Jana Igunma*

AKSOON KHOOM: Khmer Heritage in Thai and Lao Manuscript Cultures**

Abstract

In the Thai and Lao manuscript traditions, a variety of scripts was used for different purposes and in different regions, as for example the Dhamma script (*tôô tham* or *tham lao / tham laan naa*), Thai script, Lao buhaan script, Moon script, and Khoom script. At a time, also Fak khaam script may have been used in the manuscripts tradition, although there is no known evidence so far.

Khoom script played a particularly important role in the Central Thai (Siamese) manuscript tradition, but to a limited extent also in the Lao manuscript culture. Manuscripts in Khoom script were found in the wider regions of Bangkok/Thonburi, Ayutthaya, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Champassak, Vientiane, parts of Northeast Thailand, Luang Prabang, and Chiang Mai.

Khoom script was mainly used for Buddhist texts, works on language, medicine, cosmology, astrology and numerology, "magic" (*sai-ja-saat*), protective and astrological formula (mantra and yantra) in Pali or Sanskrit language, based upon the belief that it was a sacred script and special knowledge was required to produce and to use these manuscripts.

We will look at Khoom script in folding books, palm leaf manuscripts, and ritual items from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries containing canonical as well as non-canonical texts and formula. One important question is why Khoom script played such an important role in Thai and Lao religious and political culture over several centuries.

Production and Exchange of Manuscripts in Khoom Script

From research on existing manuscripts collections (National Library of Thailand, Chiang Mai University Library, National Library of Laos, Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Bibliothèque Nationale de France, British Library, Bodleian Library) we know that Khoom script is a variant of Khmer script. The latter had been in use in the Khmer manuscript tradition at least since the 12th century A.D., probably even earlier.

In the Thai manuscript tradition, Khoom script can be traced back to the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767 A.D.), although the oldest Thai manuscripts to survive only date back to the 17th and 18th centuries A.D. However, research on stone inscriptions has shown that various types of Khmer script had been used not only from the very beginning of the Ayutthaya period, but long before in the territories of the Khmer empire, and all its enclaves/vassals and territories of influence. The oldest dated stone inscription in Khmer script dates back to the pre-Angkorian period (Angkor Borei inscription, 611 A.D.).

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** The transcription of some terms was adapted to TAI CULTURE's regulations. Cf., TC, Vol. 3, pp. 6-15

It is assumed that the surviving manuscripts were produced in three main regions: Central Thailand (Ayutthaya/Siam with parts of the Malay Peninsula), Cambodia (Angkor), and in Southern and Central Lao polities along the Mekong (Champassak, Vientiane including parts of Northeast Thailand). Khoom script, as much as Pali and Sanskrit languages and to a certain extent also Khmer language, held a position of prestige and was used in ritualised royal formula and formal protocols at the Thai and Lao royal courts.

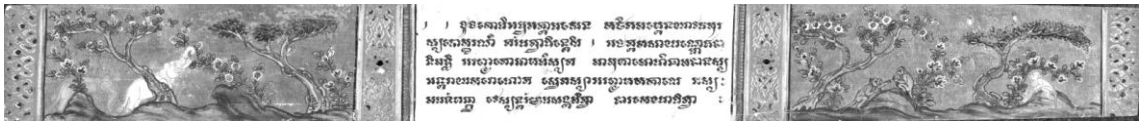
However, the presence of manuscripts in Khoom script in the collections of various libraries and museums in today's Laos, Cambodia and Northern Thailand does not automatically suggest that all these manuscripts were produced in these regions. It can be assumed that there was a lively exchange of manuscripts between monasteries, and monks who travelled long distances to further their education may have brought copies back to their home monasteries from far away.

A large number of copies containing Buddhist texts (canonical as well as non-canonical) were indeed made in Central Thailand during the 19th and early 20th centuries, though sometimes of a rather poor linguistic quality, in order to make them available to a broader audience of Dhamma students and to foreign researchers and scholars. Especially the assignment of Georges Cœdès to the Royal Vajirañāna Library in Bangkok 1916-18 resulted in the duplication and distribution of many rare texts in Cambodia that he had found in the libraries of King Mongkut and Supreme Patriarch Vajirañānavarorasa, which were formerly not or rarely known in Cambodia. It is believed that a considerable number of manuscripts in Khoom script were transferred from Central Thailand to Cambodia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Types of Manuscripts in Khoom Script

The two main types of manuscripts in Khoom script are palm leaf manuscripts (*bai laan*) and folding books (*samut khooi*) made of paper from the bark of the mulberry tree. In addition to this, there is a variety of other materials that served as writing material for ritual texts and formula in Khoom script.

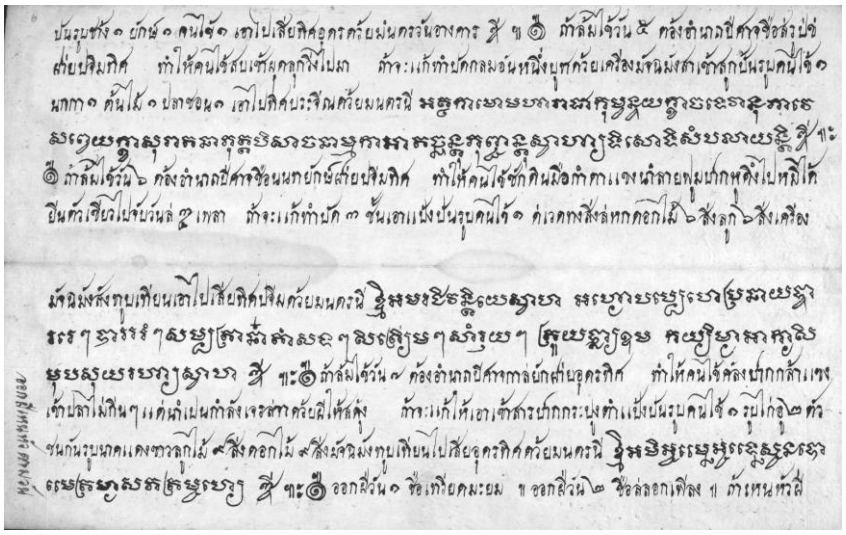
Palm leaf manuscripts, which constitute the vast majority of manuscripts in Khoom script, often contain Buddhist texts and commentaries, or local histories of Buddhist events and buildings, usually in Pali language, or Pali mixed with Thai/Lao. Mostly the text was incised and then blackened, but in some cases the text was written with a special ink or black lacquer like in the example below. In rare cases, palm leaf manuscripts were adorned with coloured illustrations, or gilt and black lacquer decorations.



Sutras in Pali language on palm leaf, 19th century, Central Thailand (British Library Or 16753, f. 1)

Folding books can contain both canonical and secular texts, usually written in black ink on cream coloured paper, or in yellow steatite on soot blackened paper. Prestigious and royal manuscripts could also be partly written in gold on black lacquered paper. They were produced for a variety of purposes, for example for the teaching of certain extracts from the Pali canon and Pali language to Buddhist novices and monks, for ceremonial and ritual purposes (for example collections of sutras and mantras), as well as cremation

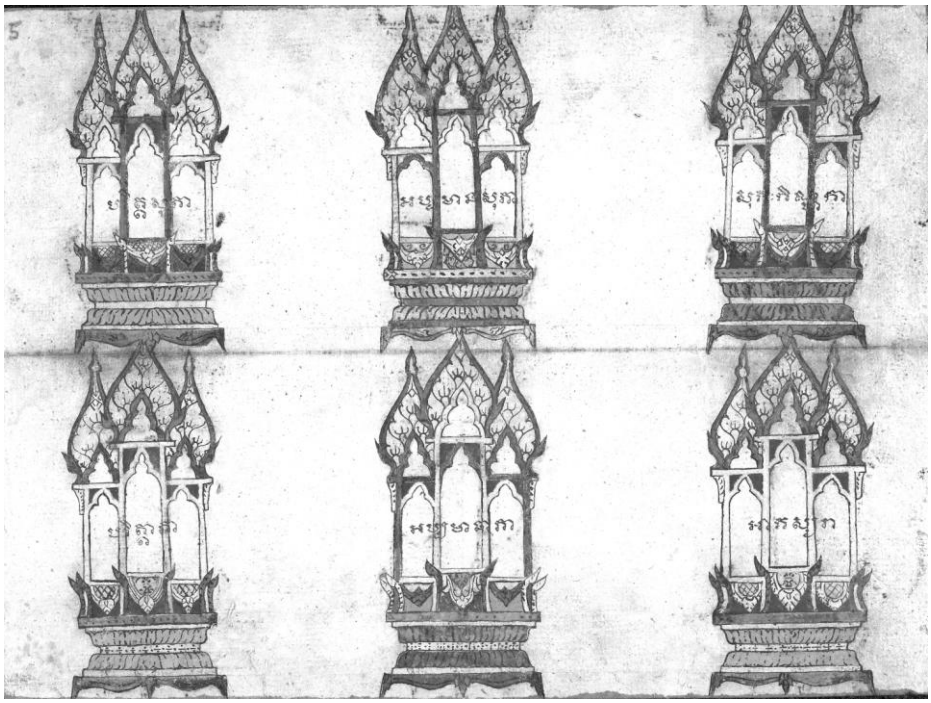
and commemorative volumes (Festschrift) to be presented at funerals or memorial services. Treatises and manuals on certain topics like astrology, numerology, cosmology, warfare, medicine, *sai-ja-saat*, divination, and the creation and interpretation of yantras are often the subject of folding books. Depending on the purpose, the language could be Pali, Thai or in rare cases Lao. Quite often there is a combination of Pali with Thai, for example many funeral presentation volumes from the Thai tradition contain extracts in Pali language from the Pali canon in combination with the legend of Phra Malai in Thai language, and occasionally a colophon in Thai language and Thai script. In addition to this, text in Khoom script can be combined with text in Thai or Lao buhaan script within one manuscript as shown in the medical treatise below, for example.



Medical treatise, folding book dated 1893 A.D. Central Thailand

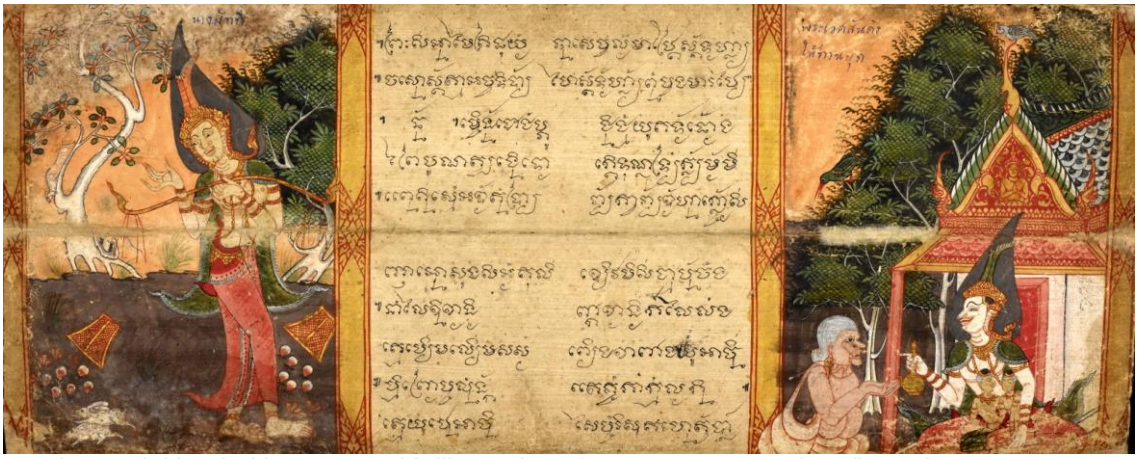
(British Library Or 14723, f. 6)

Due to their format and material, folding books were predestined for illumination. Cremation volumes and *Festschriften* often contain illustrations depicting scenes from the Last Ten Jatakas (*thotsa-chaat*), from the legend of Phra Malai, or scenes of the Himavanta heaven. Treatises and manuals also are illustrated frequently, depending on the topic.



Traiphum cosmology in Pali language, folding book, 19th century, Central Thailand

British Library Or 15245, f. 5)



Phra Malai in Thai language with illustrations from Last Ten Jatakas (here the Vessantara Jataka), folding book, 18th or early 19th century, Central Thailand (British Library Or 14704 f. 74)

In Central Thailand and some parts of Northeast Thailand, other popular materials which were used for the writing of ritual formula (mantra) and diagrams (yantra) in Khoom script are cotton or silk cloth (used for protective shirts, towels, flags etc.) and a range of metals (used for *takrut*/talismans, ritual water bowls, tattooing instruments etc.). Often these formula and diagrams are in Pali or Sanskrit languages, but sometimes they contain abbreviations in form of simple syllables for certain formula or a combination of numbers, letters, and syllables.

Ceremonial water bowl with yantra, brass, dated 1916 A.D., Central Thailand (British Library Or 16864)

Khoom Script as a Variant of Khmer Script

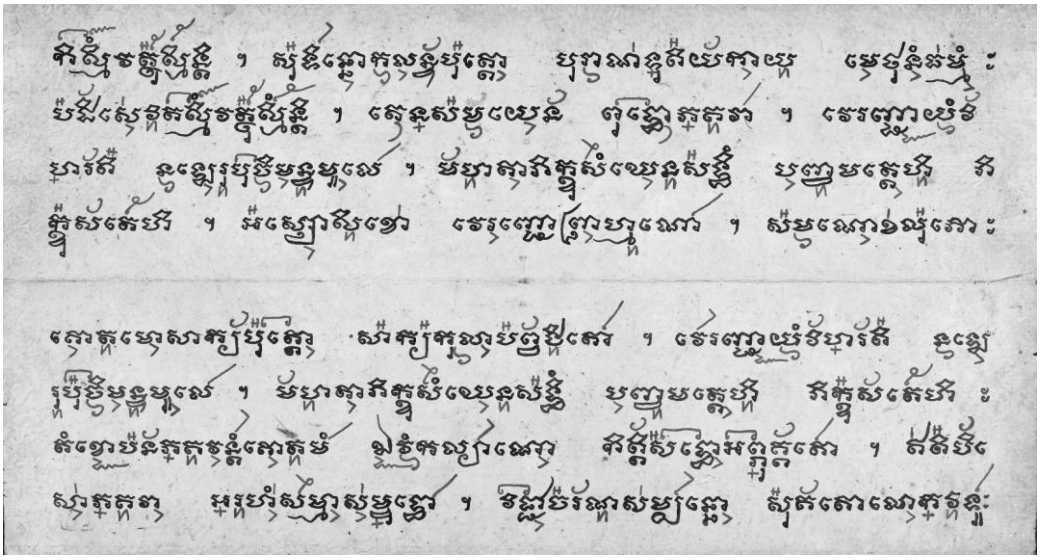
Known types of Khmer script used in the manuscript tradition include Aksoon Muul (nowadays also called Aksoon Chlaak), Aksoon Chriang, and Aksoon Khoom. In addition to this, three more variants have been identified by the Institut bouddhique in Phnom Penh: Aksoon Krasian (believed to refer to Siam), Aksoon Khwiak for rapid writing, and Aksoon Sabda.

According to Antelme (2007) and the Institut bouddhique (1967), Khoom script originated from Central Thailand (Siam), and then spread to neighbouring regions

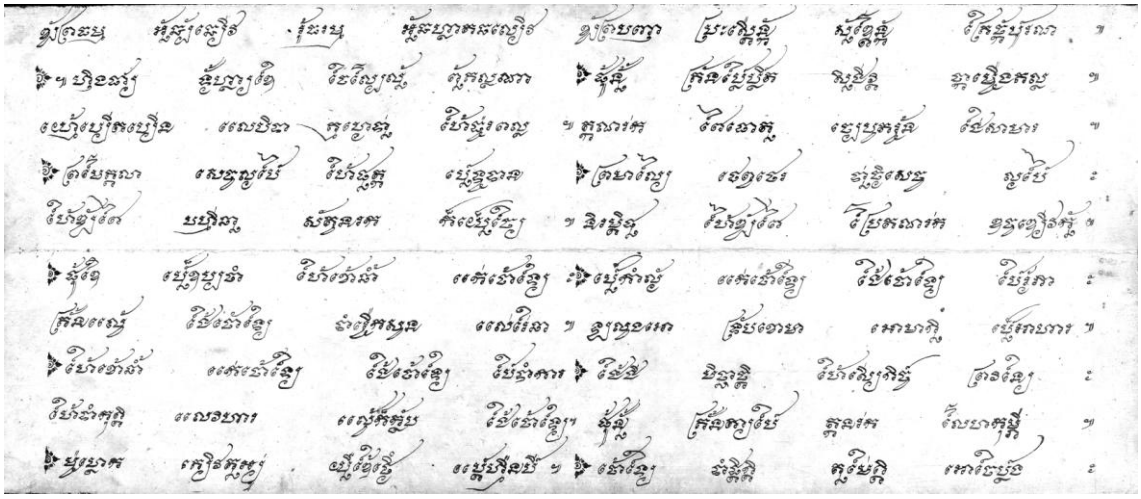
including Nakhon Si Thammarat which became a refuge for many Thai *phraam* during and after the Burmese wars.

Antelme has identified a range of letters where differences between Aksoon Khoom and the other two main types of Khmer script are obvious. Significant modifications of characters were made, and some new characters were created in order to be able to write Thai and Lao languages in Khoom script.

In addition, there exist various subtypes and modifications like Khoom Muul (the Khoom variant of Aksoon Muul) and Khoom Chriang, etc. More subtypes and variants were discussed in detail by Antelme (2007).



Extract from Vinayapitaka in Khoom Muul script (black) with diacritics to support proper accentuation/intonation (red), folding book, 19th century, Central Thailand (British Library Or 13703, f. 3)



Phra Malai in Thai language in Khoom Chriang script, folding book, dated 1894 A.D., Central Thailand (British Library Or 16100, f. 10)

The Purpose of Khoom Script

In the early periods of the Thai and Lao kingdoms, the knowledge of Khoom script was originally exclusively attributed to *phraam* (Brahmins). It is assumed that they have gained their knowledge from Khmer teachers or forefathers who indeed enjoyed an

extremely exalted and influential position in the court hierarchy in Angkor. Khmer *phraam* were recruited by Thai and Lao rulers for the purpose of carrying out certain ritual functions at the royal courts; and if we wish to believe that there is truth in the legend of King Fa Ngum (*tjau-faa* Ngum), we could be sure that he himself brought a team of Khmer *phraam* into his royal court. Over time, Buddhist monks have gained access to some of the knowledge of the *phraam* and became more and more involved in state ceremonies and rituals of a not entirely Buddhist nature. In rural communities, it became a widespread practice that men acquired some knowledge of Pali, Sanskrit and Khoom script (at a basic level, and in most of Laos they would study Dhamma script) as Buddhist novices or monks to move on to become the village *phraam* or specialists for tattooing, divination, healing and exorcism after leaving the Sangha. To a certain extent, they may have taken over some of the functions of the traditional Thai and Lao *moo* (ritual and healing specialists). On the other hand, traditional *moo* occasionally may have acquired the necessary knowledge to become *phraam.*

Yogavacara, fragment of a text on transformation and tantric-like practices, folding book, 18th century, Central Thailand (British Library Or 14447, f. 2)

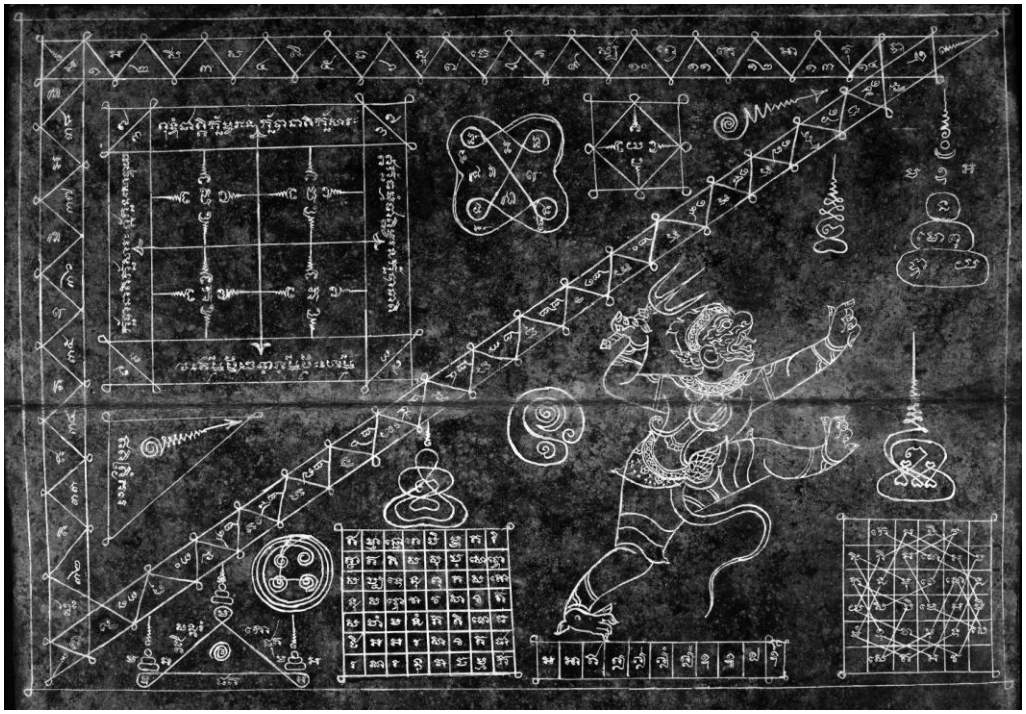
A monk who had reached a very advanced level in his Buddhist studies could specialise, for example, in astrological calculation, numerology and prediction, which were used for all important political events and state ceremonies such as coronations and cremations of kings, rites de passage of the royal offspring, founding temples, raising city pillars and associated offering rituals, formally starting agricultural activities, but also launching wars (Wales 1931). Although the Thai Royal Astrological Dept. officially ceased to exist after 1932, astrologers are still being employed by the royal court and by Thai politicians to the present day.

Sai-ja-saat was also patronised by the royal courts to a high extent, although they never succeeded to monopolise or to totally control it. The art of war, for example, is a catalogue of high-end *sai-ja-saat* (Phongpaichit/Baker 2008). War "magic" and the

quest for invulnerability formed an important part of the military preparations preceding a war or a single battle (Wales 1952). War "magic" included the acquisition of supernatural powers such as unlocking locks and gates by willpower, gaining invulnerability, invisibility or even invincibility, blessing of war elephants and weapons, overcoming the limitations of time, space and physical appearance, etc.

Other important forms of official *sai-ja-saat* were rituals to control the weather and natural catastrophes, taking oaths and spelling curses, communal sacrifices, the expulsion of diseases and of evil, and rituals connected with guardian spirits and certain Hindu deities.

The fact that much of this knowledge was encoded in Khoom script and Pali or Sanskrit language made it difficult or – for most people - impossible to acquire. It is therefore right to say that the knowledge of the *phraam* was secret knowledge.



Yantras for success in warfare to be drawn on protective shirts and battle flags, or tattooed on to soldier's bodies, folding book, 19th century, Central Thailand (British Library Or 15596, f. 8)

The affiliation of experts who possessed such special and secret knowledge to the royal courts lead to an increase of status and power of the rulers as this knowledge was commonly not only regarded as sacred, but also associated with supernatural powers, and therefore would have helped to increase respect and loyalty among subjects, and dread among enemies. Even the possession of sacred manuscripts in Khoom script may have had a similar effect. Sacred and secret knowledge, or the claim to possess such knowledge, was one – though not the only – important political instrument in the creation and rise of centralised states based on the imported *mandala* concept. In this concept, the seat of the king became the capital city, with his palace symbolising Mount Meru and the king being bestowed with powers from the gods. "The Thai palace, as Meru, became the magical center of the empire, and the king, by virtue of his residence in the palace representing the celestial mountain, was made parallel in his function to Indra" (Desai 1980, p. 45). Fear and awe helped to control whole populations (including

large masses of force-resettled people and war captives) and to justify war and other actions which normally would not have been acceptable in the context of a Buddhist or peace-loving society. On the other side, the claim to possess sacred knowledge and special, supernatural powers that provide protection from natural and supernatural dangers as well as human and spiritual enemies functioned as an assurance in return for unconditional loyalty to the king and the state.

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British Library Digitised Manuscripts
(search for 'Khmer' or 'Khom') www.bl.uk/manuscripts

CMUL Digital Heritage Collection http://library.cmu.ac.th/digital_collection/digitalheritage/

Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts http://www.laomanuscripts.net/en/index

EFEO FEMC http://www.khmermanuscripts.org/en/home.html

Southeast Asia Digital Library
(Palm leaf manuscripts of Thailand) http://sea.lib.niu.edu/type/manuscript