

## Ancient Manuscripts of Kerinci: Aksara Incung in the Course of History

Indra Muhammad Gandi  
Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Andalas, Indonesia  
*igandi672@gmail.com*

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### Abstract

Each region has numerous historical sites developed as a form of cultural heritage preservation, including Indonesia, which is home to various ancient manuscripts. One of the most significant ancient manuscripts is the Kerinci Manuscript, written in the Incung script. The Incung script was used by the Kerinci people to document spells, customary laws, and other important records. However, this script has largely been forgotten by the younger generation of Kerinci. This study aims to explore the history, functions, and development of the Kerinci Incung script. The research employs a qualitative historical method through literature review. The findings reveal that the Incung script has a long history and diverse functions, ranging from serving as a medium for writing legal codes and historical records to oral literature. The script was inscribed on various media such as buffalo horns, bamboo, tree bark, and paper. Although it is less known today, efforts to preserve it are ongoing, including through education and cultural events. This study underscores the importance of the Incung script as a cultural heritage that needs to be preserved and developed to enrich the cultural identity of the Kerinci community.

**Keywords:** *Aksara Incung; Kerinci Manuscript; Cultural Heritage*



## Introduction

Each region has historical relics that continue to be preserved to ensure that these cultural heritages remain alive. In Indonesia, many historical relics have been passed down in written form, commonly known as ancient manuscripts (Nugraha, 2013). Ancient manuscripts are a valuable and significant form of cultural heritage. These ancient writings often carry specific meanings and values, such as customs, religious rules, and more. Such writings can typically be found on objects like stones, trees, and bones (Khusairi & Sarmigi, 2022). Indonesia is home to many ancient manuscripts that are hundreds of years old. Among them is the ancient script found in Kerinci, known as the Aksara Incung. This unique script is a testament to Indonesia's rich cultural heritage and historical depth.

The people of Kerinci in the past used the Aksara Incung script for various purposes, such as writing mantras, customary laws, and more. This script is one of the writing systems found in Sumatra, alongside others like the Rejang script from Bengkulu (Putra & Melati, 2022). Several documents and manuscripts written in the Aksara Incung script have been discovered in the Kerinci region. Reports suggest that the script was used by the people of Kerinci before the arrival of the Arabic-Malay script, which came alongside the spread of Islam in the area (Gusteza et al., 2023).

The use of Aksara Incung illustrates the cultural independence of Kerinci's people in developing a writing tradition. It served not only as a tool for communication but also as a medium for preserving knowledge and traditions. Aksara Incung has distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from other scripts, such as Rejang, Batak, and Central Malay scripts. These differences can be observed in the shapes of the letters, writing techniques, and the symbols used. These unique traits reflect the rich cultural identity of the Kerinci people (Surakhman, 1979).

However, Aksara Incung is now increasingly forgotten, especially among the younger generation in Kerinci. Many are unfamiliar with the meanings and methods of reading this script. Harkeni (2021) revealed that this lack of understanding is caused by a decline in interest and attention from the younger generation toward Aksara Incung. Additionally, continuous cultural shifts and the influence of modern culture

have made them less inclined to learn about this historical legacy. The script is perceived as difficult to write, understand, and read due to its complex vocabulary.

This indifference toward Aksara Incung reflects not only a declining literacy in the script but also a fading appreciation for local cultural heritage. The younger generation of Kerinci is more influenced by modern culture, leading them to neglect the importance of preserving Aksara Incung. This situation highlights the urgent need for education to raise awareness about the importance of preserving cultural heritage, including Aksara Incung. Thus, the author is interested in exploring the history, functions, and development of Aksara Incung in Kerinci. This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the significance of Aksara Incung in the cultural context of Kerinci and to encourage efforts for its preservation within the community.

## Method

This study employs historical research with a descriptive qualitative approach. The focus of this research is a literature review, referring to sources such as archives, dissertations, theses, books, journals, encyclopedias, and other relevant materials (A. Azizah, 2017). The descriptive qualitative method was chosen to investigate the history, functions, and development of the Kerinci Incung script, allowing for an in-depth understanding of its context and the identification of patterns or trends across various available literature (Nugrahani & Hum, 2014). The primary objective of this research is to summarize, analyze, and provide a comprehensive understanding of the Kerinci Incung script. By utilizing diverse literary sources, this study aims to offer a robust foundation for efforts to preserve historical heritage sites, particularly in the context of the Incung script.

## Discussion

### *History of Aksara Incung*

In the Kerinci language, *Incung* means “slanted,” making *Aksara Incung* translate to “slanted script.” Upon close observation, the script is characterized by its slanted writing style, supplemented with curved lines and perpendicular strokes (Sembiring, 2024). It is believed to be a derivative of the Post-Pallava script found in the southern region of Sumatra. This script is also categorized as part of the *Rencong*

scripts, which consist of several types, including *Incung*, used by the Kerinci people in its time (Andhifani & Ali, 2021). Structurally, Aksara Incung exhibits unique characteristics, combining straight and curved lines to create its distinct form.

Aksara Incung is considered one of Indonesia's significant historical writing systems. The Kerinci people have used it since ancient times (Surakhman, 1979). However, the exact date of its first usage remains unclear. Scholars offer differing views, with some suggesting that Aksara Incung dates back to the 4th century CE, while others propose that its usage began between the 14th and 15th centuries CE (Powa, 2020). Despite these varying opinions, no consensus has been reached regarding the script's origin.

One notable piece of evidence for the use of Aksara Incung is found in the *Kitab Undang-Undang Tanjung Tanah*, where it appears on the last page of the text. The name "Surat Incung" also features in an ancient manuscript written in this script. In the opening of the manuscript, the phrase "*hah basamilah mujur akung mangarang surat Incung*" is inscribed, referring to a sacred text belonging to Rajo Sulah from the Siulak Mukai region (Kozok, 2006a). The historical significance of Aksara Incung highlights its role in the cultural heritage of the Kerinci people, serving as a valuable artifact that bridges the past and present.

The Kerinci people used the Aksara Incung script to compose various types of manuscripts, including historical records, customary laws, and oral literature. Aksara Incung represents a local writing system that developed in Central Sumatra, particularly in the Kerinci region. It played a significant role in the literary traditions of Kerinci, resulting in a variety of manuscripts rich in content and meaning. According to Bella (2023), Aksara Incung is one of the alphabets used by the ancestors of the Kerinci people.

Traditionally, Aksara Incung was carved or written on various media such as tree bark, leaves, bamboo, and buffalo horns. The first in-depth study of Aksara Incung manuscripts was conducted by L.C. Westenenk, who transliterated the sacred horn manuscript of Datuk Singarapi Putih from Sungai Penuh in 1927 (Tedjowasono, 2024). Further research was carried out by Petrus Voorhoeve between 1940 and 1941, during

which he successfully transliterated approximately 134 Aksara Incung manuscripts (Sunliensyar, 2019).



Source: British Library, EAP117/63/1/15 (eap.bl.uk, 27 June 2024)



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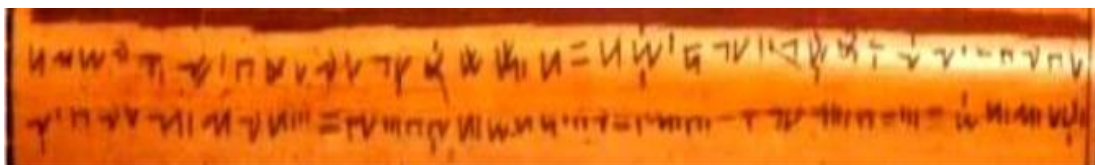
### *Functions of Aksara Incung*

Ancient manuscripts continue to be developed and preserved as part of cultural heritage, remaining significant to this day. The writing in these manuscripts is often found on materials such as buffalo horns, bamboo, tree bark, paper, and bones. Manuscripts written on buffalo horns frequently contain letters of agreement and "Tambo", which are oral histories recounting the origins of the community that safeguarded the manuscripts. For instance, four buffalo horn manuscripts are maintained by *Luhah Depati Sungai Lago* in Mendapo Rawang (Sunliensyar, 2020). These manuscripts detail the genealogies of communities residing in Tanah Rawang and describe the migration journeys of their ancestors in establishing new settlements.

Manuscripts written on bamboo and paper generally contain prose that expresses lamentations of sorrow and romantic themes. Poetic elements are often embedded in this *Incung* prose. For example, bamboo inscriptions in Aksara Incung frequently feature works like "Karang Mindu" and "Tembo" (Azizah, 2023). *Karang Mindu* typically contains prose reflecting the writer's sorrowful lament, while *Tembo* narrates migration stories and genealogies of ancestors from a particular group, referred to by the Kerinci community as "kalbu" or "luhah" (Sunliensyar, 2018). These two types of manuscripts differ in medium, as most *Karang Mindu* writings are found on bamboo and old paper.

In the past, the Kerinci community used Aksara Incung as a medium to draft regulations or laws implemented in their region and to document social life (ZE, 2019). For instance, bamboo was used as a writing medium due to the difficulty of acquiring paper at that time. The use of bamboo was not without reason; in the traditional beliefs of the Kerinci people, bamboo was considered sacred or mystical (Indonesia, 2019). Bamboo was often used for specific purposes, such as doorposts, mats for ancestral worship, flutes, and more. Additionally, bamboo was believed to possess magical powers known as "Buluh Perindu", inspiring young people to pour their misfortunes and life stories onto bamboo (Sunliensyar, 2018). The use of bamboo as a medium for writing *Incung* manuscripts was not solely due to material availability but also

stemmed from the cultural and spiritual values held by the Kerinci community. Bamboo was respected and regarded as an object imbued with special power and meaning in their lives, symbolizing both practicality and deep-rooted beliefs.

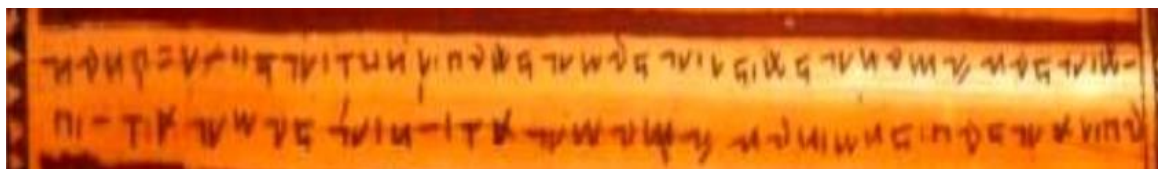


Source: British Library, EAP117/63/1/15 (eap.bl.uk, 27 June 2024)

The sounds of the Aksara Incung on bamboo are as follows:

*“Mengalun bunyi kecapi melengkung madah, rasa gemuruh darah gemertak tulang letih. Pening aih, kau ya dinda/adik sini kita saling berkasih sayang ini pantun.”*

Aksara Incung on bamboo media generally contains prose and poetry (pantun) that reflect themes of lamentation and love (Azizah, 2023). For example, the original text above flows like the sound of a lute, resonating with poetic beauty. It evokes the imagery of throbbing blood and weary bones, while its translation conveys a sense of mutual affection, expressed through a pantun filled with both beauty and sorrow. Such manuscripts illustrate how the Kerinci community used Aksara Incung to express their emotions and tell their stories through the mediums available to them, such as bamboo. This medium not only served as a means of communication but also as a rich form of artistic and cultural expression.



Source: British Library, EAP117/63/1/15 (eap.bl.uk, 27 June 2024)

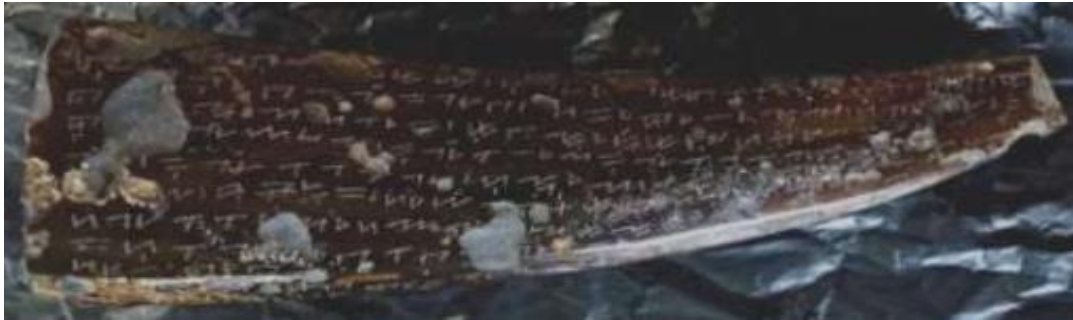
Translation:

*"Aku sepatah, dari banta patah berderai, dari padi berderai jangan dari mata.  
Bercerai dari hati bercerai jangan, ya adik dara cantik.."*

This text illustrates the use of Aksara Incung in conveying deep emotional messages and expressions of love, characteristic of the oral literary tradition of the Kerinci people. Aksara Incung was also used on animal horns, such as buffalo and wild goat horns, which were inscribed with the script to document various types of manuscripts. These horns often served as mediums for recording customary laws or significant historical events (ZE, 2019). One notable example occurred in 1922 when L.C. Westenenk documented a territorial dispute resolved through a meeting in Bukit Setinjau Laut (Kozok, 2006b). The resolution involved the sacrifice of animals like buffalo and goats as a symbol of peace between the disputing parties. The animal horns were then used as a medium to inscribe the agreement that ended the conflict. In the oral tradition of the Kerinci people, this practice is known as "*Tambo*", which records significant events such as the treaty between Indrapura and Jambi at Bukit Setinjau Laut. One of the conditions of the treaty included the offering of animals like half a buffalo, a pregnant buffalo, or *Irang* goats (wild goats). The meat of these animals was cooked and shared among the parties as a symbol of unity, while their blood was mixed to create *karang Setia*, and the bones were buried (Hidayati, 2021). The horns of these animals were then used as a medium to write the contents of the agreement.

In the oral and written traditions of the Kerinci people, there are stories about a revered figure in the region, known as the pioneer who established the first settlement in Kerinci, specifically in the village of Sungai Deras (Surakhman, 1979; ZE, 2020). The journey and accomplishments of this figure were immortalized in a manuscript written in Aksara Incung on a buffalo horn. This buffalo horn not only served as a medium for recording this historical event but also symbolized courage, wisdom, and immense contributions to the Kerinci community (Kozok, 2006a). The existence of this manuscript as part of the cultural heritage of the Kerinci people underscores the importance of oral and written traditions in preserving their history and cultural values.





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In summary, the manuscript narrates the journey of two siblings, Mangku Agung and his sister, Hanay Dayang, from Lempur. They explored forests, valleys, and remote areas to reach Tanjung Kerbau Jatuh, now known as the Sanggaran Agung region. Following the flow of the Sarak River, they arrived at Koto Limau Purut. There, they encountered Dara Hitam and Junggun, who later founded the Dusun Sungai Deras. Their journey continued to Koto Aro, where Mangku Agung married Sahuban, the daughter of Salih Sati and Salih Hambun from Kubang (ZE, 2021).

This illustrates that Aksara Incung serves many purposes, including the documentation of various types of texts such as historical manuscripts, customary laws, oral literature, and other significant documents within Kerinci culture. Aksara Incung was used to create manuscripts carved or written on materials such as bamboo, tree bark, paper, and animal horns (Indonesia, 2019). Additionally, Aksara Incung plays a critical role in preserving and safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Kerinci people. Through these writings, information about the history, traditions, beliefs, and social life of the Kerinci community can be preserved for future generations.

Aksara Incung is also an artistic expression that strengthens the cultural identity of the Kerinci people. Its use reflects the cultural values and local wisdom embraced by the Kerinci community (Sunliensyar, 2020). Historically, Aksara Incung was used to record agreements between regions or individuals, as seen in the tradition of resolving disputes documented in manuscripts inscribed on animal horns. Aksara Incung is a significant subject of study in linguistics, history, and anthropology,

offering valuable insights into the development of language and culture in South Sumatra, particularly among the Kerinci community.

### *Development of Aksara Incung*

Aksara Incung has undergone significant development and preservation efforts, spearheaded by the Kerinci government, academia, and the local community. Several initiatives have been launched to promote and sustain Aksara Incung. For instance, in 2024, the *Kayo Folk Festival* was held in Tabing, Kota Padang, organized by Kerinci students. This two-day event aimed to introduce Aksara Incung to a broader audience and celebrate the cultural and literary richness of Kerinci (UNP, 2024). The Kerinci government has been proactive in introducing and promoting Aksara Incung to younger generations. One such initiative is incorporating Aksara Incung into the school curriculum, making it a formal subject in educational institutions (Powa, 2020; Putra & Melati, 2022). This step aims to educate and encourage youth to understand, appreciate, and preserve this cultural heritage.

Additionally, academics have played a significant role in advancing studies and research on Aksara Incung. Through these combined efforts, it is hoped that Aksara Incung will continue to thrive, becoming an integral part of the cultural identity and history of the Kerinci people. Moreover, Aksara Incung serves as a source of inspiration and valuable learning for future generations, ensuring its legacy remains vibrant and influential.

### **Conclusion**

Aksara Incung is one of the historical legacies found in the Kerinci region. In the Kerinci language, "Aksara Incung" means "Incung Script" or "slanted writing." This script has distinct characteristics, such as straight, slanted, and curved lines. Aksara Incung is one of the scripts found in the Sumatra region, similar to Rencong script from Bengkulu. Although there is no definitive information about its origin or the exact time of its first use, some experts estimate that it emerged between the 4th and 14th centuries CE. Evidence of Aksara Incung can be found in several historical artifacts, such as the Undang-Undang Tanjung Tanah manuscript, ancient heirloom texts, and inscriptions on buffalo horns. Historically, the Kerinci people used this script

to create various records, including historical accounts, customary laws, and oral literature, carved onto specific media. Additionally, Aksara Incung has been documented in agreements, highlighting its role in legal and diplomatic contexts. Media such as bamboo and buffalo horns were commonly used due to their availability and cultural significance. Researchers like L.C. Westenenk and Petrus Voorhoeve, in the early 20th century, noted the use of these materials in the preservation of Incung texts.

Efforts to develop and preserve Aksara Incung continue through initiatives by the government, academics, and the local community. Events such as the Kayo Folk Festival and the integration of Aksara Incung into educational curricula exemplify ongoing efforts to introduce and teach this script to younger generations, ensuring its legacy endures.

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