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# Community participation in the Management of Palm Leaf Manuscripts as Lanna Cultural Material in Thailand



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# Community participation in the Management of Palm Leaf Manuscripts as Lanna Cultural Material in Thailand


## Abstract

### Purpose

The cultural heritage of the Lanna region of upper northern Thailand is unique. One of its distinctive features is palm leaf manuscripts (PLMs), which are viewed simultaneously as examples of sacred writing and religious symbols, means of transferring cultural knowledge, artefacts of beauty and fragile historical documents. Local people still care about these objects, and speak the language but knowledge of the script is limited. The aim of this study was to explore the views of community members and experts about the value and management of PLMs as the basis for developing a model of community-based collection management.

### Design

Because the purpose was to explore differing perceptions and beliefs around PLMs the study adopted an interpretivist worldview. Data was collected through interviews with local people with an interest in PLMs and experts who advised on organising them. In addition, observation and a photo inventory method was used to collect data. Data was analysed thematically.

### Findings

The results showed that while both groups saw the value of the knowledge PLMs contained, the community placed particular importance on the earning of 'merit' through activities related to them as Buddhist objects. Experts gave particular emphasis to the knowledge of herbal medicine contained in the PLMs. The community valued indigenous storage and preservation practices. Experts were particularly pre-occupied with the intellectual property issue around medical knowledge and convenient storage and digitisation.

### Research implications

Existing theory around libraries, archives and museums suggest some starting points for how community participation might be managed, but the unique circumstances of Lanna PLMs calls for a distinctive approach.

### Practical implications

The paper identifies a pathway suitable to the Lanna context that can build on current local practices, to enhance community participation in the management of PLMs, including a consideration of the role of information professionals.

### Originality

This paper is one of the first to extend thinking about participatory practices in the library, archive and museum literature to the context of Thailand and specifically to the case of PLMs, in the Lanna region. Rigorous data analysis of a substantial body of evidence has enhanced our understanding of the different types of value placed on PLMs. It identifies an important but not unbridgeable tension between how local people and experts view PLMs. It builds on previous library, archive and museum theory to propose a realistic model of how communities and experts (including librarians) can work together to protect the rich cultural resource represented by PLMs.


## 1 Introduction

A number of communities in Northern Thailand have rich and unique cultural traditions distinct from that of Siam that dominates Thai national culture. Lanna is one such important local identity. Lanna was a powerful regional kingdom from the 14$^{th}$ to the 16$^{th}$ centuries, but its



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cultural and linguistic influence has survived its disappearance as a political entity. A significant example of Lanna cultural materials are "Khamphi Bailan," palm leaf manuscripts (PLMs), ancient forms of documents used to record Buddhist teachings and other types of local knowledge. They are made from palm leaves that have been incised with a sharp instrument and soot rubbed into the incisions to carry the script. They are stitched together and typically enclosed in a wooden cover. The last leaf is often a colophon recording information about the manuscript such as when and at which monastery it was made, its purpose and the name of a sponsor. PLMs are an important carrier of Lanna culture, a key means by which it has survived over such a long period; they are ancient documents that represent an expression of civilization and history (Ongsakul, 2005). They are often venerated as highly sacred forms of writing (Koanantakool, 2006).

Figure 1: LannaTham script recorded on a palm leaf manuscript

Historically, like other Lanna cultural materials, PLMs have come under threat from the dominant national culture as well as the impacts of globalisation. For example, for periods in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries their use was discouraged by the state and they were actually forbidden in the 1940s by the national government, so that at times they have had to be kept in secret, often in conditions that led to their material degradation. In the first half of the Twentieth century, people ceased using PLMs in everyday life; and most people today cannot read the Lanna script in which the PLMs are inscribed, though the language is still spoken. At various times many were taken away from the region either to national institutions such as the National Library in Bangkok, as part of nation building along the lines of western models (Jory, 2000) or to Western collections. This has ensured their survival, but removed them from the communities in which they were originally created. However, many thousands (perhaps as many as a million) remain stored in traditional ways within Buddhist temple museums and libraries. How they are stored and used varies greatly between monasteries. Many PLMs have been classified by language experts, but with little standardization. They are an important cultural resource, yet to be fully researched for their historical and other knowledge value, but are also important to local identity. In the context of increasing value being placed on local cultures, and more specifically the emphasis in Library and Information Studies on community participation, it becomes important to consider how the connections between PLMs and communities can be nourished, and what the role of information professionals might be.

From the perspective of documentary theory, PLMs have a particular type of physical structure, behavioural function and mental meaning (Buckland 2015; Lund, 2009). Yet the value placed on them may differ in emphasis depending on the stakeholder or context involved. They could be treated as if their main value was in the physical object, e.g. where they are particularly precious ancient examples. Their social purpose in religious ritual could be the most salient aspect. Or it could be that it is the meaning they contain that is privileged.

PLMs do not fit neatly into Western systems for defining information and the professional boundaries associated with such definitions. For example, rather than being seen as having individual authors in a Western sense, their value may be seen as linked to particular copyists, scribes, donors or collectors. PLMs are similar to printed books, as typically collected in the West in libraries in that there are multiple copies of the same content copied out many times. Yet they are also like material in archives as they can be unique texts. They are also similar to museum artefacts as they are often thought of as precious material objects. Thus models of community participation from library, archival and museological practice may all have some relevance to how PLMs need to be managed into the future. At the same time there is a need to adapt such models to ensure they are appropriate to the very particular circumstances of Lanna.

In this context the aim of the study described in this paper is to develop a sustainable model in which the community can become more actively involved in preserving their PLM heritage in ways respecting local values. As a foundation for developing this model the research involved an exploratory investigation of current community beliefs and attitudes to PLMs alongside those of a range of experts. This promises to give us for the first time a sound understanding of user needs for services around PLMs.

## 2 Models of participation and community involvement

The growing understanding that "indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs" (UN, 2007) has been reflected in the development of new professional practices under the label of "indigenous librarianship" (Burns et al. 2009). Typically strong in USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, this has recognized the importance of acknowledging the need for sensitive management of Traditional Cultural Expressions, respect for indigenous practices of knowledge organisation and consideration of distinctive types of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property, such as collective rights of ownership over heritage. Thus, for example, there is an increasing recognition that indigenous people's concepts of knowledge organization need to be far better reflected in professional practices, and existing approaches to classification, already heavily critiqued from other directions (Drabinski, 2013; Knowlton, 2005), are inadequate (Lee, 2011). It is vital that material is managed in a way that local people remain connected to it (Stevens, 2008). Documentation and digitisation of indigenous knowledge may not be the most appropriate approach to preservation of indigenous knowledge, particularly in the context of bio-piracy (Lindh & Haider, 2010). IFLA and ALA have both done significant work in defining appropriate principles for work in such areas (e.g. Callison et al, 2016). This wider move to more participatory ways of managing indigenous affairs can be traced across many domains, including international development. In this context, for example, the International Association for Public Participation, has developed a five level schema for participation: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower (IAP2, 2007). The trend to participatory practices also has connections to the wider trends towards community participation in all areas of the management of heritage and information content, captured in terms such as community librarianship.



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Becvar & Srinivasan (2009) recognize that libraries have responded to social diversity in a growing focus on community information services. Techniques such as community analysis have been developed to understand the needs of marginalized social groups in developing library services. However, the authors point to a failure to recognize that indigenous groups often have their own ideas about how knowledge should be circulated. Indigenous knowledge is not necessarily something that should be simply captured and shared with everyone, because of indigenous beliefs about how their knowledge should be circulated – this challenges librarians' traditional focus on equal and open access. Becvar & Srinivasan (2009) argue that this necessitates a model of research into users' needs based on deeper forms of collaborative project. Shilton and Srinivasan's (2007) participatory archiving model sets out a model of research into community needs where community members become involved in processes around appraisal, arrangements and description (Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007). This is not to be seen as a simple process, however. Klimaszewski, Bader and Nyce (2012) query how the appropriate "community" is identified and who should speak for it. They argue that the way that power within local groups shapes how they might view particular cultural artefacts needs to be fully understood.

Another model of participation comes from the literature of "community archiving". Flinn (2007, p.153) writes that "Community histories or community archives are the grassroots activities of documenting, recording and exploring community heritage in which community participation, control and ownership of the project is essential". Bottom-up initiatives, community archives are created by social groups, especially marginalized or alienated ones, because state and official archives are seen to be failing to collect what they consider to be of most value and importance for their own history and identity. They are living collections for use now as part of a process of cultural liberation (Gilliland and Flinn, 2013) and "representational belonging" (Caswell et al. 2016). As a result of their alienation from formal institutions, it follows that they may not call themselves archives: they could be called anything from radical libraries, community museums to social or resource centres. They are often important as physical spaces. They are unlikely to follow standard archival principles in terms of scope (e.g. may include material objects and books as well as manuscripts) or in terms of description and organisation of such content. Indeed, they may not interact at all with professional archivists; by definition governance by the community itself is central to the definition of a community archive.

A third relevant viewpoint has been articulated by Kreps (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2014) using the term "indigenous curation" in the context of comparative museology. Comparative museology recognises that indigenous societies have their own curatorial traditions, quite different from Western practices, challenging the universal appropriateness of Western approaches. Shrines and temples are like museums because they are where highly valued objects are displayed. Indeed the very origin of the word museum links back to a temple (Kreps, 2014). Often temple design reflects attempts to preserve precious objects from environmental damage such as flooding or insect attack. Therefore, practices of displaying and preserving objects can themselves be seen as a form of intangible cultural heritage (Kreps, 2009). Furthermore, in local museums objects collected often continue to have use, and are not extracted from the social context of their creation as in Western museum practice. Rather, in this perspective, focus needs to shift from the decontextualised objects in themselves and the information they convey to the on-going social relationships they represent, and the emotional, spiritual even magical associations they have – which themselves continue to evolve (Kreps, 2006, 2014). This may



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mean that how objects are organised for retrieval based on their content is less important than their material presence (Kreps, 2014). Again Kreps makes the point that within indigenous practices access to collections is not always for the public as in a Western tradition but she argues that controls on access can be challenged if they do not respect human equality and dignity (Kreps, 2006).

Thus the literature of libraries, archives and museums provides some rich starting points for considering the critical question of how particiption in libraries, archives and museums should be conceived. The purpose of the research was to explore the context of Lanna PLMs to uncover how the community could be involved in managing PLMs in a sustainable way.

## 3 Methodology

Because the purpose was to explore differing perceptions and beliefs around PLMs the study adopted an interpretivist worldview within a critical paradigm. An exploratory approach was taken to uncover how community members and experts valued PLMs, their concepts of authorship and ownership, and what they thought about how they should be described, stored, preserved, accessed and used.

The main data for the study were interviews with community members and "experts", conducted in 2015. 23 semi-structured interviews of an average of 80 minutes were conducted with two sets of interviewees. 11 community members and leaders were interviewed, see Table 1. All had some interest in PLMs, so while not representing the community as a whole –since most community members have no knowledge of the subject - they did represent a community perspective on their value.

| No. | Age Group | Gender | Role | Community Area | Province | Duration | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | hr | min |
| 1 | 80s | M | Custodian | Wat Sungmen | Phrae | 1 | 10 |
| 2 | 70s | F | Local female | Wat Sungmen | Phrae | 1 | 14 |
| 3 | 50s | M | Prior | Wat Sungmen | Phrae | 1 | 12 |
| 4 | 60s | M | Mayor of sub-district municipality | Wat Sungmen | Phrae | 1 | 25 |
| 5 | 80s | F | Local female | Wat Laihin | Lampang | | 36 |
| 6 | 50s | M | Custodian | Wat Laihin | Lampang | 2 | 00 |
| 7 | 60s | M | Buddhism, museum and social studies lecturer | Wat Pongsanok | Lampang | 1 | 00 |
| 8 | 40s | M | Design lecturer | Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTLU) | Chiang Mai | | 48 |
| 9 | 50s | M | Lanna language teacher | Lanna Wisdoms School | Chiang Mai | 1 | 35 |
| 10 | 20s | M | University student | Chiang Mai Rajabhat University (CMRU) | Chiang Mai | | 40 |
| 11 | 20s | M | University student | Chiang Mai Rajabhat University (CMRU) | Chiang Mai | | 40 |

Table 1 Community interviewees

The second group of interviewees were 12 experts professionally interested or involved in Lanna culture. They included ancient language experts, a historian, a philosopher, an academic computer specialist and a librarian (see Table 2). Such experts (rather than information professionals) were often actively involved in classifying and organizing collections within



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temples. For convenience we use the label "experts" without wishing to imply that the community members were not themselves experts.

| No. | Age Group | Gender | Natio-nality | Role/ field of expertise | Organisation | Province, (Region) Country | Duration hr | Duration min |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 50s | M | Thai | • Researcher<br>• LannaTham Language expert | Palm Leaf Scripture Studies Center, Institute of Lanna Studies, Chiang Mai Rajabhat University | Chiang Mai, northern Thailand | 2 | 52 |
| 2 | 40s | F | Thai | Librarian | Ratchamangkhalapisek National Library of Chiang Mai | Chiang Mai, northern Thailand | 1 | 41 |
| 3 | 70s | M | Thai | Ancient language expert | National Library of Thailand | Bangkok, central Thailand | 1 | 28 |
| 4 | 70s | M | Thai | • Administrator<br>• Historian | SEAMEO Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts: SEAMEO SPAFA | Bangkok, central Thailand | 1 | 54 |
| 5 | 70s | F | Thai | • Associate professor<br>• Ancient language expert | Palm Leaf Conservation Project, Northeastern Arts and Cultural Research Institute, Mahasarakham University | Mahasarakham, north-eastern Thailand | 3 | 00 |
| 6 | 50s | M | Thai | • Ancient language expert | Palm Leaf Conservation Project, Northeastern Arts and Cultural Research Institute, Mahasarakham University | Mahasarakham, north-eastern Thailand | 3 | 00 |
| 7 | 50s | M | English | • Ancient language expert<br>• Researcher | National Library of Laos | Vientiane, central Laos | 3 | 20 |
| 8 | 80s | M | German | • Professor emeritus<br>• LannaTham literature and language expert | National Library of Laos | Vientiane, central Laos | 2 | 00 |
| 9 | 60s | M | Thai | • Assistant professor<br>• Northern Thai religious studies lecturer | Department of Philosophy and Religions, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University | Chiang Mai, northern Thailand | 1 | 33 |
| 10 | 40s | F | Thai | LannaTham language expert | Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University | Chiang Mai, northern Thailand | 2 | 30 |
| 11 | 50s | M | Thai | • Associate professor<br>• Computer science lecturer | Computer Science Department, Chiang Mai University | Chiang Mai, northern Thailand | 1 | 25 |
| 12 | 40s | M | Thai | LannaTham language expert | Ecole de Française d'Extrême-Orient | Chiang Mai, northern Thailand | 2 | 27 |

Table 2 Expert interviewees

In addition, data was collected through photographic inventory (Collier & Collier 1986) to systematically assemble visual data about how PLMs are stored and used across a number of sites. In total 688 photographs were taken across 12 sites. Field observation of a number of local practices such as the TakTham traditional procession in Wat Sungmen was also carried out.



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Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Triangulation, thick description and prolonged engagement in the field were strategies adopted to ensure research quality, rigour and credibility. A critical perspective arose from an interest in the relative power of experts in relation to the community in defining the meaning of PLMs and consequent management practices. The research raises ethical issues and dilemmas around the tension between respect for local beliefs and the professional values of expert groups.

## 4 Findings

Both community members and experts valued PLMs highly for the knowledge they contained and as material objects. In terms of knowledge, they agreed on PLM's importance for aspects of Buddhist teaching, history, language and literature, herbal medicine and academic study and research; and both groups considered the teaching of Buddhist beliefs as the most important aspect. However, community members saw the value of the physical PLMs as primarily a sacred one: in documentary theory, their social function. They considered PLMs to be sacred objects with a strong bond to notions of earning merit through the activities around the PLMs. Merit is the positive force one can accumulate through good deeds and thoughts. One community member interviewee said:

> *"It is about preserving the age of Buddhism for 5,000 years […] because there is a belief that a new Buddha will appear in the future. Therefore, people wish to preserve the Buddha's teaching by recording it in palm leaves to keep it for the next generation until the new Buddha appears."*

Another participant said *"When I was young, I saw great-grandfather place a PLM in a tray of gifts on the Buddhist altar or pedestal."* The ritual seemed to connect him to powerful personal memories.

In contrast, experts saw PLMs as mostly valuable for the knowledge they contained, less as religious objects: in documentary theory terms, their mental function. They were respectful towards the PLMs, for example after the disturbance caused by classifiying them, there was typically a religious ceremony held to show respect to them as sacred objects. Yet for the experts it was the knowledge contents that seemed to be considered more important. One expert said:

> *"I respect the inscribers and the content which is the Buddha's teaching that were recorded in PLMs. This is the way how ancestors recorded knowledge for transferring to the next generation. I do not consider PLMs as a sacred object asking for divine blessings."*

The experts also placed particular value on herbal medicine knowledge in the PLMs. One said:

> *"King Rama V realized the importance of herbal medicine. For this reason, he ordered folk doctors to gather from every part of Thailand to have a meeting and to record medicines in a Khoi book (Thai long book made of pulp from trees of the family Uricaceae) which was called "Medicine Texts Edition King Rama V". This reflected the value of Thai medicine. Although many Western medicines are influential in Thailand among Thai medicines, traditional Thai medicines are still used in everyday life."*

Reflecting the different types of value they attributed to PLMs, participants had different ideas about their management. In seeing them as objects through which merit could be earned, according to Buddhist teaching, community members considered them to belong to the

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community and thought that they would be most appropriately stored in the monasteries. One said:

> *"PLMs belong to the temple. I was born and grew up here. I have always come to this temple. I respect this temple. I could not keep them at home. I brought them to this temple to gain merit."*

From the community perspective PLMs were cultural artefacts connected to folkways and the local community were considered their owner and they belonged to their ancestors. Therefore the community felt they had the right and obligation to manage PLMs.

Where experts had provided some sort of classification, this was adapted by local people so it was more useful for their own purposes. One community member commented:

> *"I choose to present details of each manuscript on a small PVC board. I designed my own way of how to record and describe ancient objects with an informative picture, measurements, donation lists, historical detail, and how to use them on the label."*

They emphasized the value of "indigenous" storage and preservation practices. PLMs were kept in traditional storage places such as ancient chests and cabinets, within secure monastery buildings (with other valuable and sacred objects). The chests were themselves valued as a link to the ancestors who had carved them, as well as being respected as traditional craft objects – even though in practice PLMs were not always actually kept in them. Community members emphasized the way that the design of the buildings above the ground, often surrounded with a water moat was an effective way to protect the PLMs from pests.

> *"When we built the temple library, we had two layers of wall to keep the temperature stable. All water pipes and electric wires were put underground in order to protect the PLMs from insects."*

For community members, building designs also offered protection through being decorated with angels and Himmapan creatures, hybrid-animals who dwell in the legendary Himmapan Forest located beneath Buddhist heaven, and which are thought to protect PLMs.

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Figure 2: Combination of more modern storage in glass cabinets (left) and in ancient chests (right) in one room, Wat Laihin, Lampang

Figure 3: Stuccowork depicting Himmapan creatures

In the past it was only men who were involved in use of PLMs (apart from weaving covers, which was a female role). Formally this has changed, though men still seem to have priority in managing them, perhaps because the monasteries are patriarchal institutions. And permission was still needed to look at PLMs and their security controlled by abbots, monks and the guards who held the keys to temple buildings; visitors had to ask their permission before entering to see PLMs. Community members wanted access to be easier:

> *"For the idea of PLMs being accessible to everyone, we have to change the attitudes of important stakeholders. Although there is a policy of manuscript access, attitudes still have not changed. For instance, the manuscripts still cannot be seen or touched and are kept locked up... But we can change the attitudes of responsible people in the temple, the abbot, and the community. Let them understand what PLMs are, how important they are, and the more they*

*are kept out of sight, the more they disappear. Tell them that termites will damage them if we don't look after them. But if you bring them out, everybody can see them and it will help increase tourism."*

The research also involved observations of two traditional preservation practices that had been revived in specific local communities. One was "TanTham", a ceremony common in the past, to earn merit by offering PLMs to the monastery and making a dedication to the inscriber, ancestor and the Buddhist faith. In the present revival, instead of rewriting and reproducing PLMs, the community only remade the wrapper covering (itself a protection against insects or accidental damage). Another tradition that had been revived was "TakTham", a ceremony involving a procession and engaging villagers in laying out the PLMs in the sun around the temple pagoda. The TakTham tradition aims to maintain the original manuscripts in good condition by prompting a close inspection and the laying of them out in the morning sun which reduces dampness that can damage the PLMs. Participation in these activities resulted in earning merit. In both cases it was particular religious beliefs about earning merit that reanimated the community's relationship to the PLMs.

*"80% of local people, especially old people, see PLMs as sacred objects because they belonged to the previous abbot (Kruba Mahapa Kesarapanyo) who was respected among local people. The other 20%, mostly students, middle-aged people and teachers, see PLMs as knowledge. Possibly, in the future, the academic-related viewpoint might increase to 50% and be equal to the sacred view."*

Figure 4: Paying respect to the Buddha during the TanTham ceremony

Figure 5: Triple circumambulation, without shoes, performed by local people and visitors of all ages and genders in the TakTham ceremony

Yet a major barrier to a deeper relation to the PLMs was local people's lack of knowledge of the local script. They still spoke the language, but could not read it.

> *"What I want is to teach Lanna script to Lanna people. I would like them to be able to read Lanna script… The Lanna script should be the language of the Lanna or local people. Therefore, I think local people should read Lanna texts first. Everything we have talked about, hoped for and dreamt would come true if Lanna people could read Lanna scripts."*

Thus for the community interviewees it was active engagement and the earning of merit with the PLMs as physical objects that was a central concern. In contrast, according to the experts' perspective with its stress on the knowledge they contained, particularly traditional medicine, PLMs belonged to the Thai nation and were an important form of intellectual property. PLMs should be registered as national heritage, patented and copyrighted. One expert said:

> *"Herbal medicine could become just a matter of personal profit, thus, it should be protected by registration and patented."*

Another expert said:

> *"There was a committee from the Ministry of Public Health that tried to gather herbal medicines from each herbal doctor. This led to a recognition of herbal medicine as a national treasure."*

From this perspective there was a need for security around PLMs containing herbal medicine knowledge to prevent them being stolen by developed countries as had happened in the past. The experts were worried about PLMs being bought by foreigners and taken out of the country. Such PLMs might be best kept in a School of Pharmacy or the Ministry of Public Health, they believed.

As regards the majority of PLMs containing the Buddha's teaching and other knowledge, the experts considered these as public knowledge which belonged to everybody. They wanted the PLMs to be kept in the temples, and emphasized the value of convenient storage approaches over traditional chests. Because temples often did not have the capacity to care for material they thought they were appropriately stored in information institutions such as libraries. Experts saw themselves as custodians on behalf of the Thai people. An important mission was translation for further study. One expert commented:

> *"I prefer not to think in terms of ownership but it is like custodianship…our duty is to take care of them, to preserve them, not to own them…though, I think it is a good idea that certain people are officially taking care of them. However, for certain people, it is their job to make sure that the manuscripts are OK. I think that is a good idea."*

They placed emphasis on classifying PLMs by content and felt they had a mission to disseminate contents by translation. They also thought of digitization as an important means of preservation.

## 5 Discussion

While having much common ground, community members and experts diverged in their thinking about PLMs. Both thought PLMs contained important knowledge, but community members gave emphasis to them as sacred objects and the way that activities around them such as donation, handling or re-wrapping earned merit. The natural place for the PLMs was in the community



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temples, where local people remained in touch with them. Community members saw traditional practices for protecting PLMs, such as storage in chests as both valid and having their own inherent value through the link to ancestral craft skills. Revivals of ceremonies involving PLMs such as TanTham and T~~h~~akTham were a powerful means of reconnecting the community to the PLMs because they allowed people to earn merit through their engagement with PLMs. Strengthening the relation between the community and PLMs would be greatly enhanced if they were again able to read the script itself. In this sense, in the terms of documentary theory, community members recognised PLM's mental function, but privileged their physical and especially their social aspects, because of their importance in religious practices and because the cognitive meaning was less accessible.

In contrast, the experts placed greater emphasis on the knowledge the PLMs contained than the objects themselves. While concurring in seeing the religious knowledge they contained as important and respecting them as sacred objects, they placed especial importance on knowledge of herbal medicine, which had a particular need to be protected from being appropriated by individuals or other countries. This knowledge had to be carefully protected. From a documentary theory perspective, their cognitive function was more important than their physical form or social aspects. They were dedicated to preserving the PLMs and making most of their contents widely accessible. This implied improving the organisation and classification of material; storing them in convenient ways; perhaps moving them to more formal repositories in libraries and heritage organisations and digitisation, but also translation and promotion.

Experts were vital to the long term preservation and use of PLMs, yet their purposes were a little different from those of the community. A participatory model would ideally fuse the experts' input with the priorities and engagement of local people. We can return to the literature for some clues about what this might look like. The commitment to community involvement and governance is common across all the models we reviewed. Yet there are clearly significant differences with the indigenous library literature. Typically the knowledge there is oral and in need of capture. Here the PLMs are texts. The community archiving model does not quite fit either, since this is not particularly a marginalized group – though there is continuity with notions of cultural empowerment. Kreps's work seems the most relevant in stressing the way that within indigenous preservation practices objects in local museums remain embedded in social practices of use. Her emphasis on respecting traditional practices of curation also resonates with the needs of the PLM context.

Nevertheless, particularly because of the local community's limited ability to read the PLMs, it seems that the Lanna context requires a specific model in which the value of expert input can be maintained but in which the local community can be increasingly engaged and sustained. In this context the authors ~~can~~ propose a progressive model of participation building on existing types of involvement of community members in the management of PLMs.

Such a model would involve an important role for experts with appropriate community leadership and increasing community participation. Experts would need to build trust and avoid trying to dominate the agenda. The first role for experts would be to manage PLM cleaning, cataloguing and classification, and to survey and collect data from physical manuscripts. Potentially librarians might also contribute through work around appropriate standarising classification and through preservation activities. After this stage has been completed, experts



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could act as academic support. They could stimulate community members to understand the importance of PLMs by teaching Lanna script and training members of the public in the creation of PLMs, for example inscribing, weaving cloth coverings, making wooden titles, making styluses, learning the techniques involved in binding threads and in cleaning and preservation. Moreover, to facilitate community involvement, experts would disseminate the content held on PLMs by transliteration and translation. They could also create more channels for public access through the effective use of information technology. They could make digital online databases and websites about PLMs, and train community members how to digitise artefacts.

The objective would be to gradually guide the community into deeper engagement through more activities and stronger types of involvement, as captured in Table 3. Examples of many of these activities were observed.

| Support | Informing | Consultation | Involvement | Collaboration | Empowerment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Community provide food and encouragement to experts in their work on PLMs | Community are taught by experts about the value of PLMs, LannaTham script and preservation techniques | Community give feedback to experts e.g. on how PLMs should be managed | Community members actively involved e.g. weaving coverings for PLMs, making donations to reproduce PLMs, or introducing tourists to PLMs | Community make decisions with experts on equal basis e.g. in cleaning PLMs, assisting in transliteration or translation of PLMs | Community members play leadership role as custodians, re-create traditional ceremonies, actively monitor condition of PLMs |

Table 3: Community participation

The potential of this model is premised on the experts' continued involvement (and growing understanding of community needs); but also on ~~a~~ growing ~~appreciation~~ awareness, knowledge and a sense of ownership of PLMs among community members. The connection between PLMs and merit is a key driver for the process. It also requires the emergence of appropriate leadership from within the community itself, as well as critical thought about inclusivity in the way the community is represented. Leadership is needed from within the community to coordinate the community and experts, build trust and seek to link knowledge and faith. The process should be considered open-ended in recognition of the ongoing evolution of the meaning of PLMs within contemporary practices. These cannot be simply separated off from wider society including globalizing trends. The model of participation is visualized in Figure 6 below.

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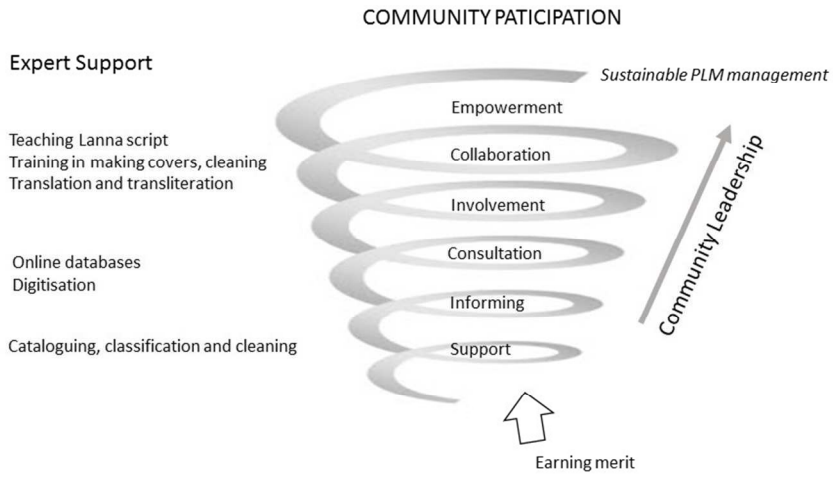


Figure 6 A process model of community participation in PLM management

## 6 Conclusion

This paper is one of the first to extend thinking about participatory practices in the library, archive and museum literature to the context of Thailand and specifically to the case of PLMs, in the Lanna region. Rigorous data analysis of a substantial body of evidence has enhanced our understanding of the different types of value placed on PLMs, and what follows from this in terms of preferences for their management. It identifies an important but not unbridgeable tension between how local people and experts view PLMs. It builds on previous theory to propose a realistic model of how communities and experts (including librarians) can work together to protect the rich cultural resource represented by PLMs.

PLMs are central to the Lanna community because of the complex spiritual and cultural meanings attached to them. The Lanna community and people are strongly invested in Buddhism, therefore the monastery and community are closely attached to each other. The Monastery is the centre of the community and also the natural place to store valued cultural collections, like PLMs. Both the local community and experts have important roles in helping the monastery collect, store and use PLMs. Experts come to manage the infrastructure of the collection while the community are core participants who continue to use and preserve them.

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