

## Preservation of Sarawak Manuscript

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to give insights on the current practices of manuscripts preservation in Sarawak. Most historical and valuable resources and manuscripts are stored and kept within the state as they are given a special right to maintain their historical resources. As there are different authorities in charge of manuscript preservation in Sarawak, the issue of effectiveness of storage and retrieval is highlighted. In understanding the situation of preservation of manuscript in Sarawak, this research is done with three research objectives. The first objective is to identify if there is any agency responsible in collecting, managing, preserving and storing manuscripts. The next objective is to know what are the methods used to ensure the safety and maintain the historical value of the manuscripts and the third objective is to distinguish the strengths and challenges of the organizations involved in preserving manuscripts in Sarawak. The strategies used in doing this research are observation and interview. Three major institutions involved in preservation of manuscripts in Sarawak were chosen to be observed. Observation was done in the premise of the organization to identify the process of preservation and storage of manuscript in the selected agencies. Besides that the websites of the organizations have also been visited to find out whether there is any exposure or promotion done for public awareness about manuscript. Interviews were also done with personnel in charge to discover the strength and challenges faced by the organizations in preserving manuscript. The finding shows that Sarawak has quite a number of manuscripts under the custody of different state authorities. Although there is a branch of a national archive in Sarawak, this branch does not have the right to keep local manuscripts. Most of the manuscripts have been preserved properly but the safekeeping of the manuscripts could be questionable.

**Keywords:** Manuscript, Sarawak; Preservation, Sarawak; Heritage, Sarawak; Document, Sarawak manuscript; National Archive, Sarawak.

### INTRODUCTION

Manuscripts are often described as unique and irreplaceable document that contains historical value, national value and evidence value. According to immersion (2002), "unlike the books, journals and other resources typically collected by libraries, archives and manuscripts typically do not exist in multiple copies." They require special techniques based on their distinctive nature. Preservation of manuscript faces many challenges since the olden days due to improper arrangement, technology obsolescence, and lack of professionals involve in the preservation process. Manuscript curators also face daily challenges such as lack of expertise, funding and time. It is crucial to determine which manuscripts are worthy for a long-term preservation. Since manuscripts also one of the evidence-added value, preserving them are the most important thing to consider.

Manuscripts are seen as the historical evidence of the past on the social event, government event and the development of a nation. Obviously, manuscripts are the evidence-added value that contributed to the growing social events and government events and its development. Therefore the existence of manuscripts is no longer doubts.

Managing manuscripts are crucial in the development of new era nowadays. Keeping up with the right track in order to make sure that the manuscripts are safely kept and being preserved is such a big deal. With the rapid changes in technology, manuscripts are left so far behind. Though manuscripts are known as valuable heritage, some parties failed to see manuscripts as important as other records that they had today. It is also known as inactive records that no longer needed, but yet, manuscripts still have the historical value that need to be protected for as long as it still valuable.

In Malaysia, the government work hard in making sure the custody of this precious heritage is well taken care of. The national archive for example is upholding the role of

preserving and storage of archival materials related to the nation's history. These materials would definitely include manuscripts.

In line with the purpose to store and safe keep the national heritage, the government through another federal organization, the National Library of Malaysia built the National Center for Malay Manuscripts to store manuscripts in Malay language.

Sarawak has long been recognized as one of the state in Malaysia, which is rich in culture because of its diverse population comprising multi ethnic background. Sarawak has unique history, being under the administration of Brunei Sultanate and then under Brooke's family for nearly hundred years (1841-1941). During the Second World War, Sarawak was under the occupation of the Japanese for more or less three years before accessioned to the British government right after the war.

There were not many information available about the history or socio-cultural pertaining to Sarawak when she was still under the rule of the Brunei Sultanate. Though there are delivery of stories and information disseminated from one generation to another verbally, the evidences in the forms of manuscripts are very rare and very hard to find.

The reign of the Brooke family was the era where the history of Sarawak was most captured and documented. During this time a lot of documentation has been done especially regarding the administration of the state. We can see the manuscripts in handwritten as well as in typewritten forms. Unfortunately most of the manuscripts created during that time were also hard to find. There are evidences of Charles Brooke's official correspondence made during his office dealing with daily administrative matter in the form of carbon copy.

It was assume that there are many manuscripts about Sarawak or manuscript created in Sarawak but perhaps those manuscripts are still being kept by individuals within and outside the state. This assumption is made based on the number of reports and books on Sarawak written by foreigners. Besides that, there are quite a number of Sarawak Public Reports being kept by organizations outside the country.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

As for the manuscripts that the state government manage to take into custody and keep, their actual safekeeping is still a big question. Therefore this research is developed to fulfill three objectives.

The first objective is to identify the agencies that are responsible and given the mandate in the management, preservation and conservation of the collection of manuscripts in the state. Also, to determine how far is their responsibilities and action taken to ensure the safekeeping of these manuscripts for the reference of the future generation as well as to preserve the state's heritage.

The second objective is to determine the methods used in order to ensure the manuscripts are in good condition. In this matter we also looking at the equipment and technology used, the knowledge of the staff in handling the preservation and conservation process, the size of the room and others.

The third objective is to determine the strength and the challenges faced by the organizations involve in preserving manuscripts. The strengths and weaknesses elements involve human resource, financial, building, training, etc.

## **PREVIOUS STUDIES**

There are a lot of literature discussing preservation of manuscript with regards to different culture and nation. Most papers were case study of a special preservation projects lead by libraries, archives, museums as well as research institutes around the world.

Mingjie and Jinfang (2010) discussed on the preservation framework for Chinese ancient books. They highlighted the values of these books and the three layer of preservation that could be done to those ancient books to preserve the physical, content and artistic format of the books.

Ziedan (2005) highlighted the manuscript museum in Bibliotheca Alexandrina with emphasis of the different departments and their roles in showcasing the different types of manuscripts.

Majumdar (2005) and Kumar & Shah (2004) have similar point of view when both looking at preservation and conservation in a wide focus. By having a case study on India, his paper focused on initiatives and importance done by organizations within the country as well as support by the government in making sure the manuscripts of the national heritage is well preserved.

Graham (2003) had a similar approach towards preservation where in her paper she concluded that a preservation initiative needs to involve everyone in a nation. The government, information agencies as well as users should play their role in the process.

Besides discussions about the preservation of ancient manuscripts, there are many literatures written on access to historical resources. The development of information and communication technology (ICT) has led to suggestions and discussions on digitization and allowing electronic access to historical documents.

Graham (2003) suggested electronic access to heritage materials. Her paper suggested that heavily used materials to be digitized for easy access as well as to preserve the physical condition of the materials.

Mazumdar (2009) mentioned that manuscripts are now in poor and fragile physical conditions and for its proper preservation at present stage for the future, many foundations, universities, and other institutions taking initiatives for digital preservation of these valuable manuscripts.

Though digital access to manuscript and heritage materials is an appealing idea, a research by M'kadem and Nieuwenhuysen (2010) showed that researchers and users are reluctant to use digitized version of manuscripts. They would not mind the trouble to retrieve manuscripts that they need as long as they are able to access the physical material.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To answer questions surfaced from the objectives of the research, three major information agencies involved in preservation and conservation of historical materials have been chosen. The three organizations namely the National Archive (Sarawak Branch), The Sarawak Museum Department and the State Library (Pustaka Negeri Sarawak) are known for their roles in securing distributing different types of information to the public. Observation was done in these three organizations with intention to understand the methods used in the process of collection, preservation and conservation of Sarawak Manuscript.

The website of all the three organizations was also visited to identify any further information regarding their role in preserving the manuscripts in Sarawak. Their approach in promoting access or creating awareness among users about manuscript was also evaluated.

Besides that, interview sessions were arranged with the personnel in the stated organization to discuss issues in preserving the manuscripts.

Though there are other organizations that might have in their storage the Sarawak manuscripts, this research is limited to the three organizations mentioned above because they are the main authority in collecting and preserving information materials in the state.

The outcome from the observation and interviews done has been analyzed and discussed further and the findings will be elaborated according to the respective objectives.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings discussed are the result of observation and interviews done at the three selected information organizations in Sarawak. It will be divided in subheadings based on the objectives of the research mentioned above.

### ***Agencies Responsible***

There are three agencies responsible of keeping archival materials in Sarawak. Yet only two organizations are given the authority to keep the Sarawak manuscripts.

The National Archive (Sarawak Branch) does not store any manuscript related to Sarawak. Though one of the objective is to collect, keep and preserve all archives records and materials from all over Sarawak which has historical and national value as well as to provide

research and reference facilities to the government agencies and the public, their function is more towards storing documents and records from federal government agencies in Sarawak. Besides that, the national archive branch in Sarawak was only formed in 1976 therefore most of the records that they keep are post 1970s records. As for the national archive in Kuala Lumpur, most of the materials and records kept are those of Sarawak's documents in relation with the federal government.

The Sarawak Museum Department has been storing the Sarawak manuscript since 1800. As the oldest information agency in Sarawak, "the Sarawak Museum Department in the website has declared their role as the custodian and keeper of all the historical documents and artifacts of the people of Sarawak and Borneo as a whole." Therefore the museum under the History and Reference Section is responsible to "collect and gather information and materials for the Archives. Archival materials include historical documents." The manuscript within the custody of Sarawak Museum dated back to the early 1800 where there are still a lot of manuscripts written by hand using Arabic script. These manuscripts are mostly folk stories and some were said to be dated back to the Brunei Sultanate reign. On top of these collections, manuscripts during Brooke's era includes handwritten and carbon copy documents range from speeches, agreements as well as letters to and from other Sultanate during that time. Unfortunately, though the Sarawak Museum is the key organization who preserved and store manuscripts on Sarawak, there are still only a very small number of manuscripts within their possession. As to date, they only store 270 manuscripts altogether. It is believed that there are more manuscripts available and kept by individuals in many parts of the world.

Sarawak State Library (Pustaka Negeri Sarawak) through their Depository Services Sector has played a role in assisting the process of preservation of the state public records and archival materials. They have worked closely with the Sarawak Museum Department in preserving and storing documents and manuscript related to the state affairs. As for now the two organizations is still in the process of transferring least valuable manuscripts from the museum to the state library. Though they obtain some documents and manuscripts from the museum, the state library also have kept some valuable manuscripts in their Sarawakiana Collection. These manuscripts are mostly of high value and received from individuals from within and outside the country. Since the manuscripts are of high historical and financial value, the access to the manuscripts is limited to research used and the usage of these manuscripts will be with supervision of the library personnel.

### ***Preservation Methods***

Manuscript and archives are the terms that often used interchangeably. However, manuscript requires special handling due to their rare condition. Even though many people could not see manuscripts as valuable heritage, but the longevity of those manuscript depends to the person who do the preservation or manage those manuscripts. One of the important aspects to consider while managing those manuscripts is their storage condition. According to Jimerson R. C (2003), deciding to save manuscripts and archives commits a repository to many years of management and storage, including arrangement, description, preservation, reference and access. As in Sarawak, the situation of preserving the manuscripts is critical due to the poor storage condition. Only a small area is provided in the Sarawak Museum to place those manuscripts. No proper handling was done by staff and one of the reasons is because they have limited spaces and resources.

The process of preserving Sarawak manuscripts are done by National Archive of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. Each manuscripts collected and stored by Sarawak Museum will be sent to the National Archives of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur for proper preservation activities. Once the manuscripts were preserved, National Archive of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur will send those manuscripts back to Sarawak Museum. This practice shows that there were no preservation activities done at state level.

Since manuscripts are inactive records, some might see manuscripts are not much importance as the current records. In Sarawak Museum environment, they only have a small unit in a building specialized to store and keep the manuscripts. Thus, the conditions of the place itself are not very encouraging to store and keep the manuscripts. There is also not enough equipment such as thermometers, mobile shelves to keep the manuscripts accordingly.

### **Strengths**

A state with interesting and special historical background like Sarawak has a huge advantage in terms of historical resources. Besides the world heritage site and valuable artifacts, the state has produced a many manuscripts with high historical value. Therefore the understanding towards saving the manuscripts for future use is high and the people in the organizations involved are well aware of the value of the manuscripts and the needs to preserve them.

### **Challenges**

Though the awareness towards preservation of manuscripts in Sarawak is high, limited professionals in the area of archives and records management has become one of the great issues in preserving Sarawak Manuscripts. Professionals such as Archivists, who are professionally trained in archival management is needed in ensuring that every standards, policies and procedures are being implemented in the preserving process. Jimerson (2003), mentioned that "archivist usually understand the historical importance of materials more clearly than do the records creators, yet they also recognize that not all records can or should be preserved." Basically, what is happening in Sarawak is every manuscript is sent over to National Archive in Kuala Lumpur for the conservation and preservation process. Due to lack and limited professionals, conservation and preservation process of Sarawak Manuscripts could not be done in house by the Sarawak Museum Department as well as in the National Archive of Malaysia, Sarawak branch. This phenomenon is crucial to the state because they have to provide some fund for the manuscripts to be sent over to National Archive headquarter.

Preserving it in a long distance term will cause difficulties in accessing as well as inviting risk of the manuscripts to be lost or damaged during the delivery of the documents.

The other major challenge faced by the state government is some individuals prefer to keep the manuscripts in their personal possession. For them, having documents of historical values such as manuscripts gives honor and pride to the descendents. They can just pass the manuscripts to their children and after few years the manuscripts will become obsolete and damaged because they are being kept without any proper handling. In some cases, they are not being educated with the importance of manuscripts and they failed to see manuscripts value and treat them as normal documents that they can easily pass to their children or grandchildren, and manuscripts are left at home without proper handling. Somehow, in a decisive political environment, people have started to get to know that it is important to reserve their rights. Great grandfather might not live long enough to tell stories or to share their thoughts, but manuscripts will remain. That is why manuscripts are kept for personal interest and to protect their family rights. They are reluctant to send the manuscripts to the archive because they are afraid they might lose their heritage. This might caused the manuscripts to be obsolete and damaged. According to Jimerson (2003), "personal letters, such as those written by soldiers during the Civil War, or by women pioneers on the Great Plains, or by unemployed workers during the Great Depression, provide vivid reminders of the hardships endured by our ancestors."

Transcription is another major challenge since some of the manuscripts are written in Arabic script. For many years they are left without any translation or description. Based on the observation conducted, it is hard to understand the content of materials written in Arabic script because there are no translations being made and this could cause to inappropriate understanding of information or content to the actual meaning of the manuscripts. To overcome this problem the National Archive through their initiative called friends of the archive or "*Sahabat Arkib*" gather people who are able to assist them in doing transcription on the Arabic calligraphy. Since there is no professional transcriber working with the archive, the friends of the archive have made a huge assistance in the transcription work. Unfortunately the Sarawak Museum do not have that initiative therefore for them to get people to do the transcription on resources that they have will take longer time than it suppose to be.

### **CONCLUSION**

Sarawak has full of history and heritage and that need to be preserved for so long it still have the continuing value. Some might not notice that the manuscripts had already existed over

hundred years ago since the formation of the region. Sarawak Manuscripts are one of the crucial records that need to be protected especially the one that have the historical value.

In order to preserve and maintain these valuable resources, a few organizations within the state have taken the responsibilities of locating, preserving and storing the manuscripts. In this case, Sarawak Museum is authorized to preserve and kept Sarawak manuscripts in the state. There are still many issues and challenges faced in preserving Sarawak manuscripts and so far there are no further initiatives in protecting them.

Some said prevention is better than cure, but prevention could not be accomplished without any initiative. The challenges have always become an enemy in preserving manuscripts that had already existed over hundred years ago. It is scattered everywhere but not many people understand of its existence. Or in other word, no one cares. Therefore before we lose all our valuable heritage, the society needs to be educated of the importance of manuscript because the only reasons manuscripts exist is to remind us about our past, to show way to our future and to preserve what we might lost.

The three organizations involved play significant roles in the matter related to conserving and preserving manuscripts in Sarawak. With exception to National Archive Sarawak Branch, the Sarawak Museum and Sarawak State Library are the organizations involved directly in ensuring the preservation of Sarawak Manuscripts. But due to certain constraints, both organizations are facing different challenges in order to actively execute their roles and functions. Sarawak State Library on the other hand has storage capacity which is yet fully utilize but both organizations do not have experts in managing the manuscripts and lacking in equipment needed for the purposes.

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