

Staging Heritage: Bringing Palm-Leaf Manuscripts to the Public through Khmer Dance and Music

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of Khmer palm-leaf manuscript heritage, encompassing its historical development, intrinsic content value, artisanal production processes, current preservation conditions, and barriers to public accessibility. It advances a heritage staging solution through the application of Khmer traditional dance and music as semiotic and performative media. This approach is designed to convey the textual content, production techniques, and cultural meanings of palm-leaf manuscripts in a vivid, intelligible, and experientially engaging manner.

The study further proposes an interactive performance model, positioning it as a form of “living preservation” that facilitates sustainable engagement between heritage and community. Focusing specifically on Sastra Sleok Rit (palm-leaf manuscripts) of the Khmer people—an indigenous knowledge system currently facing the risk of erosion—the research employs a systematic and interdisciplinary methodology to synthesize their historical trajectory, epistemic value, and handcrafted production processes.

Simultaneously, the paper evaluates existing preservation practices and identifies linguistic and technical barriers that constrain contemporary audiences’ access to this heritage. On this basis, it proposes a performative preservation strategy through staging, particularly through the integration of Khmer traditional dance and music to reconstruct both the textual content and production processes of the manuscripts. The proposed interactive model functions not only as a medium for cultural communication but also as a sustainable interface linking heritage with contemporary communities, thereby enhancing the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in evolving socio-cultural contexts.

Keywords: Palm-leaf manuscripts; Heritage preservation; Staging; Khmer arts; Cultural dissemination.

INTRODUCTION

Within the corpus of Southern Khmer textual traditions, Satra Slâc-rit (palm-leaf manuscripts) stands as a distinctive and emblematic form of cultural heritage. These manuscripts function not merely as repositories of Buddhist scriptures, folk literature, and traditional medical knowledge, but also as material testimonies to the craftsmanship, patience, and profound spiritual worldview of Khmer artisans and monastic communities across generations.

However, contemporary preservation practices face substantial challenges. These manuscripts are predominantly stored in static conditions within museum environments or Theravāda Buddhist pagodas. While such traditional modes of display ensure the physical safeguarding of artifacts, they simultaneously generate a perceptual and epistemic distance, limiting the public’s ability to access and fully comprehend both their textual content and the intricate processes of their production.

In this context, an urgent imperative emerges: to identify a mode of “living preservation” that enables heritage to move beyond static containment and actively engage with the affective and cognitive dimensions of contemporary audiences. This paper therefore proposes a staging-based solution, employing Khmer traditional dance and music as performative media. This approach is not limited to the recitation or chanting of canonical

texts but extends to the dynamic reconstruction of the entire production process—from leaf selection and dew-drying to the meticulous techniques of engraving.

The overarching objective is to transform “static artifacts” into “dynamic experiential systems,” thereby enabling audiences—particularly younger generations and tourists to engage with both the technical processes and cultural meanings of palm-leaf manuscripts in a more intuitive, embodied, and accessible manner.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To address the challenge of preserving Sách lá Buông (palm-leaf manuscripts) as a “living heritage,” this study employs a multidimensional methodological framework:

Systematic and Interdisciplinary Approach:

The heritage is examined from the perspectives of cultural studies, ethnology, and art studies in order to comprehensively evaluate the values of Satra Slâc-rit.

Fieldwork and Observational Methods:

Field surveys were conducted at Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples and museums to identify barriers to heritage accessibility.

Artistic Experimental Method:

The research team developed and staged the dance performance “Di sản Sách lá Buông” (“The Heritage of Palm-leaf Manuscripts”) to examine the feasibility of theatricalizing heritage preservation.

Experiment 1:

The performance was presented at the seminar “Sách lá buông: Preservation and Safeguarding of Khmer Heritage through Digital Technology” (January 28, 2026) at Tra Vinh University. This activity aimed to collect critical feedback from experts such as Meritorious Artist Sang Sét regarding the effectiveness of conveying cultural messages through dance and music.

Experiment 2:

The performance was reconstructed within a Khmer temple setting and coordinated with VTV5 Southwest Region for filming and broadcasting. This experiment aimed to evaluate the potential of disseminating heritage values to the broader public through media platforms specifically serving Khmer audiences.

Content

Overview of Khmer Palm-Leaf Manuscripts

History and Content Value

Language and writing systems constitute the outcome of long-term historical processes of formation and development within each cultural community. They function as primary media for communication, knowledge exchange, and the intergenerational transmission of experience. The Khmer people possess a long-established linguistic and scriptural tradition. As noted in *History of World Civilization*, “Old Khmer script first appeared in inscriptions at Angkor Borei in 611 CE and gradually developed, becoming dominant in the Khmer writing system by the 15th century” (Le Phung Hoang, 2003, p.94).

Regarding the development of the Khmer writing system, it has been observed that Khmer script was derived from Sanskrit (Le Huong, 1969, p.10). Historically, during periods when Brahmanism functioned as the state

religion, Indian priests employed Sanskrit to record religious scriptures and royal activities. Archaeological evidence indicates that such texts were inscribed on stone steles, temple pillars, and architectural structures.

Subsequently, with the widespread dissemination of Buddhism through Pali, Khmer intellectuals incorporated additional lexical elements into the Khmer language, contributing to its diversification and enrichment.

From an archaeological perspective, palm-leaf manuscripts are believed to have originated in India around the 2nd century CE. In Vietnam, such manuscripts-written in ancient Khmer or Pali under the Thomadut and Mahainikai traditions-are preserved in national archival institutions.

The historical significance of Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts lies not only in their longevity but also in their position within the broader trajectory of Khmer civilization. The transition from stone inscriptions to palm-leaf engraving represents a shift toward portability and accessibility. Palm leaves, being lightweight and mobile, allow for the storage of significantly larger volumes of content compared to stone inscriptions. Despite being organic materials, their durability-achieved through sophisticated processing techniques-attests to a refined interaction between human craftsmanship and natural resources.

In terms of content, palm-leaf manuscripts function as encyclopedic repositories (e.g., Satra Ruong, Satra L-beng, Satra Ch-bap, Satra Tes), encoding the “cultural genome” of the Khmer people. They preserve Buddhist teachings, folk knowledge, ethical instructions, and experiential wisdom, promoting virtuous living, moral conduct, and social cohesion.

- **Religious and Legal Dimensions:** Manuscripts include not only Buddhist scriptures (in Pali and ancient Khmer) but also customary legal codes (Ch-bap) that regulate ethical behavior and maintain social order within phum sroc communities.
- **Folk Knowledge:** They preserve practical knowledge related to traditional medicine and ritual practices.
- **Literature and Arts:** They contain folktales, poetic narratives, and oral traditions that shape Khmer cultural identity.

Production Process

a. Selection and Harvesting of Raw Materials

Khmer artisans demonstrate a highly refined and context-sensitive selection strategy in utilizing locally available natural resources.

- **Leaf Selection Criteria:** Palm leaves used for manuscript production bear morphological resemblance to Thnôt leaves and are widely distributed across the Mekong Delta, particularly along the Tien and Hau river regions. The selection process is **highly** selective, relying exclusively on newly sprouted young leaves (terminal buds) from mature palm trees characterized by tall and robust crowns. Mature leaves are systematically excluded, as post-processing discoloration (typically greenish-brown) negatively affects both the aesthetic quality and the legibility of engraved scripts.
- **Harvesting Techniques:** Prior to cutting, artisans must climb to the apex of the tree and bind the leaf bud tightly using rope to prevent premature natural unfolding. **Harvesting** is conducted only when the leaf reaches a transitional stage of early maturity. The cutting process is performed during dry, sunny weather conditions to ensure material stability and to prevent moisture-related degradation such as mold formation.

b. Processing Techniques and Surface Preparation

This stage is crucial for transforming raw organic material into a durable writing substrate with long-term preservation capacity.

- **Leaf Treatment:** Leaves are segmented into elongated strips measuring approximately 60 cm in length and 5 cm in width. Artisans employ a cyclical treatment method described as “sun-drying for desiccation, dew-conditioning for pliability,” repeated continuously over a period of approximately two weeks. Subsequently, the leaves are boiled and thoroughly cleansed to remove all residual impurities.

- **Forming and Stabilization:** The treated leaves are placed within wooden frames and subjected to compression for a duration of two to three months to achieve planar uniformity. Once adequately flattened, the leaves are further heat-treated over charcoal until they acquire a characteristic yellow coloration. Finally, the surfaces are polished to smoothness and perforated centrally to facilitate later binding into manuscript form.

c. Line Structuring and Engraving Techniques

This constitutes the most critical stage of the production process, requiring sustained concentration and advanced proficiency in ancient languages (Pali and Old Khmer).

- **Surface Preparation:** A specialized wooden instrument equipped with parallel tensioned strings is employed to inscribe evenly spaced guide lines across the leaf surface, ensuring structural consistency in text alignment.

- **Engraving Tools:** The engraving instrument consists of a wooden handle fitted with a finely sharpened metal tip, functioning as a stylus.

- **Posture and Engraving Technique:** The artisan maintains a stable seated posture within a quiet environment conducive to precision work. The thumb functions as a stabilizing fulcrum, guiding the metal stylus to incise deeply into the leaf surface. Each grapheme must be executed with uniform depth, size, and spacing to ensure readability and durability. On average, each leaf surface accommodates five lines of text (approximately 20–30 characters), and the completion of a single leaf page requires up to three hours of continuous, meticulous labor.

d. Text Rendering and Traditional Preservation Techniques

This final stage serves to “activate” the inscribed content and enhance the longevity of the manuscript.

- **Organic Ink Preparation:** A specialized liquid ink is produced by combining soot (or charcoal residue) with kerosene and resin oil, resulting in a high-adhesion pigment capable of penetrating engraved grooves.

- **Ink Application and Surface Cleaning:** Following engraving, artisans apply the ink across the entire leaf surface. The application process requires controlled manual pressure to ensure that the pigment penetrates deeply and uniformly into the incised grooves. Excess ink is subsequently removed using cloth, revealing sharply defined black inscriptions against the luminous yellow background of the leaf.

- **Maintenance and Protection:** A thin layer of kerosene oil is applied evenly to both surfaces of the leaf to enhance gloss and to form a waterproof barrier against insect damage and environmental degradation.

- **Final Assembly:** Individual leaves are strung together and secured between two rigid wooden covers, ensuring structural stability, flatness, and ease of storage within pagoda environments or domestic settings.

Current Preservation Status and Accessibility Barriers of Palm-Leaf Manuscripts

a. Current Preservation Conditions

At present, palm-leaf manuscripts are primarily preserved in two principal settings, each characterized by distinct institutional functions and preservation modalities:

- **Within Theravāda Buddhist Khmer pagodas:** These sites constitute the most significant repositories in terms of both quantity and authenticity. Manuscripts are typically wrapped in fine textiles and stored within intricately carved wooden cabinets, often placed in sacred spaces such as the main sanctuary hall or monastic libraries. However, preservation practices in these contexts remain largely manual and are heavily reliant on

traditional experiential knowledge. Consequently, the manuscripts are highly susceptible to the impacts of tropical climatic conditions—particularly heat and humidity—leading to material degradation phenomena such as brittleness, structural fragmentation, and fading of inscriptions.

- **Within Khmer Cultural Museums:** In contrast, museums provide a more systematized and curatorial framework for preservation and display. Manuscripts are exhibited within scientifically organized spaces, accompanied by annotation systems and thematic classifications (e.g., medicine, astronomy, religious doctrine, literature). These institutional settings represent the closest point of contact between the heritage and the general public, including tourists, thereby facilitating broader dissemination of cultural values.

b. Barriers to Accessibility

One of the most pressing concerns in the contemporary context is the marked decline in the number of individuals capable of reading and interpreting the content of palm-leaf manuscripts. As a result, these manuscripts increasingly resemble a “sealed archive” or a “locked treasury” constrained by multiple layers of inaccessibility:

- **Linguistic Complexity of Ancient Scripts:** Full comprehension of the manuscripts requires advanced proficiency in Old Khmer script, as well as in classical philosophical languages such as Pali and Sanskrit. These linguistic systems are characterized by highly complex orthographic conventions and grammatical structures, presenting significant challenges even to contemporary Khmer speakers.
- **Intergenerational Discontinuity:** The number of senior monks and scholars possessing deep knowledge of this “cultural genetic code” is steadily diminishing. At the same time, younger generations are increasingly disengaged from the study of ancient scripts. As a consequence, although palm-leaf manuscripts continue to exist as material artifacts, their deeper semantic and cultural meanings are progressively becoming inaccessible and alien to contemporary society.

Scientific Foundations of the Heritage Staging Approach

Heritage Staging

Heritage staging can be conceptualized as a transformative process in which cultural contents and values—originally embedded in artifacts or traditional practices—are reconfigured into performative artistic productions presented in live stage contexts. This process functions not merely as representation but as a means of re-enactment, valorization, and dissemination of heritage.

In the case of palm-leaf manuscripts, staging extends beyond the simple recitation or chanting of canonical texts. Rather, it involves the integration of embodied expression (dance), sonic elements (musical instrumentation), and performative spatiality to reconstruct the “life-world” of the heritage. Instead of approaching palm-leaf manuscripts as static objects confined within display cases, staging reconstitutes them as dynamic experiential systems, enabling audiences to engage directly with cultural values through multisensory interaction.

At the same time, particular attention is given to the sacred dimension of the manuscripts. Consequently, staging in this context is framed as a process of “contextual reenactment,” encompassing both the production processes and ritual practices (such as recitation and chanting), thereby preserving the spiritual integrity of the heritage while rendering it accessible.

Potential for the Application of Khmer Dance and Music

Within Khmer cultural epistemology, music and dance are not discrete artistic forms but constitute two inseparable dimensions of a unified expressive system. Dance relies on music to structure rhythm and emotional resonance, while music, through choreographed movement, acquires visual and semantic concreteness. In the context of heritage staging, this synergistic relationship enables the translation of abstract and often linguistically inaccessible knowledge—encoded in palm-leaf manuscripts—into perceptible and interpretable forms through visual and auditory modalities.

Music as the animating force of movement: Khmer musical traditions encompass a wide range of ensembles, including Pin Peat, Mhôri, Kông Skôr, and Chhay-dăm, which utilize instruments made from metal, wood, skin, and wind components. These acoustic systems possess the capacity to reconstruct sacred spatial atmospheres associated with pagodas, as well as the aura of historical mysticism. Within staged performances, such sonic elements function as a form of “narrative guidance,” enabling audiences to infer the historical context and functional environment of palm-leaf manuscripts without reliance on extensive verbal explanation.

Furthermore, the act of engraving text onto palm leaves inherently possesses a rhythmic quality—manifested in the sound of the metal stylus incising the leaf surface. When these authentic sonic textures are integrated into musical compositions, particularly in combination with Khmer instruments such as the Roneat or Skôr, they generate a distinctive acoustic layer. This integration effectively transforms the “static” into the “dynamic,” using sound as a mediating force.

Dance as a symbolic language: Khmer dance traditions—ranging from classical court dance (Robam) to folk dance—are characterized by high degrees of symbolism and stylization. Each hand gesture (Kbach dey: kđap, chon-ol, chip, lear, khuon, etc.) functions as a semiotic unit capable of conveying specific meanings. These gestures can represent not only narrative elements drawn from Buddhist texts or folktales but also technical actions involved in manuscript production (e.g., engraving with a stylus, applying ink).

Through dance, artisanal activities are transformed from repetitive technical procedures into expressive choreographic sequences imbued with aesthetic vitality. In this way, the embodied practices of craftsmen are reinterpreted as performative acts, enabling the transmission of both technical knowledge and cultural meaning within a unified artistic framework.

Proposed Models and Implementation Process for Staging Palm-Leaf Manuscripts

Staging Models

- **Model 1: Independent Artistic Performance Program Description:** This model involves the development of a short theatrical production or a sequence of performance segments. These may include choreographic representations of the palm-leaf manuscript production process, as well as narrative singing or chanting based on Buddhist scriptures or traditional Khmer folktales.

Target audience: Cultural festivals, public events, and educational institutions.

- **Model 2: Interactive Exhibition with Demonstrative Performance Description:** This model is implemented within museums or pagoda spaces, where live performances of music or dance are organized in proximity to artifact display areas. Experiential activities are designed to allow visitors to interact directly with artisans engaged in the production of palm-leaf manuscripts.

Objective: To enable audiences to immediately comprehend both the production process and the cultural significance of the artifacts through direct observation and participation.

Sample Script for the Staging Process of Palm-Leaf Manuscripts

Staging Script: “The Legend of Letters on Leaves”

Theme: The journey from the palm forest to inscribed text — the awakening of heritage

Act 1: Echoes of the Phum Sroc Soul (Introduction – Historical Dimension)

- **Soundscape:** The stage is immersed in a mystical acoustic environment, combining the gentle lullaby of a Khmer mother with the distant resonance of Buddhist chanting from a Theravāda pagoda. This layered sound functions as a form of “spiritual resonance,” evoking collective memory and ancestral origins.

- **Lighting:** A faint dawn light emerges through a mist-like atmosphere (stage smoke), suggesting the liminal threshold between past and present.
- **Action:** Scenes of everyday life gradually appear in a dreamlike, semi-visible state. The chanting serves as an auditory foundation for the symbolic “awakening” of all living elements.

Act 2: Youthful Vitality and the Journey of Gathering Leaves (Rising Action – Development)

- **Soundscape:** The music shifts to an energetic and vibrant tempo, characterized by rhythmic percussion (e.g., Chhay-yam drums or festive pentatonic ensembles).
- **Action:** Groups of young men and women, dressed in traditional attire, enter the stage carrying baskets and tools. Through choreographed movements, they enact the act of traversing forest landscapes in the early morning mist.
- **Detail:** Upon discovering the palm tree, male performers climb and execute stylized gestures simulating the binding and cutting of leaves, followed by collective transport back to the phum. This sequence symbolically articulates the relationship between humans and the natural environment.

Act 3: The Art of Patience (Stillness – Artisanal Process)

- **Soundscape:** The music transitions into a softer, more refined tonal register, featuring instruments such as the Roneat-ek or the khlui (flute). The sonic atmosphere emphasizes delicacy and contemplation, creating a space in which action is elevated into ritual significance.
- **Action:**
 - **Leaf processing:** Female performers enact the stages of boiling, drying, and flattening leaves through fluid choreographic sequences.
 - **Line structuring:** Male performers utilize props to simulate the careful marking of guidelines on the dried leaf surfaces prior to engraving.

Act 4: Transmission and Creativity (Interaction – Continuity)

- **Soundscape:** The music adopts a dialogic quality, balancing solemnity with openness, symbolizing the transmission of knowledge across generations.
- **Action:** A respected elder figure (Mê Phum) or a master artisan steps forward to the center of the stage and initiates a teaching session in engraving techniques.
- **Demonstration:** The artisan performs precise engraving gestures using a stylus, while a group of Khmer youth gathers around, observing attentively before collectively reenacting the process. These engraving movements are stylized into a choreographic sequence, transforming manual technique into expressive dance.

Act 5: Revelation of the Scriptures and Celebration (Conclusion – Heritage Value)

- **Action:** Following the engraving process, performers enact the ritual of ink application. The group collectively inspects the emerging inscriptions with anticipation.
- **Soundscape:** A deep, resonant voice begins chanting the newly revealed text. Immediately thereafter, the music intensifies into a joyful and celebratory climax.
- **Finale:** All performers form a circular formation around the completed manuscript. Lighting intensifies to full brilliance. The performance concludes with a gradual return to the original chanting, reaffirming the enduring and transcendent value of knowledge embodied in the manuscripts.

Experimental Results and Evaluation of Social Impact

The effectiveness of the theatricalization approach for preserving Sách lá Buông heritage was validated through two representative experimental activities.

- **Experiment in an Academic Setting**

The dance performance “Di sản Sách lá Buông” was presented at the seminar “Sách lá buông: Preservation and Safeguarding of Khmer Heritage through Digital Technology” (January 28, 2026) at Tra Vinh University. Khmer cultural expert and Meritorious Artist Sang Sét highly appreciated the expressive power of the music and dance language in recreating the traditional cultural atmosphere. He emphasized that performative representation enables audiences to better understand the manuscript-making process and the meaning of the scripts in a direct and intuitive manner, thereby removing barriers created by ancient language forms.

- **Experiment in Community and Media Spaces**

The research team collaborated with VTV5 Southwest Region to reconstruct and film the performance within a Khmer temple setting during the Chôl Chnam Thmây festival.

Dissemination impact:

Broadcasting the program on VTV5 Southwest Region — the television channel with the broadest influence on Khmer-language content in the Mekong Delta — enabled the heritage to reach millions of viewers. This demonstrates the capacity to transform heritage from a “static” form into a “dynamic” one on a mass scale, helping young Khmer generations rediscover the value of their cultural “genetic code.”

CONCLUSION

Sách lá Buông is not merely a repository of knowledge but also the soul and the core cultural “genetic code” of the Southern Khmer community. However, due to contemporary challenges and barriers posed by ancient scripts and languages, this heritage is increasingly at risk of becoming distant from younger generations.

Transforming preservation from a “static” museum- and temple-based model into a “dynamic” theatricalized model is not only an innovative direction but also an urgent necessity for maintaining and revitalizing the vitality of the heritage in contemporary society.

The theatricalization approach, through the integration of symbolic dance language and traditional Khmer music, has demonstrated its ability to decode classical contents while simultaneously honoring the sophisticated craftsmanship of artisans. Based on the successful experimental outcomes achieved at the seminar held at Tra Vinh University and the widespread dissemination through national television broadcasting (VTV5 Southwest Region), it can be affirmed that theatricalization is no longer merely a theoretical solution but has become a practical, vivid, and highly effective preservation model.

The enthusiastic reception from the community, together with positive evaluations from veteran artisans, indicates that performing arts serve as a universal “key” capable of unlocking the treasure of knowledge preserved on palm leaves, allowing the heritage to move beyond museum display cases and connect directly with the emotions and intuition of the public. This forms a solid foundation for implementing “living preservation,” ensuring sustainable intergenerational transmission and reaffirming the enduring value of indigenous knowledge within the broader flow of national culture.

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