1.0 Summary (max 200 words)

Give a brief description of the documentary heritage being nominated and the reasons for proposing it.

This is the “shop window” of your nomination and is best written last! It should contain all the essential points you want to make, so that anyone reading it can understand your case even if they do not read the rest of your nomination.

Sri Lanka is a repository of important historical sources even before the Christian Era. They are enshrined in the palm-leaf manuscripts covering historical documents, traditional knowledge, literary sources, tenets of Buddhism and aesthetic values. The palm-leaf manuscripts collection exceeding 3500 items now preserved in the National Museum Library in Colombo, Sri Lanka, established in 1877. This is considered the largest and the most valuable collection in the country and possibly in the world written in Sinhala, Pali, Sanskrit and in Burmese, Cambodian, Tamil and Telugu languages.

The proposed item in this collection is the Great Chronicle Mahāvaṁsa (Circa 4th Century AD) compiled by Ven. Mahanama of Anuradhapura in Pali verse, carrying the history of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) from early times up to the reign of King Mahasena of Anuradhapura (334–361) and continued up to Kirti Sri Rajasingha (1747-1780) by different authors. This entire Mahāvaṁsa contains the unbroken history of Sri Lanka for over twenty two centuries. The proposed palm-leaf manuscript copy has been prepared under the supervision of Committee comprised erudite scholars for the Colombo Oriental Library established in 1870, later transformed into Colombo Museum Library by the British Governor Sir William Gregory.

The awareness of the historical heritage of Sri Lanka was immeasurably enhanced worldwide with the publication of the English translation of Mahāvaṁsa by the British Civil Servant George Turnour in 1837. Since then the Mahāvaṁsa became an indispensable source for researchers and historians to the understanding of the island’s past.

[233]
2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

Contact Details: Director,
Department of National Museums,
Sir Marcus Fernando Mawatha,
Colombo 07,
Sri Lanka
Tel. +94 11 2693314
E-mail. nmdep@slt.lk
Fax. +94 11 2695366

2.2 Relationship to the nominated documentary heritage

Director, Department of National Museums (Person in charge of nomination process)

2.3 Contact person(s) (to provide information on nomination)

Director, Department of National Museums

2.4 Contact details

Udaya Cabral
Head Conservation & Preservation Division
National Library & Documentation Services Board
14, Independence Avenue, Colombo-7
Sri Lanka

Tel. +94 11 3056244   Fax. +94 11 2685201   E-mail. ucabral@ymail.com
3.0 Identity and description of the documentary heritage

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

If inscribed, the exact title and institution(s) to appear on the certificate should given.

The manuscript Mahāvaṁsa which is in possession of the Director, National Museums, Sri Lanka baring accession number T 8 and catalogue number 1908, consists of 223 pages of treated palm leaves of the size of 22 ½ by 2 ½ inches with 8 lines to a page. Letters are clearly inscribed on average of seven letters to an inch.

3.4 History/provenance

Describe what you know of the history of the collection or document. Your knowledge may not be complete, but give the best description you can.

The Colombo National Museum Library's collection of palm-leaf manuscripts is unique as regards to its size, relative rarity and variety of disciplines represented. The majority of manuscripts are related to the history and interpretation of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, which is one of the oldest of the Buddhist traditions. Buddhism possesses a large sacred literature that dates from several centuries before the Christian era which made the Sri Lankans literate. A complete version of the Buddhist scriptures, the tripitika in Pali was first committed to writing on the palm-leaves in Sri Lanka in the first century A.D. However, no palm-leaf books of this period extant to this date but identically preserved using copying and re-copying methods.

Sri Lanka has a long history and reputation for the production and distribution of valuable books to its neighbouring countries including India, China, Burma, Tibet and Thailand. The Indian monk Buddhadatta Thera visited Sri Lanka in the early fifth century and took away copies of Pāli texts and their Sinhala commentaries. His contemporary and a prolific commentator Buddhaghosa Thera travelled from India and settled in Anuradhapura where he compiled the Visuddhimagga, an important compilation of the teachings of the Buddha. He is remembered for his eminency of scholarship on editing important Pāli works, translating classical Sinhala commentaries into Pāli and made them accessible to the Buddhist community outside of Sri Lanka. During the Polonnaruva period (1017-1235 A.D.), King Parākramabāhu the Great invited scholarly monks from Burma and other theravada countries to help purify the Sri Lankan Buddhist fraternity or sangha. The palm-leaf manuscript collection in the Colombo Museum Library thus comprises an excellent cross section of valuable books which is comparable to none in the world.

Sri Lankan palm-leaf manuscripts, particularly certain Buddhist texts are illustrated with drawings. Some illustrations do appear in the manuscripts are of popular jātaka stories in verse, such as Wessanthara Jātaka (No.624). The paintings related to Jataka Stories that appear on the walls of Buddhist vihara or temples of the Kandyan period (1592-1815 A.D.) are sometimes featured on inside the protective wooden covers of palm-leaves. In works on medicine, astrology and charms (mantra) manuscripts are frequently illustrated with diagrams (yantra) explaining the texts and their significance. These illustrations, where they occur, either on the manuscript or on the wooden cover indicate the taste and skill of the Sri Lankan craftsman. The obsolete Sinhala numerals which were unique had been used in those manuscripts reveal information of numerical skills of the Sri Lankans.
The significance of this Manuscript Collection as a whole, however, exceeds their obvious value to scholars of the history and culture of Sri Lanka. It gives evidence beyond local concerns and attests to the historical and cultural exchanges occur between Sri Lanka and other countries in the Asian region. Many chronicles and accounts of historical and literary interests provide important information about the development and interpretation of the island's political, economic, social and cultural practices such as the nominated document Mahāvaṃsa. The incidents and events recorded in this work have been confirmed by the contemporary lithic records as well. Due to its rich diversity, this manuscripts collection has attracted many local and foreign scholars who specialize in history, literature and religious history.

1. The collection of palm-leaf manuscripts belonging to the Government Oriental Library which was established in 1870 was transferred to the Museum Library in 1877; and served as the nucleus of the Museum Library. This collection consisted 188 volumes.

2. In 1924 a collection of palm leaf manuscript of about 200 were purchased from Mr. H. C. P. Bell. In 1938, after his death another 46 manuscripts belonging to him were acquired by the Museum Library.

3. In October 1934, Dr. W. A. de Silva donated his valuable collection of palm-leaf manuscripts to the library. This collection comprises works on astrology, medicine, ballads, etc. and numbering 1226 manuscripts.

4. Mr. Hugh Nevill's collection of palm leaf-manuscripts of about 807 was purchased by the Museum Library in 1985.

5. In March, 1942 Sir Solamon Dias Bandaranaike donated Sir Henry Blake’s collection of 120 palm-leaf manuscripts to the Museum Library. Accordingly, from 1877-1922 number of manuscripts were acquired and integrated into the holdings.

### 4.0 Legal information

#### 4.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name: Director, Department of National Museums</th>
<th>Address: Sir Marcus Fernando Mawatha, Colombo 07 Sri Lanka</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Facsimile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tel. + 94 11 2695366</td>
<td>Fax. + 94 11 2692092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:nmdep@slt.lk">nmdep@slt.lk</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 4.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details if different from the owner)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name : Director</th>
<th>Address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department of National</td>
<td>Sir Marcus Fernando Mawatha, Colombo - 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museums</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
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<tr>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:nmdep@slt.lk">nmdep@slt.lk</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3 Legal status

Provide details of legal and administrative responsibility for the preservation of the documentary heritage


2. Ordinance No. 11 of 1873, An Ordinance to provide for the establishment and regulations of a Public Museum in Colombo.

3. Ordinance No. 31 of 1942. An ordinance to provide for the establishment and maintenance of National Museum in Ceylon and to declare the Colombo and Kandy Museums to be National Museums.

Responsible administration (details should be given to ensure the proper management of the documentary heritage)

Administered by a state department.

4.4 Accessibility

Describe how the item(s) / collection may be accessed.

Open subject to rules and regulations of the Museum Library. Original is deposited in a safe custody of the Director, National Museums, Sri Lanka.

All access restrictions should be explicitly stated below:

Encouraging accessibility is a basic objective of MoW. Accordingly, digitization for access purposes is encouraged and you should comment on whether this has been done or is planned. You should also note if there are legal or cultural factors that restrict access.

Considering preservation the collection is not allowed to be displayed for public viewing. Access is allowed with special permission from the Director, National Museums.

4.5 Copyright status

Describe the copyright status of the item(s) / collection

Copyright owned by the Department of National Museums, Sri Lanka
Subject to provisions in local and international copyright laws.
5.0 Assessment against the selection criteria

5.1 Authenticity.

*Is the documentary heritage what it appears to be? Have identity and provenance been reliably established?*

This is an authentic copy available in Sri Lanka.
Yes. Provenance is described in 3.4 above.

5.2 World significance

*Is the heritage unique and irreplaceable? Would its disappearance constitute and harmful impoverishment of the heritage of humanity? Has it created great impact over time and/or within a particular cultural area of the world? Has it had great influence (positive or negative) on the course of history?*

National significance

- This is a unique chronicle that records the long line of events and activities of local monarchs of Sri Lanka.
- It narrates the origin of administration, politics and historical events of national significance such as introduction of Buddhism to the island and various struggles against invaders safeguarding the sovereignty of the whole Island over 2300 years of its recorded history.
- It describes the vast changes of politics, economic, social and religion had occurred in the local society and culture.
- This document is worth preserving as any disappearance would harmful to the construction of history in the region.

International significance

- Awareness of the historical heritage of Sri Lanka was immeasurably enhanced worldwide with the publication of the English translation of Mahāvaṁsa by the British Civil Servant George Turnour in 1837.
- Since then the Mahāvaṁsa became an indispensable source for researchers and historians to the understanding of the island’s past.
- This work became the source for determining the identity of Devanampiya Piyadasi mentioned in a series of inscriptions on pillars and rocks in many parts of India, eventually the Mahāvaṁsa confirmed the identity as the great Emperor Asoka in the early 20th century.
- This work is particularly significant regarding the interstate relations between Sri Lanka and several East Asian countries including China, Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia.
• The German translation of Mahavamsa prepared by Wilhelm Geiger was published in 1912. This was again translated into English by Mabel Haynes Bode, accompanying revisions made by Geiger. Accordingly, Mahavamsa became a source book on Sri Lankan history among the German speaking scholars and communities in the world.

5.3 Comparative criteria:

(Does the heritage meet any of the following tests? (It must meet at least one of them.)

1 Time

Is the document evocative of its time (which may have been a time of crisis, or significant social or cultural change? Does it represent a new discovery? Or is it the “first of its kind”?

The proposed document Mahāvaṁsa is irreplaceable chronicle in the South East Asian region and Sri Lanka in particular. It is the first and the only chronicle of its kind that deals with vast range of personalities and activities unless otherwise would have not known to the posterity.

2 Place

Does the document contain crucial information about a locality important in world history and culture? For example, was the location itself an important influence on the events or phenomena represented by the document? Does it describe physical environments, cities or institutions that have since vanished?

The awareness of historical heritage of Sri Lanka was immeasurably enhanced worldwide with the publication of the English translation of Mahāvaṁsa by the British Civil Servant George Turnour in 1837. Since then the Mahāvaṁsa became an indispensable source for researchers and historians to the understanding of the island’s past.

This work became the source for determining the identity of Devanampiya Piyadasi mentioned in a series of inscriptions on pillars and rocks in many parts of India, eventually the Mahāvaṁsa confirmed the identity and the dating of the consecration of the Emperor Asoka thereby synchronised with the Seleucid Empire and Alexander the Great.

The Mahavamsa often refers to the royal dynasties of India, very useful for historians who wish to date and relate contemporary royal dynasties in the Indian subcontinent.

The excavations in Sanchi and other locations, confirm the Mahavamsa account of the empire of Asoka. The accounts given in the Mahavamsa are also amply
supported by the numerous stone inscriptions, mostly in Sinhala, found in Sri Lanka. If not for the *Mahavamsa*, the story behind the large stupas in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, such as Ruwanwelisaya, Jetavanaramaya, Abhayagiri vihāra and other works of ancient engineering would never have been known to us.

Besides being an important historical source, the *Mahavamsa* is the most important epic poem composed in the Pali language.

Unlike many texts written in antiquity, it also discusses various aspects of the lives of ordinary people, how they joined the King's army or farmed. The stories of the *Mahavamsa* were taken along the silk route to many countries. Parts of it were translated, retold and absorbed into other Asian languages.

An extended version of the *Mahavamsa*, which gives many more details, has also been found in Cambodia. The *Mahavamsa* gave rise to many other Pali chronicles, making Sri Lanka of that period probably the world's leading centre in Pali literature.

3 People

*Does the cultural context of the document’s creation reflect significant aspects of human behaviour, or of social, industrial, artistic or political development? Or does it capture the essence of great movements, transitions, advances or regression? Does it illustrate the lives of prominent individuals in the above fields?*

Yes, this document reflects significant aspect of human behaviour of documented in chronicle form and keeping the tradition over a period of a millennium.

At the opening of the nineteenth century, the existence of an historical record called the *Mahavamsa*, or Great Dynasty, was known to a handful of Buddhist priests. It was a metrical chronicle, hiding in mystical verse the most astonishing dynastic history of the people, covering significant aspects of human behaviour, social, industrial, artistic and political development embracing over a period of no less than twenty-three centuries from the year 543 B.C. to 1758 A.D. Its stories of battles and invasions, court intrigue, great constructions of stupas and water reservoirs, written in elegant verse expound the significant aspects of how the Sri Lankan culture established its identity.

4 Subject and theme

*Does the subject matter of the document represent particular historical or intellectual developments in the natural, social and human sciences? Or in politics, ideology, sport or the arts?*

This document in its contents represents historical and intellectual development of Sri Lankans as referred to below.

**Prelude: The Buddha visits Sri Lanka**
First theme: Buddhism in Sri Lanka
Three Buddhist Councils in India
Vijaya's Arrival in the island
The Coronation of Vijaya
The Coronation of Paṇḍuvāsudeva
The Coronation of Abhaya
The Coronation of Paṇḍukābhaya (Anurādhapura)
The Coronation of Devānaṃpiyatissa
Spreading of Buddhism to Different Countries in the region
Ven. Mahinda (Emperer Asoka’s Son) Arrives
(His) Entry into the City (of Anurādhapura)
The Acceptance of the Mahāvihāra
The Acceptance of the Cetiya-pabbata-vihāra
The (Buddha's) Relics Arrive
Receiving the Great Bodhi-tree
The Coming of the Bodhi-tree with large crowd of artisans
The Demise of Ven. Mahinda

Second theme: The Dutthagāmaṇī Epic
The Birth of Prince Gāmaṇī, the reputed national leader
Acquiring Warriors
War between the Two Brothers
Dutthagāmaṇī's Victory against invadors
The Consecration of the Maricavatti-vihāra
The Consecration of the Lohapasāda
Acquiring the Resources to build the Great Stūpa
Beginning the Great Stūpa including a technical report as to how it was constructed.
Making the Relic Chamber
Enshrining the Relics
Demise of Dutthagāmaṇī

Third Theme
A Chronicle of Kings commencing from king Mahāsena
Covering the period 4th century to 17th century AD and continued up to the down fall of the Kotte, Sitavaka and the Kingdom of Kandy.

5 Form and style
Does the document have outstanding aesthetic, stylistic or linguistic value? Or is it a typical exemplar of a type of presentation, custom or medium? Is it an example of a disappeared or disappearing carrier or format?

Besides being an important historical source, the Mahavamsa is the most important epic poem in the Pali language. Its stories of battles and invasions, court intrigue, great constructions of stupas and water reservoirs, written in elegant verse suitable for memorization, caught the imagination of the Buddhist world of the time. Unlike many texts written in antiquity, it also discusses various aspects of the lives of ordinary people, how they joined the King's army or farmed.
6 Social/ spiritual/ community significance:
Application of this criterion must reflect living significance – does documentary heritage have an emotional hold on people who are alive today? Is it venerated as holy or for its mystical qualities, or reverenced for its association with significant people and events?
(Once those who have revered the documentary heritage for its social/ spiritual/ community significance no longer do so, or are no longer living, it loses this specific significance and may eventually acquire historical significance.)

Finally when the above facts are taken into consideration the Mahavamsa naturally reflect living significance – the documentary heritage embodied therein have an emotional hold on people who are alive today, especially on the actions taken by the pioneering ancestors.

6.0 Contextual information

6.1 Rarity
This is an authentic copy available in the National Museums of Sri Lanka.

6.2 Integrity
The original is intact and its integrity is well preserved.