

Research Notes

Palm Leaf Manuscripts of the Cham People in Vietnam*

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The records of the Champa civilization, which was located in central Vietnam, go as far back as the second century (192). The Cham were profoundly influenced by Indian civilization and Islam. Although Champa culture remained vibrant until around 1832, much was lost throughout periods of assimilation of ethnic minority communities into Vietnamese society. In particular, warfare with the Vietnamese and the Khmer from the tenth to the nineteenth century left Champa polities on the brink of collapse.¹ Currently, there are only an estimated 161,700 Cham people remaining in various provinces and cities in Vietnam. The largest population centers are concentrated in Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan, An Giang, and Tay Ninh provinces, as well as Ho Chi Minh City.² The contemporary Cham retain some aspects of Champa culture. They still venerate Champa temples, create Champa styled statues, and study Champa inscriptions. In particular they still value palm leaf manuscripts (*agal bac*) which are kept and used by Hindu influenced Cham priests (*Ahiér*) for their religious rituals.

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¹ For further information on the history of the Cham, see Po Dharma, *Le Pāṇḍurāṅga (Campā), 1802-1835 : ses rapports avec le Vietnam*, Vol. 1 and Vol. 2 (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1987).

² The General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2009.

In recent years an increasing number of studies on the Champa and Cham culture have been conducted, resulting in more than 2,300 books and journal articles.³ These studies were mostly based on ethnographic fieldwork, philological examination of inscriptions, or historical documents from China and Vietnam, with little attention to *agal bac*. Centuries old and produced by the Cham themselves, *agal bac* are some of the most crucial primary sources for scholarly study of the Cham culture. This research note will explain the key features of palm leaf manuscript heritage to facilitate and promote further in-depth analysis of the historical and contemporary Cham culture.

Production of the Palm Leaf Documents

South Asian cultures have long used dried palm leaf as writing material for their religious texts; the Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi palm leaf manuscripts appear as early as the 5th century B.C.E. Since they were influenced by South Asian civilizations, Southeast Asian cultures, including Javanese, Indonesian, Khmer, Thai, and the Cham, used palm leaves in a similar way.⁴ In particular, the Cham preserved the *hala kadrap* form of palm leaf manuscript which the Ahiér Cham priests still use today.

Hala kadrap, or *Corypha lecomtei Becc*, is a tree that belongs to the Areca family (*Areaceae*). Although the tree can be found across South and Southeast Asia today, in Vietnam its range is limited to the central region's forested areas of Dai Lanh, Quang Nam province as well

³ P. B. LaFont, Po Dharma, and Nara Vija, *Catalogue des Manuscrits cam des Bibliothèques Françaises*. Vol. 114 (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1977); Nguyễn Hữu Thông, *Tổng thư mục Champa* [Total of Champa bibliographic catalogue] (Hà Nội: Nxb Thuận Hóa, 2003).

⁴ For a summary on some basic research concerning palm leaf manuscripts, especially liturgical writings on palm leaves (*agal bac*) and “normal” palm leaf (*hala hala kadrap* or *lipuel*) of the Cham people, see Sakaya, *Từ điển Chăm-Việt-Anh; Việt-Chăm-Anh* [Cham-Vietnamese-English dictionary; Vietnamese -English-Cham dictionary] (Hà Nội: Nxb Tri thức, 2014), 331-532.

as Tanh Linh and Can Cu 4 in Binh Thuan province.⁵ Mature specimens of this tree can stretch well over a meter in height with a trunk 40 to 60 centimeters in diameter. The leaves are large, with petioles at least 8 centimeters in length. Having deep grooves, the leaves can be up to 30 centimeters in width at the base of the tree. The edges are colored, often in black, and individual leaf blades are up to 4.5 meter long. There are fifty blade segments to a leaf, with 250 centimeters long passages between them. The light green body of the palm is at least 2.5 meter long with few branches. The stem usually branches several times. The older leaves are drier and water resistant. They are thus used to make palettes for simple walls in a house or hut. However, the young leaves of this tree, which can be also woven together to make bags, mats, or sails, were historically used as writing materials.

The production of palm leaf manuscripts is an art that, up until recently, had been lost for over five generations in Cham communities. Mr. Quang So, a fifty four year-old Ahiér Cham priest in Ninh Thuan stated the following regarding palm leaf collection and manuscript production:

My father, who used to be a priest at Po Klaong Girai towers in Ninh Thuan, once said that there were many different kinds of palm trees growing in the mountains. The thin type of palm leaves was collected to make roof material or boxes. The thick type of palm tree leaves had no veins, and thus was used to record religious texts. This latter type of palm trees grew plentiful in the mountain areas of Tanh Linh district in Binh Thuan province. In preparation to produce the palm leaf religious documents, the Cham harvested the appropriate leaves from the

⁵ Dai Lanh is located near Da Nang City. For further information on palm leaf, see the resource pages at <http://caythuoc.net/cay-thuoc/1/2206/la-buong.htm>.

mountains or bought them from Raglai.⁶ They then typically chose the young and tender leaves which then got dried to avoid book worms prior to the priests' inscription of religious verses onto the surface of the leaves. The Cham usually gathered the palm leaves in the dry season around the fourth month of the Cham calendar (from June to July in the solar calendar).

According to Mr. Quang So, once the leaves were prepared, the following steps were taken to produce the manuscripts:

The priest used a steel penknife to engrave letters on the leaves. Once the priest was finished engraving the leaf, a pulverized charcoal powder-based black ink was applied character by character. The black charcoal ink appeared very clearly on the surface of the leaves. Desiring to write the religious verses on palm leaves is a good practice. Cham must make this into a habit. The majority of former Po Adhia⁷ priests frequently wrote and copied texts on palm leaves. However, the art of inscribing the palm leaves was lost more than five generations ago. Current Cham priests inherited their palm leaf manuscripts from their forefathers. They use them during ceremonies in temples and other customary occasions for the Ahiér Cham in the area. However, no one knows how to inscribe letters on the palm leaves any longer.⁸

As described above, Cham priests in Vietnam today have heard about the production of *agal bac* from older generations, but have no knowledge of how to produce palm leaf manuscripts themselves.

⁶ The Raglai are another Austronesian 'Chamic' ethno-linguistic community in south central Vietnam. 'Chamic' peoples of Vietnam include: the Jarai, Rhade, Churu, Raglai and Cham.

⁷ The Po Adhia are the senior priests of the Ahiér Cham.

⁸ Ethnographic fieldwork data, Mr. Sakaya's interview with Mr. Quang So in Hieu Le village, Ninh Phuoc district, Ninh Thuan province on February 20, 2014.

In an effort to restore, preserve, and promote the cultural values behind the tradition of palm leaf manuscript production in the Cham community, Dr. Shine Toshihiko (Kyoto University, Japan) and the author traveled to Bali, Indonesia to meet the contemporary Balinese masters in palm leaf writing. The Balinese were also influenced by Indian civilization, and their culture is one of the most similar cultures to the Cham in Southeast Asia.⁹ Upon arriving in Bali on December 3, 2013, the team learned how to write letters on the palm leaves. Balinese informants said that from April to May each year they usually go up to the mountain and gather palm leaves. Then, after drying them, they use a sharp steel pen to inscribe the letters on the surface of the leaf. When the writing is done, they apply black ink that was made out of powdered charcoal on each page of the leaves.¹⁰

After returning to Vietnam to study the palm leaf manuscript production of the Cham in April 2013, the team concluded that the typeface, method of writing, and the ink on the palm leaf surface of the Cham were very similar to those of the Balinese people. Since then, the author visited the Cham communities throughout Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces in Vietnam to find Cham priests who were interested in restoring the tradition of palm leaf manuscript production among the Cham people. Finally, Basaih Nai Cao Liem, a forty-two year old Cham priest in Ninh Thuan, was able to locate palm leaves that could be used as samples for manuscript production. Mr. Nai Cao Liem then took a trip to Tanh Linh district in Binh Thuan province to gather palm leaves.

For manuscript production, palm leaves must be young and soft with no veins on the surface. Before writing letters on them, the leaves have traditionally been dried in the sun for two days before they were cut into pieces either 20-30 centimeters long and 4-5 centimeters wide, or 30-

⁹ On Balinese culture, see Miguel Covarrubias, *Island of Bali* (Hong Kong: Periplus, 1937); Fred B. Eiseman, Jr., *Bali: Sekala & Niskala* (Tokyo and Rutland: Tuttle, 1990).

¹⁰ Trương Văn Môn and Shine Toshihiko, "Vấn đề nghiên cứu và bảo tồn văn bản lá buông của người Bali - Indonesia và người Chăm ở Việt Nam" [Research and conservation: problems of palm leaf manuscripts of the Balinese in Indonesia and the Chams in Vietnam], *Tap chí Nghiên cứu Văn hoá Chăm* 2 (2013): 106-109.

50 cm long and 5-8cm wide, depending on individual preference and the size of the leaves. Afterward, the palm leaves were dipped in water and then pressed by placing heavy objects on them for 2-3 days. After going through this process, the surface of the leaves became flat as paper. Then a sharp steel pen and powdered charcoal were used to inscribe letters on the palm leaves.

Preservation of the Palm Leaf Manuscripts

There is only a small portion of the old *agal bac* that are preserved in the Cham community today. There are approximately 150 manuscripts totaling 10,000 leaves that Ahiér Cham priests (predominantly of the *Po Adhia* or *Po Tapah* classes) have kept in Binh Thuan and Ninh Thuan provinces. These manuscripts cover a range of topics, but the majority are for use in temple rituals. Each set of the old palm leaves has inscriptions from 5-7 individual prayer texts that have been passed down from one *Po Adhia* to another. In addition to these *agal bac* that were kept within the Cham community, a small number of palm leaf manuscripts were stolen during the wars with Dai Viet. They have been kept by the Vietnamese in Da Nang and Binh Dinh provinces. We collected four of these stolen manuscript sets, totaling about 300 leaves, during our field research in recent years.

A small number of palm leaf manuscripts are preserved in personal collections, museums, and international research institutes. Prior to 1975, Gerard Moussay collected more than twenty from Phan Ri in Binh Thuan province. These are preserved in the Cham Cultural Center in Phan Rang, Ninh Thuan province. Since the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, over twenty sets of the texts, totaling a thousand leaves, have been kept in the Cham Cultural Centers and Museums in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces, aside from those that were lost during the wars. In the United States, the Jay Scarborough collection in the Cornell University library has one palm leaf manuscript of thirty-pages in microfilm/microfiche form. While some paper manuscripts and rubbings of inscriptions are found in the archives of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (French School of Asian Studies), no *agal bac* is included in the EFEO collections.

During the last two decades or so, the author and a team of collaborators have located and catalogued approximately 150 palm leaf manuscripts, totaling 10,000 leaves. We have scanned and photographed these precious artefacts of Cham culture in an attempt to preserve them for future generations. Despite the importance of these materials, the *agal bac* have not received much attention from researchers, collectors, or state authorities until recently. The next step of our project is to publish Vietnamese-English analyses and selected translations of the Cham *agal bac*.

The Form and Language of Palm Leaf Manuscripts

Agal bac come in many different sizes. The smallest are 20-30 centimeters long and 4-5 centimeters wide, although they can be as large as 50 x 15 centimeters. Many are in the range of 30-50 centimeters x 5-8 centimeters. Each *agal bac* set has 13 to 180 double-sided leaves, and they are frequently encased in bamboo or wooden covers. Cover materials are usually sleek, dark reddish brown in color, and often intricately carved. Holes for thread or vine allow the pages to be attached together with two cover pages.

The script of most *agal bac* manuscripts is Akhar Thrah. Akhar Thrah is a type of standard script used by the Cham today that emerged in the early modern period in its earliest form. It is a member of the Pallava-Grantha sub-family of the Brahmi scripts. Earlier versions of Cham scripts, known as *Akhar Hayap* or *Akhar Bitau* in Cham, were used to carve epigraphic inscriptions on stones and towers, whose ruins can be found throughout central Vietnam. However, the orthography of Akhar Thrah is quite different from the epigraphic scripts. The first known appearance of Akhar Thrah is an inscription on the Po Romé tower that is dated to the seventeenth century. Therefore, based on the orthography of the palm leaf manuscripts, we can hypothesize that they date to the seventeenth century and later. This does not mean that palm leaves were not used earlier with a different orthography. If they were, however, none of these earlier manuscripts survived. A second feature of the manuscripts that is useful in dating their content is the appearance of a mixture of

Sanskrit, Arabic, Cham, and Malay vocabulary. While Sanskrit, Cham, and Arabic vocabulary can all be dated in their earliest appearance in the region to the 4th, 7th, and 12th centuries, respectively, Malay vocabulary did not become popular among Cham priests until the 15th century and later. The confluence of varied linguistic influences means that individuals who can read their content fluently are few and far between, even in the Ahiér priesthood.



[Photo 1] *Agal bac* from the Cham in Vietnam (NVV, March 3, 2013).

***Agal bac* Research Methods**

Studying palm leaf manuscripts requires a set of specific research skills. First, researchers need to be equipped with not only fluency in the Cham language but also a solid knowledge of several other relevant languages. For this reason, a team of researchers with language skills in Malay, Sanskrit, and Arabic is necessary. Secondly, studying *agal bac* requires ethnographic fieldwork research training to interview the Cham priests, to learn about proper use of the manuscripts, and to engage with readings of the manuscripts. In addition, skilled archivists to collect, scan, and photograph the manuscripts are necessary. Finally, skills to catalogue and transliterate Cham language texts into Vietnamese and other

languages, such as Malay, French, Japanese, or English, are needed in order to make the materials accessible for academic and public educational purposes. An in-depth understanding of Cham culture is indispensable as well to provide the appropriate background knowledge and context to ensure an accurate translation of the manuscript. Overall, these sets of research skills will be critical to cross check information gathered through interviews and the textual analysis on each *agal bac* manuscript.

The Content of *Agal bac*

The *agal bac* manuscripts cover many different topics. The subject matter concerns religious rituals, outlooks on life, paradigmatic expressions, calendars, and directions for offerings for fields and buildings, as well as imbibing talismans with spiritual potency.

For example, the *agal bac* manuscript that the author's team gained access to among the collections of a priest who managed the temple towers in Phan Ri in Binh Thuan province deals with the subject of "Aiek Tanah Riya" (The Sciences of Wind and Water). The manuscript has seventy-four leaves, and the English translation of the first part of the second leaf begins:

[The God of the Seas and Rivers] said that the land that is high in the east and low in the west is bad. If water is flowing from the east to the west (on the land), this is bad. If the land that is high in the north and is low in the south, this is bad. Water flowing in the east is also bad.

While the document above reveals the auspicious directions that are associated with nature, another *agal bac* manuscript (GVH09) discusses rituals for land worship while presenting a philosophical worldview. It specifically mentions the eight directions including north, south, east, west, northeast, southeast, northwest, and southwest. Since Cham culture, unlike Hindu conceptions of geography, only includes four directions, east (*gah aia harei tagok*), west (*gah aia harei tamâ*), south (*gah mraong*), and north (*gah birak*) in that order, we can argue that this particular document indicates the influence of Hindu culture on the indigenous Cham.

Another example of *agal bac* text that involves land purification comes from the collection of Quang Du (GD02), a sixty-five-year-old deputy priest of Po Ina Nagar Temple in Huu Duc village in Ninh Thuan province. Totalling 111 leaves and titled “Tanah Balih” (Text to Purify Lands, Towers, and Buildings), the English translation of the first leaf of the manuscript reads:

On behalf of Siva-yang, I will perform this rite. I had just stepped out of the house and saw the god-bird Garuda holding in its beak a dragon that was flying into the sea. The dragon scales became a golden parasol; and the saliva of the dragon became artesian waters as they fell upon the land.

Similarly, the following *agal bac* documents (GD01, GN7) indicate the way a land purification ceremony was performed:

In the name of Siva-yang, I will perform this rite. I walk out into the yard, with my feet on the earth and head toward heaven, and then see the *Garuda* bird (*ina garit*) carrying a dragon (*inâ girai*) flying over the sea. The skin of dragon is stripped off to become a golden parasol, and the dragon's saliva falls to the earth to become the source of water for the rivers and the streams. The dragon's bones fall into the earth and become the high mountains and thick forests.

When worshipping at midnight, Cham priests hold ritual sticks (*gai drâng*) as they move about to purify the land while reading these prayers.

The text above is from a manuscript set that has 111 leaves. The first leaf of this manuscript contains the phrase “*Ni suk tik dhik si si*,” which is a common expression to open Ahiér Cham prayers. It is spelled in many variations in Cham and comes from the Sanskrit, “*Ni swasti sidhi*.” *Ni* means “this,” and *swasti* “auspicious words.” *Sidhi* refers to “occult powers” used to control the elements. Additionally, the names of two supernatural animals appear repeatedly. Both animals were popular historically across Southeast Asia. Symbolically, *Garuda* is derived from Hindu culture. On the other hand, the dragon, in common Cham visions of history, was originally a *naga* serpent in the times of Champa. However, after the early modern period, artistic renditions of the *inâ garai* dragon

came to closely resemble similar Chinese and Vietnamese dragons (Vn.: long). The text on Leaf 12 of the same *agal bac* manuscript reads:

The Snake-god eats everything. Please, Snake-god, release the people, do not come to harass them again. If we see the white dragon that dominates the border of the country, then we will invite it to reign in the desert-sand. If the red dragon dominates the middle part of our country, we would like to invite the red dragon to reign halfway up the mountain (to avoid disaster for humans).

While the above manuscripts detail rituals outside the temple complexes, other palm leaf manuscripts, such as *agal bac* GVHCNT 02 and 03, give further details on their religious rituals at temple towers for Basaih priests. These ceremonies include: the tower opening ritual (*peh mbeng yang*), the sacrifice ritual for the fire god (*yuer yang*), Katé rituals, and the worshipping ritual for the goddess (*cambur*). The manuscript gives very clear guidelines concerning the ritual sacrifice to the fire god (*yuer yang*) along with an explanation for each symbol in the ritual, including *nandin* (holy cow), *abaoh jap* (stringing), *adhaong halah* (knife), *pangin manyak li-u* (cup containing coconut oil for light), and *bingu pak coh* (Champa flower).

In tower rituals, the sacrificial objects are often placed in a bamboo basket, called *baginrac*, held by a Po Adhia priest. During this ritual, the Po Adhia holds up objects moving his hands as if he is clapping, and then draws magical designs on the face of the earth and in the air while whispering prayers. Some previous ethnographers and cultural researchers who studied Cham rituals did not take time to examine the *agal bac* texts, especially since they had no access to them. However, the meanings and symbols of the ritual objects that were mentioned in the palm leaf manuscript can offer important explanations of some key aspects of Cham culture. Only by reading the complete *agal bac*, can one understand all the symbolism behind the sacrificial rituals at the Cham towers and also analyze how they were connected to the Hindu culture of South Asia.



[Photo 2] The Basaih monks of the Cham Ahier read old *agal bac* in a ceremony (Photo by the author, 2014).

Another interesting example of the *agal bac* manuscripts comes from the Da Nang (GDN0, GDN 02, GDN03) and Binh Dinh (GBD01) collections. These are also religious texts that were used during sacrificial offerings at Cham towers. They are written in Akhar Thrah although the vocabulary is influenced more heavily by Hindu Sanskrit than the Binh Thuan and Ninh Thuan manuscripts. It is possible that these particular manuscripts are crucial evidence that demonstrates that, although the Cham in Da Nang recorded in epigraphic scripts, they also have written in Akhar Thrah prior to the seventeenth century. However, it is also probable that the Vietnamese captured these *agal bac* documents from the southern Cham territories, such as Binh Thuan and Ninh Thuan, and brought them to Da Nang and Binh Dinh trying to merge the power of the manuscripts with the old Champa civilization sites. In the case of the latter, more likely hypothesis, the manuscripts are evidence of historical Vietnamese attempts to merge the spiritual potency of Cham manuscripts with territory claimed through conquest.

In addition to the ritual details, *agal bac* documents can also reveal details concerning the Cham calendar (*sakawi*) as in the case of the

manuscript GVHCNT 07. The text contains an original Cham calendar which appears to be very accurate. If this calendar were to be translated and published, it could help standardize the contemporary Cham calendar. There is one contemporary calendar that is recognized for Ninh Thuan province and one for Binh Thuan province, a fact which remains controversial among Cham communities even today. A standardized calendar would therefore be of great use to local communities.

Agal bac GTVHCNT 02 records astronomical events. It is a study of the stars, lunar and solar eclipses, and signs of the weather. In particular, this text addresses how astronomy influences the health of humans, animals, plants, as well as harvests, wars, and the destiny of their country and nation. Cham astronomers were very well respected and well known through the colonial period, although their knowledge and fame has become lost in contemporary society. Nevertheless, the records of such astronomical texts still remain in the form of the *agal bac* manuscripts.

Finally, manuscript GVHC11 contains text that deals with the cycle of dragons. It rotates along with the direction of the earth affecting the seas and the other bodies of water. The cycle also dictates good and bad days for constructing towers and buildings, as well as good directions for travel. This manuscript classifies the types of dragons in Cham culture, such as the white dragons (*inâ garai patih*), yellow dragons (*inâ garai kanyik*), red dragons (*inâ garai mariah*) and black dragons (*inâ giarai hitam*). The manuscript then illustrates auspicious timing for building houses, towers, and dams in the community. If this kind of *agal bac* text is translated and published, it will clarify the ways in which “dragons” were conceptualized within the Cham and broader Southeast Asian cultures. This text also suggests that Cham dragons might be more than what was simply derived from Chinese culture.

Conclusion

The popularity of the use of *agal bac* was not only among the Cham people of Vietnam but also throughout the region of Southeast Asia. As introduced above, the *agal bac* texts contain information on numerous

valuable topics and aspects of Cham culture. Further efforts to discover, preserve, and analyze these palm leaf manuscripts will bring current research and understanding of Cham culture to a higher level as these texts reveal much about the Cham religion, calendar, astronomy, philosophy, and festivities among other topics.¹¹ Moreover, *agal bac* also points out the relationship between the Cham and surrounding cultures such as Indian, Malay, Arabic, Vietnamese, and Chinese.

Further Readings on *Agal bac*

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¹¹ Editor's note: According to Mr. Hao Phan, Southeast Asia Curator at the Northern Illinois University Library, a preservation project of the Cham documents, funded by the British Library, digitized more than five hundred Cham manuscripts which are available online at the following link: <http://eap.bl.uk/database/results.a4d?projID=EAP698;r=41>

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