

Lontar Legacy: Knowledge and Wisdom

Singaraja houses the only lontar museum in Indonesia, Gedong Kirtya. Formerly it was Liefriink van der Tuuk library, named after a Dutch scientist and founder.

If you ask a Balinese priest how he knows that a ceremony is performed the way it should be, he will simply answer, "It is said on lontar."

For Balinese and even Javanese, lontar books have been the source of wisdom and knowledge—where they gain their philosophy of life, knowledge on astronomy, laws, rites, medicine and gods. Lontar are the main references—the books of life.

Only certain people that have been through ritual are allowed to read original lontar manuscripts. Today, there are only

a few Balinese who can read lontar. Being able to read lontar does not mean they can translate its content.

The texts from Kakawin, a lontar book on epics of either Mahabharata or Ramayana, sometimes are read together by a group of men. For this reason, the lontar text must be translated into Latin letters first because most cannot read Kawi letters. To popularize lontar in Bali, lontar reading is contested among the village *banjar* communities, where groups read Kakawin melodiously.

Lontar is, in fact, the name of a palm tree that grows in dry, monsoon climate. The meaning of lontar was later reduced to the lontar palm-leaf strips used as paper, upon which ancient people documented their knowledge and wisdom.

People have many colloquial names for lontar (*Borassus flabelifer*), such as *siwalan*, *siwala suwala*, *sawala patra*, *sewana patra* and *ental (tal)* tree.

Just like a book, lontar palm-leaf strips are bound between two narrow covers—pieces of wood. One bundle of lontar consists of 10 leaf strips. Different from paper, lontar is not easily damaged by insects or changing climate. Because of its durability, lontar can last for decades. People still find lontar in Bali, Java, Lombok and other parts of Indonesia.



Lontar, historical resources of all Balinese daily activities

In Bali lontar were first used as books in the 13th century. The lontar manuscript is written in Old Balinese, Old Javanese and Sanskrit using Kawi letters. The texts on lontar usually narrate aspects of life, such as laws, Hindu epics, mantras, folk tales, mysticism, medicine, history, ethics, kingdoms and fables.

Singaraja houses the only lontar museum in Indonesia, Gedong Kirtya. Formerly it was Liefriink van der Tuuk library, named after a Dutch scientist and founder. It was built in 1928 as a manuscript library with collections including books on culture and lontar manuscripts from Bali and Lombok.

The collection today in the museum is said to exceed 3,000 books. The lontar 'books' are kept in wooden boxes and are classified according to the themes of content. There are *Mantrastawa* (worship of gods), *Kalpasastra* (rites/ceremonies), *Palakarta* (laws), *Awig-awig* (customary law), *Wariga* (astronomy/astrology), *Tutur* (philosophy), *Kunda* (mysticism), *Usada* (traditional Balinese healing), *Parwa* (parts of Mahabharata), *Pujian* (praises), *Gaguritan* (songs), *Lalampahan* (story), *Satna* (children stories), *Kakawin* (epics

like Mahabharata or Ramayana) and *Nitisastra* (advice and guidelines of life).

Some lontar manuscripts in the museums are original, contributed by their owners or kings of Balinese palaces. Otherwise, the lontar manuscripts are copied from manuscripts that are written either in old Balinese, old Javanese or Sanskrit. In the museum, there also are some lontar that are written



Gedong Kirtya, Indonesia's only lontar museum

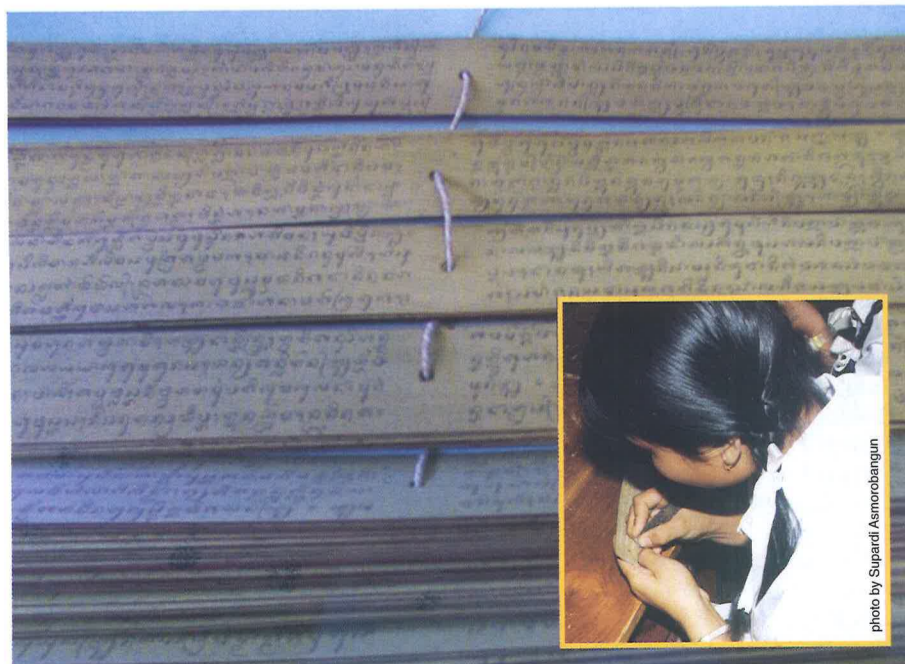
in pictures not in letters.

It takes six months to make lontar strips from lontar palm tree and the writing of manuscript on lontar can take up to five months. The process requires attention and patience. It is complicated work. If the translators write incorrectly, they must resume from the start.


The lontar leaf is engraved with a small, sharp knife locally called *pengutik*. After being engraved, the leaf is rubbed with charcoal or fried candlenut to darken the script and make it readable. The skill to engrave on lontar manuscript leaves is called *prasi* art.

Other than Gedong Kirtya, lontar manuscripts also are kept in some Denpasar libraries.

Small strips of lontar may be purchased as souvenirs in tourist destinations such as Tenganan village. Once an influential media to document knowledge, stories and laws, lontar are now unpopular among locals and few study the art. Today's students interestingly come from countries like the Netherlands, Japan, USA and India.



Lontar manuscript is written in Old Balinese, Old Javanese and Sanskrit using Kawi letters; inset: a high school student inscribes on a lontar



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PT. Khrisna Inter Visi Media
Jl. Raya Kuta 88R, Kuta - Bali - Indonesia
(T) +62 361 755 136 (hunting) (F) +62 361 762 241
(E) visi@visi-media.com (W) www.visi-media.com

story and photos by Wahyuni Kamah