The Ancient Art of Ola Writing

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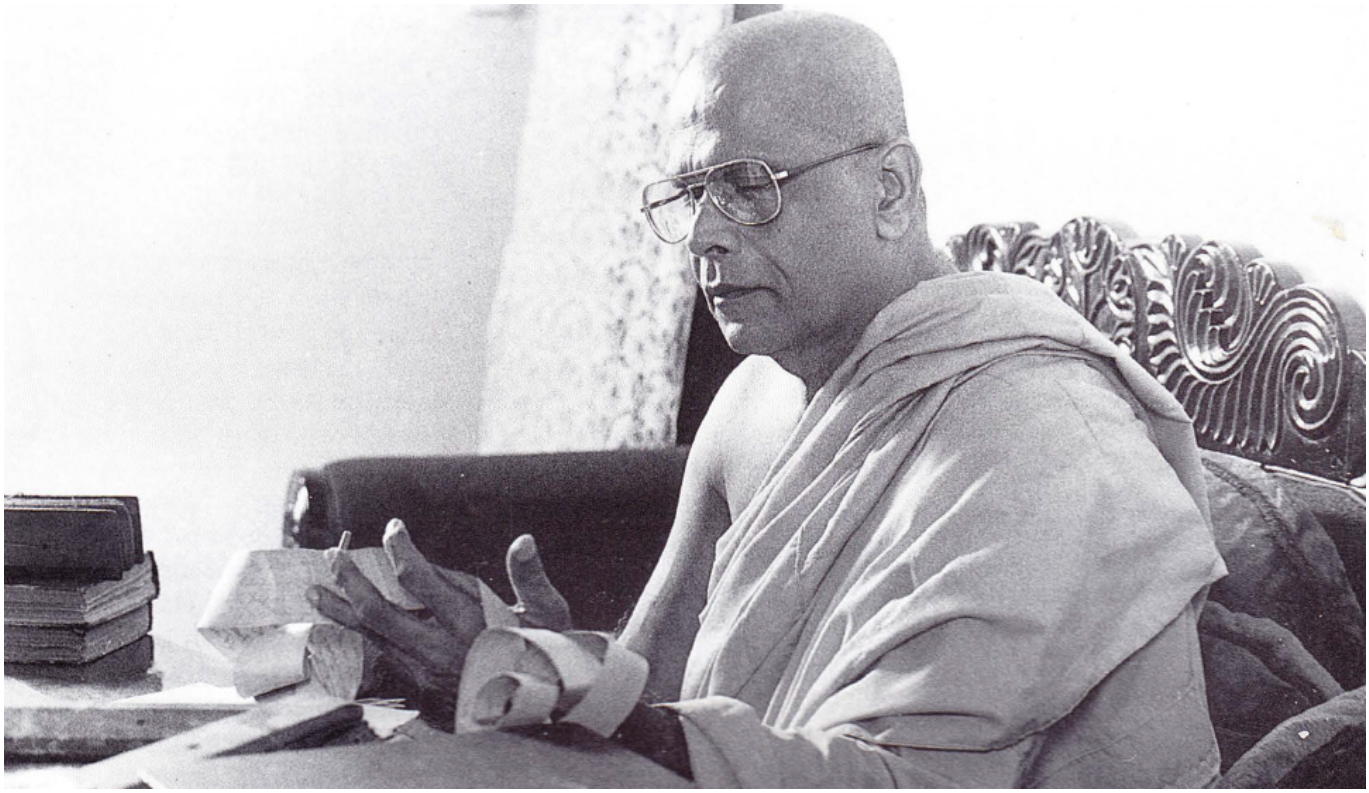
Ola pre-dates paper in Sri Lanka

Florence Ratwatte



There is no record of when conventional wood-pulp paper made its appearance in Sri Lanka. When it did arrive Sri Lankans had already developed their own unique cured palm-leaf writing paper called ola. Long before the birth of Christ, ola was widely u ed for producing fine. durable, moth-proof manuscripts.

The advent of Buddhism in Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BC marked the beginning of higher learning. The need to record and preserve the Dhamma (doctrine) in its pure form mothered the development of literacy and the art of writing. It is probable that the technique of writing on ola leaf came, like Buddhism, from India.

In early times (and in rural society even today), the education of boys was carried out by Buddhist monks of the village temple. In ancient society, this commenced when the child was taken to the temple when he was six. His first lessons were recitations of the alphabet. Then the pupil learned to write using a narrow, sanded board mounted on four legs, called a velipila. After about a year, the pupil was introduced to writing on palm-leaf parchment.

With a long strip of untrimmed ola and a blunt writing stylus, he learned the art of tracing the letters on the cured palm-leaf and how to incise them with even pressure so that they were uniformly printed. All the lesson texts which the pupils used were also written on ola leaves, and called puskola in Sinhala. A student was usually in his late teens before he became completely competent in ola writing.

Ola leaf processing and the art of ola writing was an integral part of scholarship, developed in the temples. The preparation of ola leaf paper and the art of writing on it was widely practised by Buddhist monks and they became, and still are, the acknowledged experts.

The first record of ola leaf books and the art of manuscript writing is in the 1st century BC when the Buddhist Canon was committed to writing at the rock temple of Alu Vihara at Matale. Alu Vihara was chosen due to its distance and remoteness from the then strife-torn capital of Anuradhapura. According to the historical chronicle, the Mahavansa, 500 monks gathered at the temple and wrote down the Tripitaka, the three baskets of the law that is the Pali canon of Buddhism in its pure form.

Those original ola manuscripts were destroyed during the Matale rebellion of 1848. Since then, monks at the temple have been at work to reproduce the lost volumes on ola, and the art of ola writing can still be seen in practice there.

Ola is prepared today just as it was in the pre-Christian era, from strips of the leaf of the talipot palm (Corypha umbraculifera). This palm thrives in the warm, moist valleys of Sri Lanka’s foothills up to an elevation of about 900m. It has huge (about 5m diameter) fan-shaped leaves. The talipot dies after its spectacular flower spathe has burst into bloom and its fruits ripened, which happens only when the tree is between 25 and 30 years old.

For the preparation of ola, the tender leaf bud is cut down just before it opens. This is never done without paying obeisance to the tree. A bud is around 5m in length,

and can yield as many as 80 to 100 leaves. The leaf segments are separated and their sharp, serrated edges pared off.

The midrib is then removed, dividing each segment into two strips. These are loosely rolled up and placed in a copper cauldron and boiled up with raw papain and papaya and pineapple leaves for about an hour. Raw papain, which contains pepsin, is the milky secretion from the leaves and stems of the papaya tree. The boiling mixture preserves the talipot leaf and the pepsin makes it pliable.

The leaves are then dried flat for three days and nights, exposed to sun and dewfall. The blond, cured leaf strips are now pliable and are usually stored in a kitchen loft as wood smoke adds to their durability.

When required for writing, both sides of the ola strips are given a fine sheen by rubbing against the smooth side of an areca-nut tree trunk. The polished leaves are then cut into various standard sizes, the largest three handspans in length. The popular size for important books are two spans and four fingers in length; smaller sizes are about 45cm in length, or less. Care is also taken to make the strips of even width.

After the finishing process is complete, string-holes are punched for binding the leaves together in loose-leaf book form. The leaves are punched according to a rule set down in a Pali couplet, each leaf folded in three down and four across, and punched at the intersections.

These leaves are then collected into thick parcels between wooden covers with slim wooden toggles passed through the string-holes to hold them together. The four sides of the leaves in the packet (or loose-leaf book) called a pot-gediya, are singed with a hot iron and stored until needed for writing.

Ola was not only the stationery of sacred Buddhist scriptures (for which Pali was the usual medium) but also the papyrus of this country for many centuries. Magical and occult treatises, charms, mantras, Bali (curative ritual) songs, horoscope readings, astrological charts, and medical prescriptions were all recorded on ola, usually in the Sinhala language. Traditionally, horoscope readings were always written on full length ola leaf rolls.

When they are needed for writing, the prepared leaves are removed from the assembled packet one by one and written on with a pointed stylus called a

panhinda. Traditionally these styluses had handles elaborately carved with Buddhist symbols.

Three distinct styles of writing were used: hasthi, a large-lettered script; sinha, a rounded script and hansa, an elegant, small-lettered script.

Due to the difficulty of preparing ola lea e for writing. cholars u ed them thriftily and observed many economies both in expression and calligraphy. Abbreviations and certain phonetic symbols much like shorthand are used. To avoid damaging the leaf, dots are not used and stops at the end of a sentence are indicated with a feather symbol. Vertical arrangements of letters are sometimes used to save on space.

Ola writing is a highly skilled ,, and artistic craft. The letters on is the manuscripts are even, clear, cl 33 well-formed and written in 2l straight, closely arranged lines on the unruled blank leaves. The letters are clearly incised with regular pressure so that the entire script will be of the same depth and boldness.

After the script is incised, the book is proof-read and any errors corrected by the writers. It is now ready for the final stage, the application of the ink which will bring the pale, incised script into bold relief. This process is called kalu-medima, “the applicaiton of black polish.”

A paste of lamp black (the soot obtained from the flame of a natural oil lamp), black resin and kekuna (Kokoona zeylanica) oil is rubbed on the manuscript. This black paste brings out the incised writing into sharp, clear focus on the golden ola leaf, like bold black printing on straw-coloured paper. The manuscript is wiped clean with a soft cloth and given a final polish with kurakkan (brown millet; Eleusine coracana).

Ola books are usually not illustrated to save on space, but occasionally a few graphic decorations and charts are used.

The ola book covers are always beautifully wrought and lavishly decorated. Carved, lacquered wood, copper, silver or even ivory are used.

Royal warrants were often written on ola, the covers richly ornamented. A specimen from the Kandyan period (15th-19th century) is decorated with scroll work, embroidered in gold thread with small bosses of red and blue silk.
The art of making, and wntmg on, ola leaf is now confined to small communities of

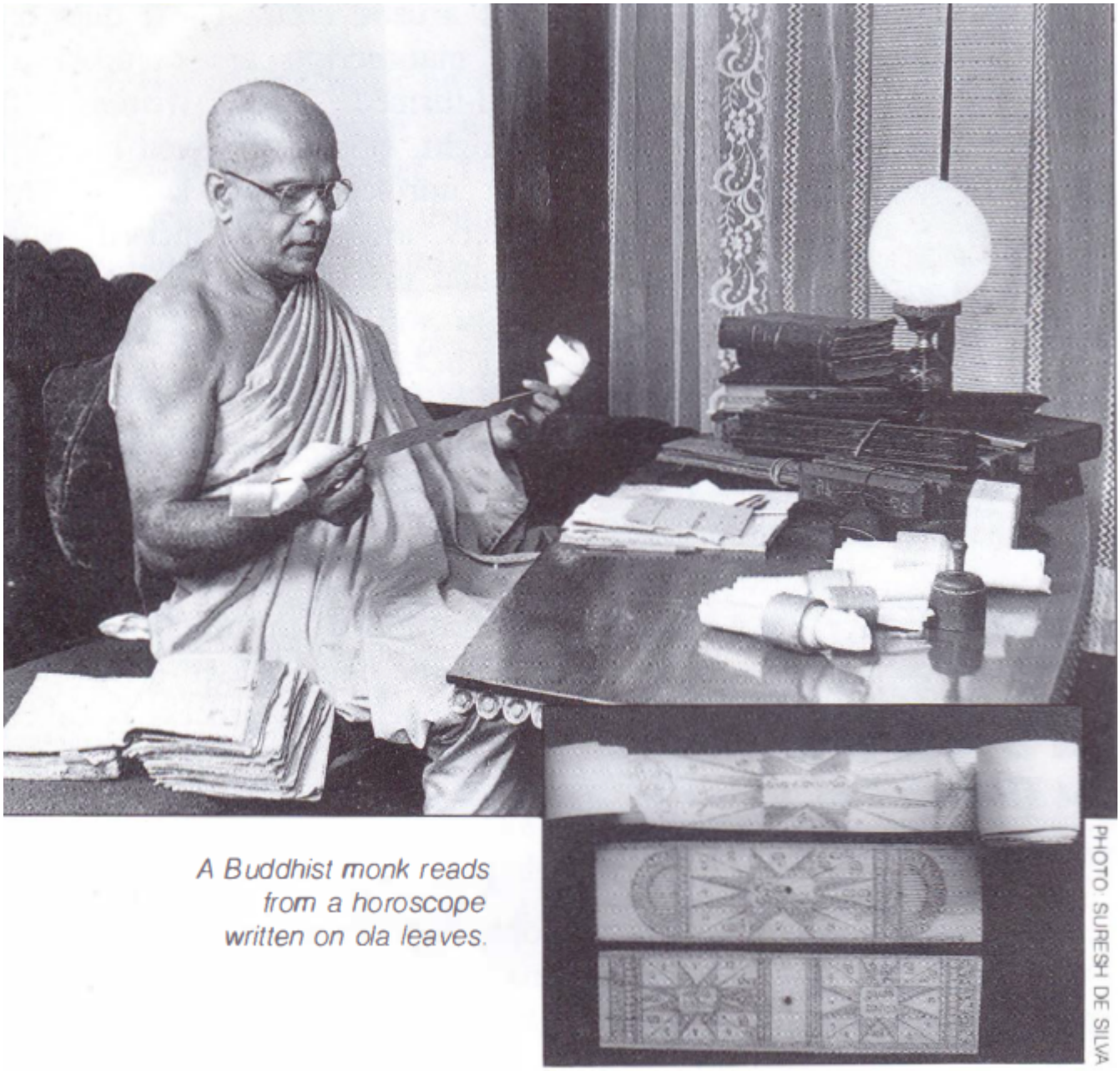
Buddhist monks and a few traditional astrologers, although ola is still used for recording horoscopes and for ceremonial purposes. The official who rides the first elephant in the procession of the Temple of the Sacred Tooth in the Kandy Esala Perahera carries an ola manuscript called the Lekam Mitiya (sheaf of records) which is a register of temple lands, tenants and services due from them.

Collections of ala leaf books are maintained at the Malwatta and Asgiriya monasteries in Kandy but these are not open to the general public. Ola leaf wntmg in practice, and books, can be seen at the Alu Vihara (temple) at Matale, 26km from Kandy, and almost every temple will have some ala leaf manuscripts which visitors may be able to see on request. There are displays of ancient manuscripts at the Colombo National Museum.

Any tourist offered an ala leaf book to buy as a souvenir, should be aware that the customs authorities will not permit ala books (or any other article) more than 50 years old to be exported as they are classified as antiques. Even the export of ala books of more recent vintage might be disallowed as there is no conclusive way to prove that they are not antiques.•

Tourists should be cautious about purchasing ala leaf books as *those over* 50 *years old cannot be exported* .

The first elephant in the Temple of the Tooth procession in the Kandy Esala perahera bears an ala manuscript.



A Buddhist monk reads from a horoscope written on ola leaves.

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