



reviving the ancient medical
manuscripts of bali...

the lontar usada

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Unlike many cultures, where generational knowledge passes by word of mouth, Bali has a scholarly tradition of recording important knowledge in manuscripts fashioned from the leaves of tropical palm trees. Known as the Lontar Usada, these ancient palm-leaf manuscripts are an invaluable part of Bali's history and are now part of a large, Asia-wide preservation project.

BALI'S TRADITION OF HEALING

Grounded in ancient Balinese beliefs and practice, influenced by Ayurveda, as well as Javanese and Chinese practices, the traditional healers of Bali are known as Balian. Balian group themselves into such specialties as manipulation and bone setting; midwifery; spiritual healing; and herbal therapies.

Similar to other Asian healthcare traditions, illness is viewed as the result of disharmony, or disease. The concept of harmony and balance, pervasive in Balinese culture, is grounded in the philosophy of *Tri Hita Karana* — literally, 'three causes of wellbeing'. The three fundamental relationships which must be in harmony for health are the relationship between the individual and the Divine, the social environment (human to human) and the physical environment.

The Balian's role was to identify the source of the disharmony and to re-establish harmony in the life of the patient. This was then recorded on lontar, strips of cured palm leaf which were etched in Balinese script with a steel stylus. After rubbing with ash from the waxy candlenut to highlight the text, they were bound into bundles and fastened with twine between slats of insect-resistant wood.

Bali's highest knowledge has been stored in these palm-leaf books for centuries. Poetry, religious ritual, art and literature are all recorded in lontar, but it is the medical manuscripts, known as Lontar Usada, that are beginning to attract worldwide attention.

ANCIENT ORIGINS

The use of palm leaves as a record for the written history of a society, its codes and guiding legends, has ancient origins in South and Southeast Asia. Palm-leaf manuscripts constitute one of the oldest media of writing in India as well as in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia.

India's influence on Southeast Asia, especially on the island of Bali, clearly included the introduction of the palm-leaf manuscript tradition of writing. Historians speculate that palm leaf was used as a medium for writing long before the time of Ashoka the Great (ca. 304–232 BCE). As far back as the 4th century CE, Buddhist texts record housewives reading palm-leaf texts in the light of oil lamps in the evenings. Records also indicate that the tripithaka, or Buddhist scriptures, were written on palm leaves in the First Buddhist Conference (1st century CE).

On account of their perishability, there are no palm-leaf manuscripts in India dating before the 10th century. Despite this, they are mentioned as a writing material in a number of literary works and can be seen in several sculptures and monuments. Indeed, the patroness of knowledge in both India and Bali, Saraswati, is classically depicted holding a set of palm leaf manuscripts or lontar.

FROM PALM LEAF TO LONTAR

The tropical palms of Bali offer a perfect medium for writing materials. While methods of processing differ throughout Asia, in Bali the basic method of palm leaf preparation starts with the half-opened young shoot of palm leaves being cut before they become dry and brittle. The leaves are then cut into the required sizes and then soaked for up to several days in an herbal solution that includes turmeric, an antioxidant, and lemongrass, an insect repellent.



After the softened leaves have been dried in the shade or light sunshine, the spine is removed from the main leaf and the remaining portion is pressed, polished and trimmed to size. Holes are made on either side of the leaves, typically with a red-hot wire or special knife. Then a cord is passed through the holes to hold the leaves together.

In the final stage, two wooden slats from a valued wood, such as sandalwood, are placed above and below the manuscript as covers. These covers may be polished with insecticidal oils prepared from herbs, lacquer and minerals.

In Bali, it is common for the wooden covers to be soaked in an insect-repelling solution similar to that used for the lontar themselves. Then, the bound manuscript is wrapped in a cloth, or placed in a specially made lontar box, to keep it free from dust and insects. Balinese families fortunate enough to own lontar, traditionally open and clean them once a year during a special ritual on Saraswati Day which, this year, falls on June 16.

PRESERVING THE PALM-LEAF MANUSCRIPTS

There is a growing movement to conserve Asia's ancient palm-leaf records for their rich cultural heritage. In Tibet, more than 50,000 pages of palm-leaf manuscripts have been preserved. Tsewang Jigme, Director at Tibet's Palm-Leaf Manuscripts Protection Office, reports that since 2006, officials have completed the registration, sorting and photocopying of these ancient manuscripts.

Written in Tibetan, Sanskrit and other ancient Indian languages, they include Sanskrit classics, Buddhist scriptures, ancient Indian literature, and legal and moral codes. Most of the manuscripts preserved in Tibet date from the eighth to fourteenth century CE and, unlike those in tropical areas, have lasted well due to Tibet's cold, dry climate.

In India, the Institute of Asian Studies in Chennai has a project for

preserving and translating palm-leaf manuscripts, in partnership with the University of Cologne and the University of California-Berkeley. The project has already published five volumes of a projected 25-volume Descriptive Catalogue of Palm-leaf Manuscripts. When translated and digitalised, the texts will be disseminated as a searchable online database, CD-ROMs and books.

The Indian government has also established The National Mission for Manuscripts (NAMAMI) to survey, locate and conserve Indian manuscripts with the aim of creating a national resource. In addition, the Bangalore-based Institute of Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine is partnering with NAMAMI to document and study India's wealth of medical manuscripts.

In Thailand, an ASEAN-linked project is compiling, conserving and digitising endangered manuscripts from the Mon community. Many of these manuscripts are located in monasteries along the Thai-Burma border. Run by the Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts, part of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), the project aims to preserve endangered old Mon manuscripts for study and the dissemination of cultural and historical information.

The Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI), Denpasar, which hosts a lontar project on literature and the arts, estimates that there are 50,000 lontar kept by palace families, high priests and ordinary families. Some are preserved with great care and respect, as centrepieces of family heritage, while others gather dust in forgotten corners of rural homes.

In view of this burgeoning interest in Asia's ancient manuscripts, it is not surprising that UNESCO has established a Memory of the World Committee for Asia/Pacific (MOWCAP) to raise awareness of the documentary heritage in the region. Here, palm-leaf manuscripts are recognised as a significant treasury of knowledge.


BALI'S HEALING HERITAGE: THE LONTAR USADA PROJECT

Following the Global Spa Summit in Bali in May 2011, a conversation between Professor Gerard Bodeker of the Oxford-based Global Initiative For Traditional Systems of Health, and Chicco and Lahra Tatriele, founders of Fivelements Puri Ahimsa, led to the idea for a project to conserve, study and promote Bali's ancient palm-leaf medical manuscripts. Discussions with Bali's leading cultural, religious, political and healthcare figures led to a conference in late January 2012 and to the creation of the Bali Lontar Usada Project.

The project aims to make the Lontar Usada accessible, readable and understandable to a wider audience, especially to younger Balinese, which is of utmost importance to maintain Bali's heritage. "Lontar Usada Bali is the bridge of the ancient Balinese intellectual treasure to the welfare of mankind — now and in the future," says Dra Made Suardewi of Bali's Universitas Hindu Indonesia of the ancient scripts. Her enthusiasm is shared by Dr D.R. Dharma Putra, Director of the Center for Sustainable Development of Udayana University. "For years many of the medical manuscripts, Balinese Usada, have been preserved in the Leiden Museum in the Netherlands," he says. "We are extremely excited to be involved in this new and important project led by

the Balinese for Balinese generations to come.”

As a direct result of this initiative, a new consortium has been created to conserve, study and apply the Lontar Usada. Comprising Balians, The Culture Department of Bali’s Province, the Gedong Kirtya Museum, Singaraja, Udayana University, Universitas Hindu Indonesia and supported by Fivelements Puri Ahimsa, the consortium aims to work with UNESCO, the United Nations University and leading international organisations and universities, including Oxford.

The project will be launched at the Bali Arts Festival 2012 in Denpasar, on the eve of Bali’s Saraswati Day, June 16th — the day on which lontars are taken out, cleaned and honoured. Through the festival, the project plans to generate books and curriculum on Balinese healing. Above all, it aims to offer a deep foundation to support Bali’s pre-eminence as a global wellness destination — to benefit all who come in quest of personal fulfilment and wellbeing. www.lontarusadabali.org 

an ancient tale

In one of the instructional palm-leaf medical manuscripts — the Lontar Budhakecapi — now in the collection of Udayana University’s Faculty of Letters in Bali’s capital city, Denpasar, a story is told of two brothers who were gifted in healing but had little knowledge of diagnosing.

Successful herbalists from the village of Lemah Tulis, the brothers were named Klimosadha and Klimosadhi. The first brother, Klimosadha, was adept in curing all manner of diseases. And the second brother, Klimosadhi, was renowned for his mastery of antidotes for even the most toxic of poisons.

At one point in time, a patient of each of the brothers died after the brothers had promised the families that the medicines would return their loved ones to health. In deep crisis, Klimosadha and Klimosadhi sought out a renowned master of healing, Budhakecapi, who roared with laughter at their plight.

Budhakecapi pointed out that they had no real knowledge of the origins of disease, methods of diagnosis, and the many levels on which treatment can occur. And that they may have been more motivated by payment than the needs of the sick.

Through the use of stories, instruction and cautionary tales, Budhakecapi provides the theoretical, clinical, diagnostic and ethical knowledge needed to transform village herbalists into master healers. His instruction includes a series of original herbal recipes for treating serious diseases.

The Lontar Budhakecapi is a fascinating narrative and a classic text of Balinese medical education. It offers a glimpse into the treasury of knowledge in the thousands of unexplored Lontar Usada in Bali’s villages and homes.

