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## ***MANUSCRIPT STUDIES***

### ***THE POTENTIAL OF ULU MANUSCRIPTS IN BENGKULU PROVINCE: A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ULU WRITING TRADITION AND THE ULU ORAL TRADITION IN BENGKULU CITY***

Nyayu Soraya<sup>1</sup>, Alimron<sup>2</sup>, Maryamah<sup>3</sup>

#### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the cultural potential of Ulu manuscripts in Bengkulu Province, with particular emphasis on the relationship between the Ulu writing tradition and the oral tradition in Bengkulu City. Employing codicological, palaeographical, and textual analyses, the research documents manuscripts inscribed on bamboo, bark, and paper, encompassing a wide range of contents,

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<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, UIN Raden Fatah Palembang, [nyayu.soraya\\_uin@radenfatah.ac.id](mailto:nyayu.soraya_uin@radenfatah.ac.id)

<sup>2</sup> Lecturer, UIN Raden Fatah Palembang, [alimron\\_uin@radenfatah.ac.id](mailto:alimron_uin@radenfatah.ac.id)

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer, UIN Raden Fatah Palembang, [maryamah\\_uin@radenfatah.ac.id](mailto:maryamah_uin@radenfatah.ac.id)

including customary law, prayers, medicinal knowledge, oral poetry, and genealogical narratives. These materials reflect not only the intellectual and cultural richness of the local community but also the dynamic interaction between orality and literacy. The findings indicate that Ulu manuscripts functioned as repositories of knowledge, instruments of ritual and religious practice, and markers of cultural identity. Oral tradition animated and sustained the texts, while the manuscripts preserved and institutionalised oral knowledge, demonstrating a continuous interplay between spoken and written culture. Nevertheless, the preservation of these manuscripts faces significant challenges, including material deterioration, inadequate cataloguing, and limited public awareness. As a preliminary investigation, this study underscores the scholarly importance of Ulu manuscripts within the context of Malay–Islamic heritage and calls for further interdisciplinary research, systematic digitisation, and their integration into broader studies of Islamic civilisation and regional identity.

**KEYWORDS:** Ulu manuscripts, Bengkulu, Oral tradition, Writing tradition, Malay–Islamic heritage.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, manuscript studies have been increasingly recognised as a pivotal field for uncovering cultural and intellectual legacies, particularly in Southeast Asia, where the Malay world has long sustained a rich tradition that intertwines oral and written forms of knowledge. Manuscripts are not merely physical artefacts; they function as vital repositories of collective memory, knowledge systems, and cultural identity.<sup>4</sup> Within this broader heritage, the Ulu

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<sup>4</sup> Gareth Richards, “The Travelling Text: Manuscripts, Print Culture and Translation in the Making of the Malay World,” *Discourses, Agency and Identity in Malaysia* 13 (October 24, 2021): 59–103, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4568-3\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4568-3_3).

manuscripts produced historically by communities in South Sumatra, Bengkulu, and Lampung constitute an important yet comparatively understudied corpus. Written in the indigenous Ulu or Ka-ga-nga script, these manuscripts encompass a wide range of themes, including genealogies, customary law (*adat*), religious practices, traditional medicine, and oral poetry.<sup>5</sup> As such, they represent a valuable entry point for understanding how local communities in Bengkulu and its surrounding regions articulated their worldview, preserved their heritage, and transmitted knowledge across generations.<sup>6</sup>

Ulu manuscripts, however, also played a significant role in the spread and preservation of Islamic teachings, particularly in Bengkulu. These manuscripts served as important vehicles for the transmission of Islamic knowledge, serving not only as repositories of local traditions but also as documents that recorded and formalised Islamic practices. The Ulu script was used to transcribe religious texts, prayers, and teachings, ensuring that Islamic knowledge was preserved in a form that could be passed down across generations. In this way, Ulu manuscripts contributed to the development of Islamic literacy in the region, enabling communities to engage with Islamic teachings in written form and supporting the broader process of Islamisation in Bengkulu.

Although Ulu manuscripts provide concrete testimony to the intellectual traditions of the region, Bengkulu's oral heritage remains of equal importance.<sup>7</sup> Folklore, pantun, ritual chants, and proverbial expressions have historically coexisted with written culture, functioning as vital channels for the transmission of ethical

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<sup>5</sup> Sarwit Sarwono, Didi Yulistio, and Amril Canhras, "Naskah-Naskah Ulu-Islam Pada Masyarakat Di Provinsi Bengkulu ( Ulu-Islamic Manuscripts Preserved in the Society in Bengkulu Province)," *Mozaik Humaniora* 19, no. 2 (December 19, 2019): 229–42.

<sup>6</sup> Sarwono, Yulistio, and Canhras.

<sup>7</sup> Budi Agung Sudarmanto, "Revitalisasi Sastra Lisan Dan Pemertahanan Bahasa Daerah: Studi Kasus Sastra Lisan Rejung Dan Guritan Di Sumatera Selatan," *JSSH (Jurnal Sains Sosial Dan Humaniora)* 4, no. 2 (2020): 111–20, <https://doi.org/10.30595/jssh.v4i2.8593>.

values, collective memory, and social cohesion.<sup>8</sup> Rather than existing in isolation, the written and oral traditions have functioned in a complementary relationship: manuscripts often formalised oral expressions, while oral traditions gave vitality and continuity to the knowledge recorded in texts.<sup>9</sup> Examining this interplay is thus crucial for understanding how Bengkulu's communities negotiated the boundaries of memory, performance, and textualisation.

Despite their cultural significance, research on Ulu manuscripts, particularly in Bengkulu Province, remains limited when compared with the more extensively studied Malay manuscript traditions of Aceh, Minangkabau, and the Malay Peninsula. Previous scholarship has tended to privilege philological concerns such as transliteration and codicology, with relatively little attention to the socio-cultural contexts in which the manuscripts were embedded. Likewise, the relationship between the Ulu writing tradition and the oral practices of the communities that produced and safeguarded them has received scant scholarly focus. This lacuna underscores the need for a preliminary study that considers Ulu manuscripts not merely as textual artefacts but as dynamic components of a continuum linking oral and written culture.

The preservation of Ulu manuscripts and the survival of oral traditions also bear significant implications for heritage studies in the Malay world. UNESCO underscores that safeguarding cultural heritage requires balanced attention to both tangible elements, such as manuscripts, and intangible forms, including oral traditions, rituals, and performances.<sup>10</sup> Recognising this interdependence, the present study seeks to enrich understandings of Bengkulu's cultural identity within the broader framework of Malay-Islamic civilisation, while aligning with scholarly calls to integrate manuscript research with the study of performance, ritual, and oral

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<sup>8</sup> Walter J Ong and John Hartley, *Orality and Literacy* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Amin Sweeney, *A Full Hearing: Orality and Literacy in the Malay World* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO, "Education in a Multilingual World," 2003.

narrative traditions.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, this preliminary investigation explores the potential of Ulu manuscripts in Bengkulu Province by tracing the interconnections between the Ulu writing system and oral traditions in Bengkulu City. It lays the groundwork for further inquiry at the intersection of philology, anthropology, and heritage studies, situating Bengkulu within wider networks of Malay intellectual and cultural history. Ultimately, the study highlights the urgency of preserving and revitalising both written and oral traditions as interdependent legacies that continue to shape Bengkulu's cultural identity today.

## 2.0 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in several theoretical perspectives that provide a foundation for examining the relationship between Ulu manuscripts and the oral tradition in Bengkulu. Philology offers the primary lens for understanding Ulu manuscripts as textual artefacts, enabling the analysis of script, language, and textual variations that reveal the intellectual and cultural practices of the community. Alongside philology, oral tradition studies are employed to capture the living dimensions of folklore, chants, *pantun*, and proverbs that continue to shape the identity and worldview of local communities. Furthermore, the research draws on the field of heritage studies, particularly the distinction between tangible heritage (manuscripts as material texts) and intangible heritage (oral traditions as performances and cultural expressions). These theoretical perspectives together highlight the need to approach Ulu manuscripts not as isolated textual relics but as part of a broader cultural ecosystem.

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<sup>11</sup> T.E Behrend, "Manuscript Production in Nineteenth-Century Java. Codicology and the Writing of Javanese Literary History," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 149, no. 3 (1993): 407–37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27864482>.

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative approach appropriate for a preliminary study of cultural heritage. Data collection relies on literature review, field observation, and semi-structured interviews with cultural practitioners and local custodians of tradition. In addition, document analysis is conducted to examine the physical features, content, and functions of existing Ulu manuscripts. As a preliminary investigation, the methodology emphasises exploration and description rather than exhaustive cataloguing. This design allows for identifying key themes, patterns, and challenges that will form the basis for further, more comprehensive studies.

## **2.1 Heritage and Oral Tradition Framework**

The study of Ulu manuscripts in Bengkulu cannot be separated from the broader framework of cultural heritage, which encompasses both tangible and intangible dimensions. Tangible heritage comprises physical artefacts such as manuscripts, monuments, and architecture that embody a society's material culture. In this regard, Ulu manuscripts represent a unique form of written heritage, serving as visible evidence of intellectual traditions, local knowledge systems, and cultural memory inscribed in the Ulu or Kaganga script. Philology, as the study of ancient texts, plays a crucial role in understanding the authenticity, preservation, and intellectual significance of these manuscripts. By analysing the script, language, and textual variations, philology helps scholars uncover the historical and cultural practices of the Ulu community, allowing them to trace the development of these manuscripts over time.

On the other hand, intangible heritage includes oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, and knowledge practices that are transmitted across generations through speech, performance, and social interaction. In Bengkulu, traditions such as pantun, folklore, chants, and ritual expressions are living forms of intangible heritage that complement and give meaning to the textual content of Ulu manuscripts. The role of oral traditions in preserving knowledge and maintaining cultural continuity is vital, as these traditions not only

provide the living context in which the manuscripts were produced but also give them ongoing relevance. Through oral performance, these traditions keep the knowledge inscribed in the manuscripts alive, ensuring that it is not only remembered but also actively used within the community.

Together, these two dimensions of heritage highlight the interconnectedness of written and oral practices in sustaining cultural identity. The oral tradition serves to sustain the relevance of the manuscripts, while the written tradition safeguards the continuity of oral knowledge by formalising it in a more durable form. This interaction between the two forms of knowledge preservation creates a dynamic cultural ecosystem in which both written and oral forms are indispensable.

This conceptualisation aligns with the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which emphasises that cultural heritage is not limited to monuments and artefacts but also includes “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills” that communities recognise as part of their cultural legacy. UNESCO also stresses the importance of safeguarding heritage in both its tangible and intangible forms to foster cultural diversity and human creativity.<sup>12</sup> By situating Ulu manuscripts within this dual framework, this study underscores that manuscripts are not merely relics of the past but are embedded within a living continuum of oral and written traditions. Preserving Ulu manuscripts, therefore, requires not only the physical conservation of the texts but also the revitalisation of the oral practices that sustain their meaning within the community.

## 2.2 Methodological Implications

This research adopts a qualitative approach that combines codicological, palaeographical, and textual analysis.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> UNESCO, “Education in a Multilingual World.”

<sup>13</sup> James T Collins, *Bahasa Melayu Bahasa Dunia: Sejarah Singkat* (Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2005).

codicological and palaeographical perspectives focus on the external features of the manuscripts, such as writing material, dimensions, script styles, and overall condition, while the textual analysis investigates the content and themes preserved in the manuscripts. These methods are instrumental in understanding the physical and intellectual dimensions of Ulu manuscripts. The use of philology enables a deeper understanding of the authenticity and evolution of the Ulu script and its significance within the local cultural context.

Fieldwork was conducted in 15 villages in Bengkulu Province identified as potential locations for Ulu manuscripts. The selection of villages was based on preliminary information from local informants and village leaders, as well as on the presence of *langar*, traditional raised wooden structures often used to store sacred or cultural objects. Data collection involved surveys, direct documentation of manuscripts, and interviews with owners or custodians, particularly customary leaders responsible for safeguarding village heirlooms.<sup>14</sup>

To systematise the documentation, each manuscript was assigned a unique catalogue code. The code consisted of two components separated by a hyphen. The first part contained three capital letters representing either the owner's name (for family-held manuscripts) or the village name (for community-held manuscripts). The second part consisted of a sequential number corresponding to the number of manuscripts preserved by that family or village. For example, a family named Asrip with eight manuscripts received the codes ASR-01 through ASR-08, while Teni Wama's single manuscript was recorded as TEW-01. Manuscripts found in Atas Tebing village were coded ATB-01 to ATB-04.

The codicological analysis focused on measuring the manuscripts, assessing their physical condition, examining the script styles and diacritical marks, and identifying the languages used. In parallel, the textual analysis involved reading and interpreting the contents of the manuscripts, which included genealogical records,

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<sup>14</sup> Stefan Titscher et al., *Metode Analisis Teks Dan Wacana* (Yogyakarta: Pusaka Pelajar, 2009).

customary laws, oral poetry, ritual knowledge, and Islamic texts. These combined approaches allow the study to document both the material and intellectual dimensions of the Ulu manuscripts, while simultaneously situating them within the broader context of Bengkulu’s oral traditions and cultural heritage. Through these methodologies, the study aims to understand how Ulu manuscripts are both products of their time and continue to engage with the community’s oral traditions, preserving and passing on cultural knowledge.

Table 1: Villages and Informant

No	Village	Number of Manuscripts	Catalogue Code	Owner / Informant
1	Atas Tebing	4	ATB-01 to ATB-04	Village residents / community
2	Teni Wama	1	TEW-01	Teni Wama (individual)
3	Asrip	8	ASR-01 to ASR-08	Asrip family
4	Lubuk Aur	3	LBA-01 to LBA-03	Village residents / community
5	Pasar Seluma	2	PSE-01 to PSE-02	Village residents / community
6	Sumber Jaya	5	SBJ-01 to SBJ-05	Village residents / community
7	Talang Empat	6	TLE-01 to TLE-06	Village residents / community
8	Sungai Serut	2	SSR-01 to SSR-02	Village residents / community

9	Pino Raya	3	PRI-01 to PRI-03	Village residents / community
10	Karang Anyar	4	KAY-01 to KAY-04	Village residents / community
11	Kota Manna	5	KMA-01 to KMA-05	Village residents / community
12	Ujan Mas	3	UJM-01 to UJM-03	Village residents / community
13	Selagan Raya	2	SLR-01 to SLR-02	Village residents / community
14	Padang Bano	1	PBN-01	Village residents / community
15	Air Rami	4	ARM-01 to ARM-04	Village residents / community

### 3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the core findings of the study and interprets them in relation to the research objectives and existing literature. The discussion is organised into several sub-sections to provide a systematic analysis of the data, including the codicological and palaeographical features of the Ulu manuscripts, their textual content, and their broader cultural significance. Each sub-section highlights patterns, variations, and notable observations, linking them to previous studies and theoretical frameworks to contextualise the results within the scholarly discourse on manuscript studies and cultural heritage.

### 3.1 The Historical Context of Ulu Manuscripts in Bengkulu

The Ulu script, also known as Surat Ulu or Aksara Ulu, is an ancient writing system that emerged in the 13th century in the interior regions of Sumatra, particularly along the upper reaches of the Musi River. This script is a derivative of the Pallava script from India, which was utilised during the Srivijaya Kingdom era. The Ulu script was employed to write manuscripts in Malay and other Sumatran languages, serving as a medium for recording various aspects of local culture and knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

Over time, the Ulu script underwent adaptations to suit local dialects and cultural nuances. These adaptations led to variations in the script's characters and orthographic conventions across regions. For instance, the Ulu script used in the Rejang region exhibits distinct characteristics compared to that used in other areas, reflecting the localised evolution of the script.<sup>16</sup>

The primary materials for writing Ulu manuscripts included tree bark, bamboo, and palm leaves. These materials were commonly used in the interior regions of South Sumatra, such as in the Serawai area of Bengkulu province. The manuscripts often contained texts related to traditional medicine, genealogies, customary laws, and Islamic teachings, indicating the script's role in preserving and transmitting cultural and religious knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

The distribution of Ulu manuscripts is concentrated in the interior regions of Bengkulu and South Sumatra. These areas, characterised by their geographical isolation, maintained strong cultural traditions and a high level of literacy among the local populations. The manuscripts were typically preserved as family

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<sup>15</sup> Ayu Fitriani, "Hadir Sejak Abad Ke-12 M, Ini Dia Sejarah Aksara Ulu Di Lubuk Linggau," 2024, [https://silamparivt.disway.id/read/9035/hadir-sejak-abad-ke-12-m-ini-dia-sejarah-aksara-ulu-di-lubuk-linggau?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://silamparivt.disway.id/read/9035/hadir-sejak-abad-ke-12-m-ini-dia-sejarah-aksara-ulu-di-lubuk-linggau?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>16</sup> Aksara Ulu, "Sejarah Aksara Ulu Sumatera Selatan," 2022, [https://aksaraulusumsel.id/sejarah?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://aksaraulusumsel.id/sejarah?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>17</sup> Sarwit Sarwono and Ngudining Rahayu, "Traditional Medicine Knowledge in the ULU Manuscripts of Bengkulu," *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 13, no. 19 (2023): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.7176/RHSS/13-19-01>.

heirlooms or community treasures, underscoring their significance in the cultural identity of these communities

The Ulu script represents a vital component of the cultural heritage of Bengkulu and South Sumatra. Its historical development, regional variations, and the distribution of its manuscripts provide valuable insights into the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual history of the Malay Archipelago.

no	fungsi	Default	Muba	Oku-timur	Lubuk linggau	Muara-enim
1	ka menjadi ki					
2	ka menjadi ke					
3	ka menjadi ko		Huruf o menjadi u			
4	Ka menjadi ku					
5	ka menjadi k					
6	ka menjadi kan					
7	Ka menjadi kar					
8	ka menjadi kang					
9	Ka menjadi kah					
10	ka menjadi kai					
11	Ka menjadi kau					

no	bacaan	default	Ms. Ban yaasin	Oku-timur	Lubuk linggau	Muara Enim.
1	Ka					
2	ga					
3	nga					
4	ta					
5	da					
6	na					
7	pa					
8	ba					
9	ma					
10	ca					
11	ja					
12	nya					
13	a					
14	sa					
15	ra					
16	la					
17	wa					
18	ya					
19	ha					
20	ngka		-	-		-
21	ngga		-	-	-	-
22	nta		-	-	-	-
23	nda			-		
24	mpa		-	-	-	-
25	mba			-		
26	nca		-	-	-	-
27	nja		-	-	-	
28	rha		-	-	-	-

Figure 1: Basic Letter Variants of the Ulu Script

In Bengkulu Province, surveys have identified Ulu manuscripts in

19 villages and 1 urban ward. These are distributed across Kaur (2 villages), South Bengkulu (3), Seluma (10), Lebong (1), Rejang Lebong (1), North Bengkulu (1), and Bengkulu City (1 ward). In total, researchers documented 74 manuscripts, with the majority (41) preserved in Seluma Regency.<sup>18</sup>

Most manuscripts were inscribed on bamboo, though others were inscribed on *gelumpai* bamboo, bark, rattan, or coconut shells. They are generally preserved as family or village heirlooms, but many are in poor condition due to inadequate storage. Families often keep them in kitchens, attics, or small prayer houses (*langgar*), making them vulnerable to smoke, insects, and humidity. Damage includes cracks, fading, peeling, and surface darkening, rendering some texts illegible. For instance, several bamboo manuscripts from Talang Kabu, Talang Tingi, and Lubuk Betung are almost unrecognisable, while rattan manuscripts from Padang Jawi remain intact but unreadable due to blackened surfaces.<sup>19</sup>



Figure 2: Bark Manuscript (*Naskah Kayu*)

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<sup>18</sup> Sarwono, Yulistio, and Canhras, “Naskah-Naskah Ulu-Islam Pada Masyarakat Di Provinsi Bengkulu ( Ulu-Islamic Manuscripts Preserved in the Society in Bengkulu Province ).”

<sup>19</sup> Ngudining Rahayu, “Literasi Dan Naskah Ulu Abad XX Pada Berbagai Kelompok Etnik Di Bengkulu,” *Wacana: Jurnal Penelitian Bahasa, Sastra Dan Pengajaran* 14, no. 2 (2007): 124–38, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/228578665.pdf>.



Figure 3: Coconut shell manuscript from Lubuk Betung Village<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the transmission of these manuscripts has not always been accompanied by literacy in the Ulu script. As a result, many inheritors preserve the manuscripts as sacred symbols rather than as active sources of knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, they remain valuable for understanding Bengkulu's cultural and intellectual history, particularly in relation to medicine, customary law, and Islamic traditions.

Thus, Ulu manuscripts in Bengkulu are not merely textual records but living cultural artefacts that embody literacy, spirituality, and identity. Their widespread distribution across the province highlights both the historical extent of Ulu literacy and the urgent need to preserve this heritage for future generations.

### 3.2 Functions and Contents of Ulu Manuscripts

The Ulu manuscripts contain a diverse range of texts that reflect the multifaceted life of the communities in Bengkulu. Their contents include customary laws (*hukum adat*), prayers and religious invocations (*doa*), traditional medicine and healing practices (*pengobatan*), oral poetry (*syair*), and genealogical records

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<sup>20</sup> Sarwono, Yulistio, and Canhras, "Naskah-Naskah Ulu-Islam Pada Masyarakat Di Provinsi Bengkulu ( Ulu-Islamic Manuscripts Preserved in the Society in Bengkulu Province )."

<sup>21</sup> Sarwono, Yulistio, and Canhras.

(*silsilah*). These manuscripts were not merely literary artefacts but served multiple functions within society.

Socially, they acted as repositories of communal knowledge and guidelines for maintaining order and tradition. Religiously, they preserved spiritual practices, rituals, and Islamic teachings, facilitating the transmission of moral and ethical values across generations. Culturally, they functioned as symbols of identity and continuity, embedding local wisdom, artistic expression, and historical memory into the fabric of everyday life. Through these manuscripts, the communities maintained a tangible link between the past and the present, ensuring that knowledge, customs, and beliefs were safeguarded and passed down systematically.<sup>22</sup>

One notable category among these texts is medicinal manuscripts, which record practical knowledge of diseases and traditional healing methods. These works are strongly believed to have originated from the Serawai scriptorium.

For example, MNB 07.01 consists of a single bamboo log, measuring 53 cm in length and 9 cm in diameter, entitled *Usuran Sunup*. Its provenance and acquisition date by the museum remain unknown. MNB 07.09, another bamboo log (51.4 cm long and 8 cm in diameter), bears the title *Ubat-Ubatan* at the beginning of the text. This manuscript comes from Muara Dua Village, South Bengkulu, and was acquired by the Bengkulu State Museum on September 19, 1997.

Meanwhile, MNB 07.15, a bamboo manuscript measuring 42.5 cm in length and 6.7 cm in diameter, is titled *Tangas Sunup*. Originating from Sibak Village, Ipuh, North Bengkulu, it was obtained on December 23, 1997, and remains in good condition.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> S.O Robson, *Principles of Indonesian Philology* (Dordrecht-Holland: Forris Publication, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Sarwono and Rahayu, "Traditional Medicine Knowledge in the ULU Manuscripts of Bengkulu."



Figure 4: *Tangas Sunup*

The study of these medicinal manuscripts demonstrates how local communities not only preserved practical medical knowledge but also intertwined it with ritual practices, prayers, and broader cultural understandings. This highlights the role of Ulu manuscripts as holistic media of transmission, combining social, religious, and cultural dimensions in a single unified tradition.

One of the uncatalogued manuscripts at the Bengkulu State Museum, made of folded tree bark measuring  $11 \times 7$  cm, contains excerpts from several Qur'anic chapters, including *Al-Fatihah*, *Al-Nas*, *Al-Falaq*, *Al-Ikhlās*, and a passage from *Al-Baqarah* commonly known as *Ayat al-Kursi*. Meanwhile, manuscripts identified as Mal 6884 (L.Or. 12.255) consist of half-folio leaves arranged in two columns: the left column is written in Jawi script, and the right column provides its transliteration in Ulu script.

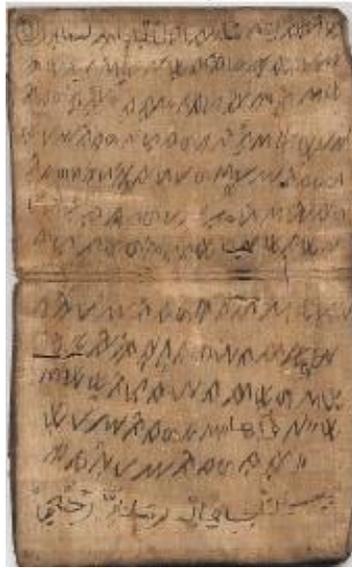


Figure 5: Two pages of manuscript MNB 1740, written in Ulu and Arabic<sup>24</sup>

Another example of a prayer preserved in the Ulu manuscripts can be found in Manuscript E1 Peti 93, written on folded tree bark measuring 14 × 13.5 cm. The text is inscribed on both sides of the bark, with an Arabic prayer rendered in Ulu script. On the second page, ten lines of supplication appear, including a prayer for safety, such as “*alahuma anseli nauripi dulu hubil hubur ansilin nurripi janatin nain ....*” Furthermore, Manuscript E86 P97, composed on a bamboo tube (*gelumpai*), contains a dialogical text closely connected to the teachings of Islamic law (*Sharī‘ah*).

The phenomenon of bilingualism in Ulu manuscripts demonstrates that their writers not only mastered the Ulu script but also knew Arabic and Jawi. This indicates a complex level of literacy, in which they may be classified as functionally literate

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<sup>24</sup> Rahayu, “Literasi Dan Naskah Ulu Abad XX Pada Berbagai Kelompok Etnik Di Bengkulu.”

persons<sup>25</sup>, capable of engaging in reading and writing for both personal needs and community development. Unlike Jawi and Arabic manuscripts in the Malay tradition, Ulu manuscripts were not primarily intended as institutionalised learning materials. Instead, they served as a medium of communication, documentation of cultural knowledge, and transmission of messages within groups familiar with Ulu and Arabic/Jawi scripts.

Historically, Ulu texts were rooted in oral traditions and social practices and were influenced by Arabic and Jawi writings. Thus, Ulu manuscripts functioned not only as cultural records but also as representations and mediums for the transformation of cultural knowledge within their society.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.3 Oral Tradition and Its Interplay with Writing in Bengkulu

The cultural landscape of Bengkulu is deeply rooted in oral tradition, expressed through diverse forms such as folklore, *pantun* (rhymed verse), *mantra* (incantations), and *peribahasa* (proverbs). These oral genres not only served as artistic expressions but also functioned as vital instruments for transmitting knowledge, values, and collective memory across generations.<sup>27</sup> Oral tradition preserved communal wisdom and reinforced social norms long before literacy became widespread, ensuring that cultural identity and moral frameworks were maintained within society.<sup>28</sup>

The emergence of Ulu manuscripts illustrates the dynamic interplay between orality and writing. Oral traditions provided the “life” and cultural content that were later documented in writing, while manuscripts offered a means of formalising and preserving

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<sup>25</sup> Agneta Lind, *Literacy for All: Making a Difference* (Paris: Unesco, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Wahyu Rizky Andhifani and Nor Huda Ali, “Tradisi Islam Dalam Prasasti Dan Naskah Ulu Di Wilayah Pasemah, Sumatera Selatan, Indonesia,” *Berkala Arkeologi* 41, no. 1 (2021): 55–68, <https://doi.org/10.30883/jba.v41i1.599>.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices* (Routledge, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> James Danandjaja, *Folklor Indonesia: Ilmu Gosip, Dongeng, Dan Lain-Lain* (Jakarta: Pustaka Utama Grafiti, 2002).

oral knowledge in a more enduring medium.<sup>29</sup> This interaction reflects a two-way process: writing safeguarded the continuity of oral heritage, and oral performance sustained the relevance of the manuscripts in everyday cultural practice.

Concrete examples from Bengkulu demonstrate this relationship. Healing incantations, religious prayers, and narrative folklore that were once transmitted orally found their way into bamboo and bark manuscripts, ensuring their preservation and enabling intergenerational transmission in both oral and written modes.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the coexistence of orality and literacy highlights how Bengkulu's cultural knowledge was not merely archived but also continually revitalised through social performance and textual recording.

### 3.4 Potentials and Challenges in Preservation

The Ulu manuscripts hold significant potential as primary sources for understanding the cultural and intellectual heritage of the Malay-Islamic world. These manuscripts are not merely textual artefacts but serve as repositories of religious knowledge, customary law, healing practices, and oral traditions that shaped the sociocultural fabric of Bengkulu and South Sumatra. As such, they offer invaluable insights into the historical interplay between Islam and local traditions, contributing to a broader understanding of regional identity and cultural continuity.<sup>31</sup>

Despite their potential, the preservation of Ulu manuscripts faces several pressing challenges. Physically, many manuscripts are fragile, often inscribed on bamboo or bark, which are highly vulnerable to decay, insect damage, and environmental conditions. Institutionally, cataloguing and systematic documentation remain

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<sup>29</sup> Ong and Hartley, *Orality and Literacy*.

<sup>30</sup> Sarwono and Rahayu, "Traditional Medicine Knowledge in the ULU Manuscripts of Bengkulu."

<sup>31</sup> Virginia Matheson-Hotter, *Writing a New Society: Social Change through the Novel in Malay* (Brill, 2021).

limited, hindering accessibility for researchers and the safeguarding of knowledge for future generations.<sup>32</sup> Socially, public awareness of the cultural and historical significance of these manuscripts remains minimal, thereby reducing community involvement in preservation efforts. Without increased recognition and collaborative conservation initiatives, much of this heritage risks deteriorating or being lost.

Thus, balancing the potential of Ulu manuscripts as cultural and scholarly resources with the challenges of preservation requires integrated strategies that involve scholars, heritage institutions, and local communities.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

This study highlights the close interconnection between written and oral traditions in the cultural history of Bengkulu and South Sumatra, as reflected in the Ulu manuscripts. Far from static texts, the manuscripts emerged from a dynamic interplay of oral performance, local wisdom, and Islamic influence, shaping their contents and functions in society. They served as cultural bridges, formalising oral traditions in writing while simultaneously being revitalised through oral recitations and practices.

The findings underscore the broader significance of Ulu manuscripts for Malay world studies. They provide valuable insights into how local communities negotiated identity, religion, and cultural continuity, thereby contributing to the larger corpus of Malay-Islamic heritage. The manuscripts not only preserve knowledge of customary laws, medicine, and genealogy but also embody the intellectual creativity and adaptability of the communities that produced them.

Given their importance, further research is essential to deepen understanding of their linguistic, cultural, and historical

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<sup>32</sup> Henri Chambert-Loir, *Khazanah Naskah: Panduan Koleksi Naskah-Naskah Indonesia Sedunia* (Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 1999).

dimensions. At the same time, urgent preservation efforts are required to safeguard these fragile texts from physical deterioration and neglect. Finally, integrating Ulu manuscripts into the study of Islamic civilisation and regional heritage would enrich both academic discourse and cultural identity, ensuring that these unique legacies continue to inform present and future generations.

