Community Involvement in the Management of Palm Leaf Manuscripts as Lanna Cultural Material in Thailand

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\begin{abstract}
The Lanna region in Upper Northern Thailand has a distinct cultural heritage, one of the most important aspects of which are palm leaf manuscripts. These are seen at one and the same time as forms of sacred writing, containers of cultural knowledge, religious symbols, beautiful artefacts, products of particular cultural traditions and fragile historical documents. Libraries may have an important role to play in managing the collections of such cultural material (Becvar & Srinivasan, 2009; Jory, 2000). Yet following the management practices of developed countries may be inappropriate (Kreps, 2005). Participatory models of collection suggest that information professionals should encourage local people to participate in collection management to meet their needs (Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007). The aim of the study is to develop a model of community-based collection development for palm leaf manuscripts, by exploring the views of community members and experts. Semi-structured interviews, participant observation and photographic inventory (Collier & Collier, 1986) were used as methods in this research.
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Palm leaf manuscripts; indigenous knowledge; collection management; community collaboration
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1 Introduction

Many communities in Northern Thailand, such as Lanna, consider themselves as local or native people. They continue to maintain their own languages and unique cultural traditions. These are often differ significantly from those of Siam. The latter tends to dominates interpretations of Thai national culture. Lanna culture has been influenced by Buddhism, which has over laid original matriarchal roots. A good example of Lanna cultural materials are the palm leaf manuscripts. These are ancient forms of documents used to record Buddhist teachings and other types of local knowledge. They are often venerated as highly sacred forms of writing. More recently, Lanna cultural materials have become threatened from both the dominant national culture and the impacts of globalisation. In response to these pressures, this study examines existing practices of management of Lanna materials. The focus is on promoting sustainable models in which the community can become more actively involved in preserving their heritage and also respect local values.

2 Background

2.1 Lanna Palm Leaf Manuscripts

The oldest surviving palm leaf manuscripts (PLMs) today were copied in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, at the beginning of the Ratanakosin (Bangkok) era (Ongsakul, 2005). The writing down of material was carried out to underpin religion and earn merit. Therefore, the beginning of writing usually started with the Buddha’s story (Ongsakul, 2005). As the result of writing in Lanna coming into regular use, the region acquired the distinction of having more manuscript records of its history than other parts of Thailand. Even though there is an abundance of written records, much Lanna history has yet to be studied. Due to the lack of
research interest in this area, the treasure of Lanna knowledge continues to remain concealed in the PLMs (Ongsakul, 2005). An important part of the context is that first half of the twentieth century, people ceased using PLMs in their everyday lives. Therefore, the majority of people could not read and write the Lanna script on PLMs. Moreover, in the recent past people did not see the value of PLMs and did not maintain them in a good condition, meaning that they deteriorated through misuse and ignorance of how to protect them from weather, insects and animals. In Upper Northern Thailand, the majority of PLMs have been collected in Buddhist temple museums. There are also special collections in National and Academic libraries. The main purpose of the study is to explore the involvement of communities by investigating their attitudes, awareness, with a view to developing a model of community involvement in their collection.

2.2 Palm Leaf Manuscripts with Libraries, Archives and Museums

PLMs do not fit neatly into Western systems for defining documents. For example, they are similar to printed books, as would be typically collected in Western libraries, in that there are multiple copies of the same content copied out many times. Yet they are like material in archives as they can be unique texts. They are also similar to museum artefacts as they are often thought of as precious material objects. Given this, how existing theories of community participation in the management of material apply is hard to evaluate. This research study considers the applicability of the models of community archiving developed by Flinn (2007, 2010), Srinivasan et al.’s (2007, 2009) participatory archiving model and their model of culturally sensitive collaborative collection and Kreps’ (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2014) notion of appropriate museology, which focuses on Non-Western models of museum and aspects of curation.

Flinn (2007, p.153) says “Community histories or community archives are the grassroots activities of documenting, recording and exploring community heritage in which community participation, control and ownership of the project is essential”. Communities, especially marginalized ones, tend to create community archives because institutions such as state and official archives fail to collect and store what the community considers to be of most value and importance. Therefore, communities often establish their own projects in order to create and collect content they feel represents their experience. They often thus create local collections including documents, oral histories and a wide variety of artefacts. This provides us with one model of how the community might be involved in collection of local materials.

In the last ten years, two more models have emerged from Srinivasan’s research, this time more embedded in librarianship. These models focus on how information institutions such as libraries and archives can work with indigenous people in order to collect information in a culturally sensitive way. Shilton and Srinivasan’s (2007) participatory archiving model sets out to inspire community members to become involved in processes around appraisal, arrangements and description (Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007). Another model of culturally sensitive collecting published in 2009 includes collaborative methods, direct indigenous involvement, ensuring appropriateness, establishing the “right” kind of research relationship and ownership of the projects (Becvar & Srinivasan, 2009). Both models have similar concepts in that the professionals are recommended to listen to the voice of communities and allow communities to manage by themselves. They believe and rely on the community for accurate information. The approach has been criticized by Klimaszewski, Bader and Nyce (2012) who query how the appropriate “community” is identified and who should speak for it. The way that power within local groups shapes how they might view cultural artefacts cannot be ignored.

A third relevant viewpoint has been articulated by Kreps (2003, 2005, 2008, 2014) using the term “indigenous curation”. Indigenous curation has a common approach with indigenous libraries, community archives and participatory archival theory, in that it focuses on the local community preserving their collections. In indigenous curation, it is recognised that local people already make collections and preserve them as part of existing practices. In this context objects collected continue to have meaning and are not extracted from the social context of their creation as in Western museum practice.
The research sought to investigate how PLMs are valued by community members and by experts and to identify an appropriate model of community involvement in their management. More specifically, the research sought to answer six questions: 1) What is the place of PLM in Lanna culture? 2) What similarities and differences are there in how community members and experts perceive the value of PLM? 3) What similarities and differences are there in how community members and experts think PLM should be managed? 4) What similarities and differences are there in how communities and experts think the community should participate in management of PLM? 5) What would a collaborative model for management of PLM look like? 5.1) What might the role of libraries in this model be? And 6) What drivers and barriers exist to achieving such a collaborative model?

3 Methodology
The study adopted an interpretivist worldview within a critical paradigm in order to understand the world of Lanna culture and to explore collection management in libraries. An exploratory approach was taken in this research to study of palm leaf manuscripts. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and photographic inventory in two distinct phases. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Triangulation, thick description and prolonged engagement in the field were strategies adopted to ensure research quality, rigour and credibility. The research raises complex ethical issues and dilemmas around the tension between respect for local beliefs and core professional values.

Data collection was planned to be in two phases. In phase 1, the pilot study used purposive sampling to select five experts for a semi-structured interview. This phase aimed to explore issues related to Lanna collection management and Lanna culture. The main data collection was phase 2. This consisted of 23 interviews combined with observation and photo inventory. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for semi-structured interviews with community members and leaders (11), ancient language experts (8), historian (1), philosopher (1) academic computer (1) and librarian (1). Experts (12) represented from who interested and involved in Lanna culture. Most of the experts were academic staff who were chosen to gain a big trustworthy picture of Lanna culture, PLMs and Lanna language. Other experts were practitioners who provide services. Field observation of the TakTham traditional procession in Wat Sungmen was also carried out.

4 Findings
This preliminary results paper reports initial analysis of data from the interviews with community members and experts. Both groups valued PLMs for the knowledge they contained and as material objects. Yet while both community members and experts valued the PLMs highly, they had different ideas regarding what the most valuable aspects were. In terms of knowledge, they expressed the same value in respect of Buddhism, history, language and literature, herbal medicine and academic study and research but what they emphasised was different. For example, although both groups ranked the teaching of Buddhist values as the most important aspect, community members saw the value of the physical PLMs as primarily a sacred one. Community members considered PLMs as sacred objects which connect to folklore along three dimensions including spiritual, beliefs and culture. All three dimensions have a strong bond to notions of earning merit through the use of the PLMs. One community member interviewee said:

“It is about preserving the age of Buddhism for 5,000 years [...] because there is a belief that a new Buddha will appear in the future. Therefore, people wish to preserve the Buddha’s teaching by recording it in palm leaves to keep it for the next generation until the new Buddha appears in the future.”

Another participant said “When I was young, I saw great-grandfather place a PLM in a tray of gifts on the Buddhist altar or pedestal.” The ritual seemed to connect him to powerful personal memories.
In contrast, experts saw PLMs as valuable for the knowledge they contained, less as religious objects. One expert said:

“I respect the inscribers and the content which is the Buddha’s teaching that were recorded in PLMs. This is the way how ancestors recorded knowledge for transferring to the next generation. I do not consider PLMs as a sacred object asking for divine blessings.”

The experts placed particular value on herbal medicine knowledge in the PLMs. One said:

“King Rama V realized the importance of herbal medicine. For this reason, he ordered folk doctors to gather from every part of Thailand to have a meeting and to record medicines in a Khoi book (Thai long book made of pulp from trees of the family Uricaceae) which was called “Medicine Texts Edition King Rama V”. This reflected the value of Thai medicine. Although many Western medicines are influential in Thailand among Thai medicines, traditional Thai medicines are still used in everyday life.”

Reflecting the different types of value they attributed to PLMs, participants had different ideas about their management. In seeing them as objects with merit attached, according to Buddhist teaching, community members considered them to belong to the community and that they would be appropriately stored in the monastery. One said:

“PLMs belong to the temple. I was born and grew up here. I have always come to this temple. I respect this temple. I could not keep them at home. I brought them to this temple to gain merit.”

From the community perspective PLMs were cultural artefacts connected to folkways and the local community were considered their owner and they belonged to their ancestors. Therefore the community felt they had the right and obligation to manage PLMs. PLMs were displayed exhibited in monastery museums with security access for visitors. One community member said:

“I choose to present details of each manuscript on a small PVC board. I designed my own way of how to record and describe ancient objects with an informative picture, measurements, donation lists, historical detail, and how to use them on the label.”

PLMs were classified by age and value. They were stored in easily accessible storage for visitors to clearly see them. Access was quite controlled by abbots, monks and custodians; visitors had to ask their permission before enter to PLMs. PLMs were kept in traditional storage places such as ancient chests and cabinets, within secure monastery buildings. There were also two traditional preservation practices which were launched by the community, one being “TanTham” which was a common ceremony in the past to make a merit by offering PLMs to the monastery and make a dedication to the inscriber, ancestor and Buddhism. In the present, instead of continually rewriting and reproducing PLMs in the TanTham tradition, the community prefers to change only the wrapper covering. Another newer tradition was “TakTham”, engaging villagers laying out the PLMs in the sun around the temple pagoda. The TakTham tradition aims to maintain the original manuscripts in good condition but it is also associated with religious ceremony.

In contrast, according to the experts’ perspective with its stress on traditional medicine, PLMs belonged to the Thai nation and were an important form of intellectual property. PLMs were registered as national heritage, patented and copyrighted. One expert said:

“Herbal medicine could become just a matter of personal profit, thus, it should be protected by registration and patented.”
Another expert said:

“There was a committee from the Ministry of Public Health that tried to gather herbal medicines from each herbal doctor. This led to a recognition of herbal medicine as a national treasure.”

From this perspective PLMs could be kept in easily accessible storage but having security to prevent access from the public because of concerns around them being stolen by developed countries like in the past. From this perspective the optimal means of preservation is digitisation. PLMs were appropriately stored in information institutions such as libraries, school of pharmacy, Ministry of public health and monasteries. An important mission is translation for further study.

As regards the Buddha’s teaching and other knowledge, the experts considered PLMs as public knowledge which belonged to everybody. Experts saw themselves as custodians on behalf of the Thai people. One expert commented:

“I prefer not to think in terms of ownership but it is like custodianship...our duty is to take care of them, to preserve them, not to own them...though, I think it is a good idea that certain people are officially taking care of them. However, for certain people, it is their job to make sure that the manuscripts are OK. I think that is a good idea.”

They classified PLMs by content and had a mission to disseminate contents by translation.

5 Discussion

The data seems to be in a number ways consistent with the theories of community participation as presented in the literature review above. Several of the models, such as community archiving, reflect an inclusive approach to collecting, so that archival material, printed material and museum objects are all included in community collections. Similarly, PLMs have all these attributes tied up in one object, they therefore defy neat Western categories of material suitable for libraries, archives or museums. Another recurrent theme in the literature is the issue of community control over a collection. Even though the majority of PLMs are kept in the monasteries and taken care of by abbots, monks and other custodians, PLM management recently has come to increasingly depend on the experts who enter to the monasteries helping the management of PLMs especially through classification and cataloguing. There is a parallel in the community archiving literature where the role of expert archivists is increasingly recognised. The idea is that the community might want to create and control the archive, but progressively they do need to turn to experts in areas such as preservation. One big difference with community archiving theory, where it is often that alienated and marginalized communities operate in conflict with official archives, here there is much shared in how experts and community value PLMs. But this is not to deny the rich variation of value attributed to them, indeed within the community itself.

Many of Srinivasan’s (2007, 2009) ideas are also relevant to Lanna PLMs, such as his suggestions about listening to the community voice, community involvement in appraisal, the importance of cultural sensitivity and direct indigenous involvement. On the other hand, a key difference, and with this and with the notion of community archiving as well, is the community’s inability to read PLMs and reliance on experts to actually read and interpret the manuscripts. It requires the expertise of specialists, both linguistic and religious, to classify their content. As a result, the community cannot take total control of all the process of their project by themselves. Nevertheless, for the lay general public, the manuscripts are considered to be highly valuable, sacred and esteemed artefacts.

From the previous models discussed in the literature review, the concept of indigenous curation appears to be the most relevant to Lanna PLM management. Local people have their own ways of collecting, preserving and displaying things as a part of existing social practices. (Kreps, 2003, 2006). The way that they collect and show artefacts is understood and respected among local people and also enables visitors to
have access via the monastery museum (Kreps, 2003, 2005, 2008). In this model shrines and temples are
the natural place to store ancient collections such as PLMs (Kreps, 2006; Paritta, 2006). This concept
resonates with the value of traditional methods of looking after PLMs. PLMs have strong ties to religious
merit making (Paritta, 2006). Local people connect preservation with the ritual of making merit and respect
the value of both content, as Buddha’s teaching or knowledge, and form, as fine, handmade compositions,
such as the covering, wooden titles and palm leaves themselves. Moreover, they seek and attain merit by
donating their collections to the monastery. To preserve their cultural objects, local communities tend to
“renew” the objects not only for conservation and restoration but also to make things look fresh again and
more attractive. The community members stressed reproduction and taking care of PLMs by following
traditional processes (Kreps, 2014, Parrita, 2006). Nevertheless, in the Lanna context it is clear that
expertise of information professionals can also contribute in many ways to the organization and preservation
of PLMs. A final model will need to integrate this element, while respecting local practices.

6 Conclusion

PLMs are central to the Lanna community because of the complex meaning attached to them. The Lanna
community and people are strongly invested in Buddhism, therefore the monastery and community are
closely attached to each other. The Monastery is the center of community and also the natural place to
store valued cultural collections, like PLMs. Both the local community and experts have important roles in
helping the monastery collect, store and use PLMs. Experts come to manage the infrastructure of the
collection while the community are the core participant who continue to use and preserve it. Community
members place great value on Buddhist objects because of the merit attached while experts considered
herbal medicine knowledge to have high value. From these different systems of value differing suggestions
of how to manage PLMs follow. One contribution of this paper is to reveal the richness of meaning attached
to PLMs in Lanna culture and how this ties to issues around their management. The purpose of the study
is to think about ways these rich but differing values can be harmonized or at least how a process can be
developed in which differing stakeholders can work together while respecting each others’ point of view.
In thinking about this there are useful starting points in the library, archive and museum literature that
explores community involvement. PLM management differs in significant respects to that of Community
Archives and the CIS model but participatory archival theory is relevant in aspects of appraisal, provenance
and ordering. Non-Western models of museums and curation that respect local practices in which objects
are created and used are also highly relevant to PLMs. These useful aspects give us a starting point to
create a suitable framework for libraries and archives to manage PLMs with community involvement.
Information institutions should work with local community by building productive relationships and giving
authority to the community. Such processes preserve the sense of ownership in the community through
their active involvement in storage, access and preservation to let them participation.

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