

PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION EFFORTS FOR ARWI MANUSCRIPTS AT THE SOUTH EASTERN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA LIBRARY

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Abstract: *Arwi manuscripts, essential repositories of Sri Lanka's indigenous knowledge, have historically served as vital conduits for sharing information. Ancients freely recorded their wealth of local wisdom within these manuscripts. However, today, there's a looming threat of their extinction. To combat this, the Library of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka initiated a comprehensive project focused on preserving and conserving Arwi manuscripts. This ambitious undertaking aims to safeguard indigenous knowledge for future generations. It commenced with the systematic collection and physical conservation of scattered Arwi manuscripts across Sri Lanka. Concurrently, a Preservation and Conservation unit was established within the library, not only for Arwi manuscripts but also for rare books. The project employed established conservation techniques tailored to the specific defects observed in the manuscripts. Subsequently, preservation methods suitable for local environmental conditions were implemented. As a final step, the entire collection of manuscripts was digitized, granting researchers access in accordance with established policies.*

Keywords: *Arwi, Manuscript, Preservation, Conservation, Sri Lanka Heritage*

Introduction

Arab Muslim traders and indigenous Tamil converts to Islam in Tamil Nadu, India, and Sri Lanka developed closer ties due to their commercial endeavors. Despite sharing a common religion, they were hindered by distinct languages, prompting the need for a bridging language (Marikar, 2022). Consequently, they began writing Tamil using an adapted Arabic script known as Arabu-Tamil. This script, also known as Arwi, employed an Arabic-style script to represent the Tamil language (Zubair, 2023). From the eighth to the nineteenth century, Arabu-Tamil flourished among Tamil-speaking Muslims in both regions, facilitating cultural exchange and advancement between Arab and Tamil cultures.

Arabic holds immense significance across the Muslim world, being the language of the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad. Consequently, many languages spoken by Muslims have been transcribed in Arabic characters at some point. The formation of Arwi can be attributed to two crucial factors, besides the general prestige of Arabic (Sherif, 2014). Firstly, Muslims are hesitant to translate religious terms, fearing distortion of meaning. The Arabic script allowed for the dissemination of religious teachings without compromising the integrity of these terms. Historical evidence indicates that Arwi thrived in the eleventh century in coastal Tamil Nadu and Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) due to the presence of

Arab traders seeking exotic spices (Tschacher, 2018). Secondly, many Muslims learned to read the Qur'an in Arabic, resulting in proficiency in reading and often writing Arabic, while being unfamiliar with the scripts used for their mother tongues.

The language's origins lie in both the South-West Coast of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the South-East Coast of India, particularly in Kayalpatanam, where it was enriched and developed. As the Moors settled in South-West Ceylon, notably in areas like Colombo and Galle, they transliterated local Tamil into Arabic, giving rise to the Arabu-Tamil Language, which flourished in Kayalpatanam and Ceylon (Marikar, 2022; Zubair, 2023). This Arabicized Tamil, known as Arabu-Tamil, served as a conduit for conveying the valuable ideas of Tamil Muslim communities, contributing significantly to the advancement of both Arab and Tamil cultures. In contemporary literature, the term "araputtamil" ("Arabic-Tamil") is commonly used to refer to Tamil written in the Arabic script. Recognizing its importance, the United Nations has accepted Arwi as one of the world's approved languages. Arwi has become the mother tongue of the Muslim community, evolving into a medium for their daily activities such as business, property transactions, correspondence, and social interactions.

Establishment of the Preservation and Conservation Unit of the Library of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL)

The SEUSL Library holds existing collections of Arwi manuscripts that warrant preservation due to their invaluable content. It is believed, based on anecdotal evidence, that Arwi manuscripts were used in composing chronicles during the Kotte period. Sunethra Devi, the beloved mother of King Parakramabahu VI, governed during this era (Bastin and de Silva, 2020). Presently known as the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, its library is entrusted with the preservation of these Arwi manuscripts. This unique history, combining written evidence and oral tradition, bestows upon the SEUSL library a distinct responsibility to conserve this valuable knowledge for future researchers, surpassing that of any other institution on the island.

In 2018, the SEUSL library embarked on a project aimed at conserving our indigenous knowledge for posterity. Initiated under the guidance of the then Librarian of SEUSL, the project commenced with the library possessing two original Arwi manuscripts and a few copies whose origins were uncertain. Previously dubbed "Arabu Thambul," the source and acquisition details of this collection remained undocumented. The primary goal of the project was to gather scattered Arwi manuscripts from across Sri Lanka and safeguard them for the benefit of future generations.

As an initial step, a dedicated unit was established to preserve and conserve library materials, recognizing the national importance of safeguarding our cultural heritage. The ultimate goal was to digitize and identify Arwi manuscripts for reader accessibility. Between these objectives, several processes unfolded, including awareness programs and the collection of manuscripts from various locations across the island. Under the leadership of the Librarian, library staff coordinated the acquisition of Arwi manuscripts from different parts of the island. Necessary documentation, such as consent letters from

manuscript owners for temporary or permanent transfer to the university, along with physical details recording the manuscripts' characteristics (such as number of folios, dimensions) were prepared. Priority was given to collecting donated manuscripts, and the team actively engaged with local mosque committees to locate potential sources of Arwi manuscripts. This collaborative approach facilitated extensive collection efforts, maximizing the acquisition of materials.

Subsequently, additional manuscripts were procured through purchase. Many owners willingly entrusted their manuscripts to the library, demonstrating trust in the university's commitment to preserving these valuable materials. A committee tasked with assessing manuscript value took into account various factors including rarity, physical condition, content, and the period of origin. These considerations guided the determination of each manuscript's worth. Furthermore, an appreciation ceremony was arranged to honor the donors of Arwi manuscripts, acknowledging their contributions to the preservation effort.

There is limited documentation regarding the dissemination of ancient Arwi manuscripts across Sri Lanka. However, literature records show that a few institutions in the country have undertaken efforts to conserve and preserve these manuscripts. This study specifically examines the Arwi manuscripts held by SEUSL, aiming to discern the practical significance of their preservation and conservation. To achieve this goal, establishing a database (Digital Repository) containing comprehensive bibliographical information about Arwi manuscripts, along with digital images, would facilitate efficient access to information for researchers.

Objectives

The primary aim of the study is to develop strategies for the preservation and conservation of our indigenous knowledge for the benefit of future generations. To achieve this overarching goal, the following sub-objectives have been delineated:

- a) Identify the various types of deterioration observed in Arwi manuscripts.
- b) Investigate methods for addressing deterioration based on the identified categories.
- c) Examine the challenges associated with capturing complete manuscript contents.
- d) Propose approaches for creating metadata and digitizing manuscript contents.
- e) Develop an access policy governing the use of Arwi conservation manuscripts by researchers.

This study aims to preserve, conserve, and provide access to the Arwi manuscript collection for researchers. These manuscripts largely consist of unpublished materials

pertaining to the history and culture of Sri Lanka. Our library has gathered these dispersed manuscripts from across the island with the intention of conservation and preservation. Furthermore, it is anticipated that this endeavor will augment the existing resources of the library and enrich the information services offered by the SEUSL library.

Materials and Methods

The SEUSL library's compilation of Arwi manuscripts has been assembled through contributions of personal collections and the acquisition of rare Arwi manuscripts from individuals and institutions. Presently, the library holds a total of 100 Arwi manuscripts, with 85 of them already preserved. These preserved manuscripts served as the sample for our research. To categorize the types of defects, we meticulously examined each folio of the manuscripts manually, documenting our findings. This process involved experimental observations. The conservation and preservation initiative was launched to address both physical and digital conservation needs of the manuscripts. Upon identifying the specific types of deterioration, appropriate conservation measures were implemented. To digitally conserve the Arwi manuscripts, a database was established utilizing DSpace open-source software as the chosen method.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the source and the details of the manuscripts we obtained as donations. Details of the purchased collections are given in Table 2 and Summary will be displayed in the Table 3.

Table 1 - Arwi manuscripts collected through private collections

S. No.	Acc. No.	Title	Author/Editor	Page	Year	Publisher	Place of Pub	Subject/ Keyword	Abstracts	Remarks
01	701318	Rawlathul Asfiya Fee Kasasul Anbiya (3rd ed) றல்லதுல் அஸ்பியா பீ க் கல் அன்பியா	Shahul Hameed Ibu Idhroos	312	-	Shahul Hameed & Sons	Madras	History of Prophets	நபிமார்களின் வாழ்க்கைச் சரித்திரங்கள் பற்றி இதில் கூறப்பட்டுள்ளது.	Private Collection
02	701319	Rawlathul Asfiya Fee Kasasul Anbiya றல்லதுல் அஸ்பியா பீ க் கல் அன்பியா	Shahul Hameed Ibu Idhroos	336	-	Shahul Hameed & Sons	Madras	History of Prophets	நபிமார்களின் வாழ்க்கைச் சரித்திரங்கள் பற்றி இதில் கூறப்பட்டுள்ளது.	Private Collection
03	AA005091	Al-Manafu Al-Athama Fii Thafseeru Amma அல்-மனாபிஉ அல்-அதம பீ தபஸ்ரூல் அம்ம்	Shahul Hameed	120		Shahul Hameed & Sons	Madras	Thafseer	தொழுகையில் மிக முக்கியமாக ஒதப்படும் குறாக்களை உள்ளடக்கிய குறா “அம்ம்” இன் விளக்கம் இதில் உள்ளடக்கப்பட்டுள்ளது.	Private Collection
04	AA005423	Fawaaidul Quraan Lil Muhimmaath பவைதுல் குர்ஆன் லில் முஹிம்மாத்	Shahul Hameed	544	1968	Shahul Hameed & Sons	Madras	Astronomy Islamic Doctrinal Theology, Islamic Medicine	குர் ஆன் எழுத்துக்களினூடாக வைத்தியம் பார்த்தல்	Private Collection
05	AM012006	Rawlathul Asfiya Fee Kasasul Anbiya றல்லதுல் அஸ்பியா பீ க் கல் அன்பியா	Shahul Hameed Ibu Idhroos	336	-	Shahul Hameed & Sons	Madras	History of Prophets	நபிமார்களின் வாழ்க்கைச் சரித்திரங்கள் பற்றி இதில் கூறப்பட்டுள்ளது.	Private Collection

When addressing insect-damaged Arwi manuscripts, the process began with dust removal and cleaning, as previously described (Joshi et al., 2020). Subsequently, damaged folios were repaired, and any holes were filled using acid-free Japanese tissue or handmade papers, along with CMC (Carboxymethyl cellulose or cellulose gum) or binder glue. Following repairs, the folios were trimmed for a tidy appearance (Zhao et al.,

2023). Finally, a mixture of resin (Dummala) oil and charcoal powder was applied. It was noted that some manuscripts experienced discoloration, turning black or brown from their original hue. Despite precautions, the edges of the Arwi books were notably fragile, likely due to acidity (Nishanthi and Wijayasundara, 2022). To address this instability, the manuscripts were cleaned using an alcohol solution. Once all folios were trimmed and repaired, the resin oil and charcoal mixture were applied using cotton cloths.

Table 2 - Arwi manuscripts collected through sponsors

86	955	இஸ்லாமிய சமய வழிகாட்டி		128	1950		Prayer	இதில் பழமான், கன்னத்தான தொழுகைகள் சம்மந்தப்பட்ட விடயங்கள் தெளிவாகவும் கருக்கமாகவும் விளக்கிக் காட்டப்பட்டுள்ளன.	B.M.Suhaib Aalim
87	956	குத்பா பேருரை		78	1957		Kuthba	குத்பா பிரசங்கம்	B.M.Suhaib Aalim
88	959	வைத்திய குறிப்பு		28	1950		Medicine	வைத்தியக் குறிப்பாக பயன்படுத்தியது	B.M.Suhaib Aalim
89	960	இஸ்லாமிய தொழுகை முறை	Hameed Lebbai	6	1877	Dehiyangai	Prayer	தொழுகை முறை பற்றி குறிப்பிடப்பட்டுள்ளது	B.M.Suhaib Aalim
90	961	திருமணக்குறிப்பு		140			wedding	நிகாஹ் சம்மந்தமான குறிப்புகளும் ரஸூல் (ஸல்) அவர்களின் சலவாத்தும், அரபுத் தமிழில் எழுதப்பட்டது	B.M.Suhaib Aalim
91	MUSE'963	மரியம் (அலை) அவர்களின் வாழ்க்கை வரலாறு	Shahul Hameed	88		Shahul Hameed & Sons	History	மரியம் (அலை) அவர்களின் வாழ்க்கை வரலாறு	B.M.Suhaib Aalim
92	957	கிதாபு		30	1942			ஒவ்வொரு தொழுகையின் பின்னாலும் ஒதும் திஃர்கள் அடங்கியது	B.M.Suhaib Aalim Binding
93	947	கிதாபு		300	1917				B.M.Suhaib Aalim Binding
94	946	கிதாபு	ஆலிம் வாப்ப	250	1867	Kasawathtai			B.M.Suhaib Aalim Binding
95		திரு நபி சரித்திரம் முபாரக் மாலை	அப்துர்ரஹ்மான் பாரிஉஷ் சம்கதீன்	248	1344 hijuri	Lace house road gallee cotte	qaseeda	முஹம்மது நபி (ஸல்) அவர்களைப் பற்றிய வரலாறு	Dr. Faiz Marikar Binding
96		தஸுக்ருல்அனாம் பீ த-பீல்மனாம்	Shahul Hameed ibnu ithyurus	272		Shahul Hameed ibnu ithyurus, madrass		கணவின் பலன்கள்	Dr. Faiz Marikar Binding
97		ராதிபதுல் ஜலாலியா பீ தர்ஜுமதி ஹிமா அல் அர்பபியா	saithu muhammathu lebbee aalim	144	1379 hijiri		ratheba	thikuru	Dr. Faiz Marikar Binding

Table 3 – Summary of the collections

Nos	Items (Collections)	Total	Scan
01	Lending Books	2	
02	AA	2	
	AM	1	
03	AT	35	15
	MUP	1	
04	SA	18	
05	SK	7	6
06	UM	8	1
07	SMM. Mazahir- Dean (FIA)	1	1
08	Dr. Faiz Marikar	8	2
09	B.M.Suhaib Aalim	15	6
	Total	98	31

(Abbreviation are donors who doesn't want to acknowledge)

Additionally, fungal growth has been identified in some manuscripts, appearing as grey-black colonies. Unlike insect damage, fungal attacks affect the entire structure of the book within this archive. While insects may spread from one infested collection to another or originate from surrounding areas, there are instances where the manuscripts themselves could be the source of insect infestation (Querner et al., 2022). Symptoms of insect damage on Arwi books include the presence of small, pinhead-sized holes,

irregularly eaten edges, and the existence of larvae that consume the leafy material, creating channels. In addition to dust, fungal growth is also found indirectly in the glue used in Arwi manuscripts.

Failure to promptly undertake restoration efforts for the damaged Arwi manuscripts could render their contents illegible. This predicament could lead our nation to endure the loss of invaluable indigenous knowledge, significantly impeding the decision-making capabilities of both present and future generations. Consequently, it became imperative to seek out individuals with expertise and proficiency in preserving and conserving Arwi manuscripts. Specifically, those adept at deciphering the contents of Arwi manuscripts and organizing them into relevant subjects were sought after for this crucial task.

The Arwi manuscripts acquired by the library underwent an initial process of physical preservation and digital conservation. Following this conservation effort, the manuscripts were stored in an environment conducive to their long-term preservation within storage units at the SEUSL library. Notably, our collection includes rare Arwi manuscripts, some of which offer insights into medicinal treatments for various ailments such as fever, catarrh, headaches, and skin diseases. Additionally, there are Arwi manuscripts detailing rituals aimed at curing specific afflictions, such as the fear of inhumanity. Given the significance of this indigenous knowledge in the contemporary context, the preservation of Arwi manuscripts is of paramount importance. By safeguarding these manuscripts, we ensure the transmission of our rich knowledge heritage to future generations.

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Translation of abstract and keywords into Bulgarian

Резюме: Ръкописите на Arwi, основни хранилища на местното знание на Шри Ланка, в миналото са служили като жизненоважен канал за споделяне на информация. Древните свободно са записали своето богатство от местна мъдрост в тези ръкописи. Днес обаче съществува надвиснала заплаха от тяхното изчезване. За да се бори с това, Библиотеката на Югоизточния университет на Шри Ланка инициира цялостен проект, фокусиран върху опазването и съхраняването на ръкописи на Arwi. Това амбициозно начинание има за цел да запази местните знания за бъдещите поколения. Започва със систематичното събиране и физическото съхраняване на разпръснати ръкописи на Arwi из Шри Ланка. Едновременно с това в библиотеката беше създадено звено за съхранение и консервация не само за ръкописи на Arwi, но и за редки книги. Проектът използва установени техники за консервация, съобразени със специфичните дефекти, наблюдавани в ръкописите. Впоследствие бяха приложени методи за консервация, подходящи за местните условия на околната среда. Като последна стъпка цялата колекция от ръкописи беше дигитализирана, предоставяйки достъп на изследователите в съответствие с установените политики.

Ключови думи: Arwi, ръкопис, запазване, консервация, наследство на Шри Ланка

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