

Surat Ulu, the Ancient Writing Tradition of South Sumatra

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The South Sumatran community uses Surat Ulu to call manuscripts written in Kaganga script (Ulu script). Kaganga is the name of script/writing system used by Melayu communities in South Sumatra, Bengkulu, Lampung, and Jambi. Ka-ga-nga refers to the three first syllabaries in this writing system. In other regions, Kaganga is called Lampung script (in Lampung), Incung (in Kerinci, Jambi), Rejang script (Bengkulu), while western scholars such as Voorhove, Westenenk, and van Hasselt call it Rencong script. Kaganga script is also found in Sunda, West Java (ancient Sunda script), North Sumatra (Pustaha script), and South Sulawesi (Lontarak script). In those regions, Kaganga script develops according to language capacities and creativities of each supporting community. The development in each region has created variations or differences in script forms or diacritical marks.

South Sumatran community comprises of various local languages that people speak since a long time ago, such as Komerling language, different dialects of Malay language such as Musi, Rawas, Sekayu, and Basemah dialects, and the languages of diasporic communities of Java, Batak, Sunda, and Bali. Few script variations and the uses of those languages can be found in Surat Ulu manuscripts. The name Surat Ulu shows that the manuscript is created by communities living in the interior or upstream regions (*hulu*). South Sumatra has nine big rivers, eight of them branch out of the Musi river, therefore South Sumatra is called *Negeri Batanghari Sembilan*. Musi river has had a very long history since Sriwijaya kingdom from the 7th to the 13th century. Surat Ulu tradition develops only in the upstream region in the form of manuscripts made from bamboo, *kaghas* (paper made of tree bark), bones, *lontar*, and later European paper. In Palembang, the capital of Sriwijaya, Surat Ulu tradition was not found. Here inscriptions and manuscripts show the uses of Pallawa script, then later the Java, Malay-Arabic (Jawi), and Latin scripts.

Ulu (Kaganga) script derives from a syllabary system consisting of 28 syllabaries, certain marks to change vocal sounds, and “killing” marks to form consonant sounds. The other features are the marks for the beginning and the end of sentences. The original structure of this script has no reading marks such as comma or point, and also has no numerical marks. Today the remaining manuscripts are kept in museums, libraries, and by individuals or adat communities who treat them as family heirlooms or sacred objects because these owners cannot read the manuscripts and therefore they do not know the contents of the manuscripts. In addition, Kaganga

manuscripts are also kept in the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Germany. Surat Ulu tradition has disappeared, but the remaining manuscripts need serious and critical attention.