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Scripture

Safeguarding Bali's Sacred Palm Leaves

Bali's lontar bundles contain scriptures brought from India over a thousand years ago, including ancient versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata

By Rajiv Malik, Bali

Bali's ancient lontar are identical in concept to the palm-leaf manuscripts of India. By some estimates, 50,000 ancient lontar manuscripts are held by the priests, scholars and ordinary Hindus of Bali, passed down from their ancestors. These were the books and ledgers of their day, used for everything from the Vedas and Agamas to the epics to land records. In Bali we find lontar on religion, holy scriptures, prominent rituals, family lineages, law codes, medicine, arts, architecture, calendars, poetry, prose, black magic and even the rules for cock-fighting. Many of these palm-leaf manuscripts are kept in beautifully hand-crafted wood boxes and cleaned and worshiped yearly on Saraswati Puja.

Though many Balinese Hindus have lontar in their homes, few understand their contents. The language of most is Kawi, also known as Old Javanese; a few are in Sanskrit. Dr. Nyoman Catra, who heads the lontar digitization project at the Dwijendra Foundation, explained that the texts date back as far as the 9th century ce. The Ramayana and Mahabharata were translated from Sanskrit into Kawi, a script derived from the Pallava and Grantha scripts used to write Sanskrit in South India from the 6th century ce onwards, during the era of seafaring exploration by Indian kingdoms. Some newer lontar are written in Aksara Bali, a script derived from Kawi around the 15th century. (Several old scripts of Southeast Asia are closely related, as are modern Malayalam and Sinhala.)

When the Majapahit kingdom collapsed due to the Muslims coming to Indonesia, the lontars were brought from Java to Bali and maintained there ever since. Palms grow

everywhere in Java and Bali, so the leaves are readily available, Dr. Catra explained.

The Dwijendra Foundation is a government-supported institution which has 3,000 lontar and funds the ongoing digitization project headed by Dr. Catra, who also lectures on the performing arts at the Indonesian Institute of Arts. Hinduism Today was directed to this institution by Dr. Ron Jenkins, professor of theater at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, USA. Dr. Jenkins has a long association with Bali and a particular interest in the lontar dealing with theatre production. Together he and Dr. Catra transcribed and translated Sivaratrikalpa (Siva's Night Meditation), a story about knowledge and enlightenment. They teamed up with the San Francisco-based Internet Archive Foundation to digitize the 3,000 lontar at Dwijendra Foundation.

The word lontar comes from Old Javanese ron meaning leaf and tal meaning the rontal tree (*Borassus fabellifer*, commonly called palmyra or toddy palm). The leaves are cut, dried, soaked in water, dried again, steamed, treated with herbs, then flattened and dried one last time. They are assembled into bundles of varying number of leaves, trimmed with a plane, fitted with boards top and bottom and bound together with strings through two or three holes punched in the leaves. The resulting bundle is far more durable than a modern paper book and can last for hundreds of years with proper care.

According to an article at www.wonderfulbali.com there are nine categories of lontar: 1) Weda, dealing with mantras and religious rituals; 2) Agama, religious rules, ethics, morals and law; 3) Wariga, astronomy and astrology; 4) Usada, medicine; 5) Itahasa, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Balinese literature; 6) Babad, history and genealogy; 7) Tantri, stories from ancient Indian literature, Balinese stories and scholastic writings; 8) Lelampahan, stories from the performing arts; and 9) Prasi, illustrated lontar derived from the wayang shadow puppet plays.

Professor I Made Titib, rector of the Denpasar State Hindu Dharma Institute, kindly displayed one of his family's treasured lontar (photo at top left). It was last copied onto new leaves in 1920. "This is the Ramayana in old Javanese language," he explained. "This is not Valmiki Ramayana but another version written by Bhatti Maharishi. I can read and recite it, but to be understood by the common man it has to be translated into the local Balinese language. Our Ramayana ends after Rama is victorious and takes over the kingdom of Ayodhya. Once Ravana is killed, it is the end of Indonesian Ramayana. Rama's sons, Luv and Kush and their story is not there." As with many Balinese I encountered, he was very interested in obtaining

the fuller version of the Ramayana as well as other scriptures not present in Bali, such as the Rig Veda.

The Digitization Project

Dr. Catra works in a big hall belonging to the cultural division of the Governor of Bali. The air is filled with the strong smell of various chemicals and traditional Balinese herbal oils being used to clean and preserve the ancient lontar. "This collection of lontars," Catra explains, "is in the possession of the government of Bali as it is a national heritage."

The lontar currently being photographed was entitled "How to Become a Rishi," giving directions on how those aspiring to be priests are to be purified. The bundle had been cleaned with alcohol and lemon grass oil. If necessary, the leaves would be rubbed again with ink made from lamp black to darken the writing, as when they were first made. Two leaves are photographed at a time, and 500 photos are taken each day--a decent pace for this kind of work. The title, size, number of leaves, camera resolution and other cataloging information is assembled with the photo files and transmitted to the Internet Archive in San Francisco where it goes on line. As of September 21, 2011, over half of the 3,000 lontars have been photographed and archived.

Relationship to Saiva Agamas

Hinduism Today itself recently completed a very similar digitization project, photographing the palm-leaf collection of the French Institute of Pondicherry. That collection contains bundles on many of the same topics as found in the Bali lontar, with the addition of Saiva Agamas.

"The lontars are mainly based on the Siva teachings," Dr. Catra said, "but I am not aware whether they are connected to Saiva Agamas. We have the concept of Siva, Sadasiva and Paramasiva, but no one has come to Bali from South India to study the lontar."

That philosophical approach is very much in line with the Saiva Agamas. With both collections now available online, scholars have an entirely new means to research the connection. Already we know that the Kawi script is closely related to the

Grantha script of the Agamas, and the kingdoms which spread Hinduism to Indonesia were South Indian.

Bali's digitization project has the same motivation as in Pondicherry: preservation of the texts contained in the lontar before the leaves disintegrate through age, insects and other hazards.

The skill to prepare and scribe lontar continues to exist in Bali, unlike in South India where it has died out altogether. I was pleasantly surprised when one of the girl students took my business card and expertly scribed my name on a leaf in just few minutes. A side project being done elsewhere, Catra shared, has perfected a way to print on lontar leaves with a laser printer. He said the results are similar to the scribed leaves, and proof-reading corrections are much easier!

There are Hindus in Bali who can still read the lontar, but their number is decreasing. Even the bundles themselves are not well cared for in all households. The present project has funding only for the government collection and is expected to end in a few more months. If funds become available, Catra said, they could extend the project to include lontar in private hands.