

## The Bakunun Oral Tradition in the Construction of Kerinci Cultural Identity in the Modern Era

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the Bakunun oral tradition as a cultural heritage of the Kerinci community in Jambi, which is currently in a critical condition due to weak intergenerational transmission and the pressures of modernity. The research problem focuses on the forms, existence, and meanings of the Bakunun tradition within Kerinci society, as well as its role in shaping and sustaining cultural identity, particularly among younger generations. The study aims to describe the practice of Bakunun, analyze its current condition of continuity, and reveal the social and cultural meanings embedded in it within the context of social change. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted through stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, with data validity ensured through source and technique triangulation. The theoretical framework draws on concepts of oral tradition and cultural identity construction, particularly Stuart Hall's view of identity as a dynamic and continuously negotiated process. The findings indicate that Bakunun functions not only as a form of entertainment and moral education but also as a medium for transmitting customary values, religiosity, and Kerinci cultural identity. However, limited regeneration and insufficient institutional support have placed this tradition at risk of extinction, underscoring the urgent need for revitalization strategies that engage younger generations and educational institutions.*

**Keywords:** *Bakunun, cultural identity, Kerinci, modernity, oral tradition, cultural preservation*

### **Abstrak**

*Penelitian ini mengkaji tradisi lisan Bakunun sebagai warisan budaya masyarakat Kerinci, Jambi, yang saat ini berada dalam kondisi kritis akibat minimnya pewarisan antargenerasi dan tekanan modernitas. Rumusan masalah penelitian ini meliputi bagaimana bentuk, eksistensi, dan makna tradisi Bakunun di tengah masyarakat Kerinci, serta bagaimana perannya dalam pembentukan dan pemertahanan identitas budaya, khususnya di kalangan generasi muda. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan praktik tradisi Bakunun, menganalisis kondisi keberlangsungannya, serta mengungkap makna sosial dan kultural yang dikandungnya dalam konteks perubahan sosial. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa*

wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Analisis data dilakukan melalui tahapan reduksi, penyajian, dan penarikan kesimpulan, dengan validasi data menggunakan triangulasi sumber dan teknik. Kajian teori bertumpu pada konsep tradisi lisan dan konstruksi identitas budaya, terutama pandangan Stuart Hall tentang identitas sebagai proses yang dinamis dan terus dinegosiasikan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Bakunun tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai sarana hiburan dan pendidikan moral, tetapi juga sebagai medium pewarisan nilai adat, religiusitas, dan identitas budaya Kerinci. Namun, lemahnya regenerasi dan kurangnya dukungan institusional menyebabkan tradisi ini terancam punah, sehingga diperlukan strategi revitalisasi yang melibatkan generasi muda dan lembaga pendidikan.

**Kata Kunci:** *Bakunun, identitas budaya, Kerinci, modernitas, pelestarian budaya, tradisi lisan*

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## 1. Pendahuluan

The Province of Jambi, Indonesia, is widely known by the cultural appellation “Sepucuk Jambi Sembilan Lurah,” a designation that reflects not only its abundant natural resources but also its rich cultural heritage and customary traditions. Nearly every region within Jambi preserves distinctive local cultural expressions. According to data on cultural works registered as Indonesia’s Intangible Cultural Heritage (Warisan Budaya Takbenda/WBTB), managed by the Directorate General of Culture under the Ministry of Education and Culture between 2013 and 2017, a total of 29 cultural elements from Jambi Province were officially designated as intangible cultural. One of the regions that contributes significantly to this cultural wealth is Kabupaten Kerinci, which is known for its distinctive oral traditions and performing arts.

Among Kerinci’s local cultural treasures are Tari Rantak Kudo, Ritual Kerinci Sko, Aksara Incung, and Tale Nek Jei (also known as the Hajj Departure Chant). Oral literature constitutes an integral component of local culture, reflecting the identity, worldview, and normative values of the community.

In the Province of Jambi, one form of oral literature that is nearing extinction is Bakunun. Bakunun is a storytelling tradition transmitted orally across generations and embodies profound ethical, aesthetic, and social values. It is selected as the focus of this study due to its increasingly marginal presence within contemporary society, where it has gradually faded and is now on the verge of disappearance, largely because there are no longer skilled storytellers capable of sustaining and transmitting the tradition<sup>1</sup>. This condition is further evidenced by the official registry of Indonesia’s Intangible Cultural Heritage (WBTB), managed by the Directorate General of Culture under the

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<sup>1</sup> Ayu, “6 Budaya Sastra Lisan Asli Indonesia Serta Nasibnya Sekarang, Ada Yang Di Ambang Kepunahan,” 2023.

Ministry of Education and Culture, in which a search of the database yields no entries under the terms bakunun or kunun.

The term Bakunun is derived from the Indonesian word “kunun” or “konon,” meaning “it is said” or “once upon a time.” According to the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), bakunun is defined as news or stories conveyed orally<sup>2</sup>. Based on this definition, Bakunun may be understood as a narrative storytelling tradition. This oral practice has been transmitted across generations by the ancestors of the Kerinci community. Individuals who narrate these stories are traditionally referred to as *Tukang Kunun* (master storytellers).

Kunun is delivered in a particular rhythmic pattern, and certain performances are accompanied by the *dap*, a traditional Kerinci frame drum comparable to a *rebana*. In some instances, kunun also incorporates performative elements, in which the storyteller enacts specific scenes and assumes the roles of various characters throughout the Bakunun performance.

Kunun may be classified according to both its narrative content and its mode of delivery. The stories commonly take the form of fables, presenting animals that embody human traits and behaviors. Frequently recurring characters include deer, pelicans, and *kuaw* (a species of bird known in the local tradition). Beyond animal figures, kunun narratives also recount mythic or semi-legendary characters such as *Jugei*, a humorous and combative figure, and *Tupai Jenjang*, a princely figure depicted as a squirrel.

Bakunun fulfills multiple social and cultural functions. It serves as a medium for moral instruction, a channel of communication and social interaction, and a means of strengthening communal solidarity. It also functions as a vehicle for cultural transmission and preservation. Moreover, Bakunun possesses economic value, particularly for its practitioners or *Tukang Kunun*, who may derive livelihood or social recognition from their performances.<sup>3</sup>

In the Kunun of *Tupai Jenjang*, the philosophical maxim “*adat bersendi syara’, syara’ bersendi Kitabullah*” is distinctly reflected, expressing the principle that customary law (*adat*) is founded upon Islamic law (*sharī‘a*), and that the *sharī‘a* itself is grounded in the Qur’an. This aphorism encapsulates the normative integration of local tradition and Islamic doctrinal authority within Kerinci society.

This principle is illustrated in the following excerpt from a dialogue delivered by the character *Tuanku Rajo*:<sup>4</sup>

*Bismillah mulai kamunyalu*

*Limo Pantu odio nan di pancang*

*Nak mudik ka Kayu Aro*

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Penyusun, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia Edisi Kelima (Daring)* (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Leni Efendi and dkk, “Tinjauan Sejarah Dan Budaya Yang Mempengaruhi Teater Tutar Tupai Janjang Masyarakat Kerinci Jambi,” *Jurnal Ekspresi Seni* 15, no. 1 (2013): 1–19.

<sup>4</sup> Efendi and dkk.

*Singgah di Bedeng Lapan*

*Bia la tasirak kembang jalo...*

The Kunun Tupai Janjang was first narrated in 1950 by Sutan Aris from Lubuk Nagodang, Siulak, Kerinci. The tradition was subsequently continued by Ibrahim from Koto Rendah village, Siulak. Both elder practitioners have since passed away. Recent information indicates that only one remaining traditional practitioner survives today, namely Japril (65 years old) from Dusun Baru, Siulak, underscoring the increasingly precarious condition of this oral tradition's continuity.<sup>5</sup>

At present, the Kunun tradition has gradually been displaced by other forms of popular entertainment, such as "organ tunggal" (single-organ musical performances). "There are almost no young people in Kerinci who are interested in learning the Kunun tradition," stated Japril. This situation reflects a deeply concerning process of cultural degradation. In 2015, the government officially designated the Tupai Janjang narrative theater as an element of Indonesia's Intangible Cultural Heritage. However, this recognition has largely remained symbolic, as it has not been followed by systematic documentation, preservation, or meaningful revitalization efforts by the relevant governmental institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Scholarly inquiry into Bakunun in Jambi is both highly significant and urgently needed within the broader framework of safeguarding Indonesia's cultural heritage. The Province of Jambi possesses an extraordinary wealth of oral traditions, with approximately thirty distinct forms distributed across various regencies and municipalities. These include Kompangan (Jambi City), Buka Lanse (Batanghari), Tatah Inai (Tanjung Jabung), Ngagah Imau (Kerinci), Ngangkat Dulur (Tebo), Biduk Sayak (Sarolangun), Beselang Mping (Bungo), Nyahau Umah (Merangin), and Tale Nuai (Sungaipenuh City).

Amid this rich constellation of oral traditions, Bakunun occupies a particularly strategic position as a distinctive storytelling tradition originating from Kerinci, Jambi. It involves the narration of stories—primarily fables or animal tales—accompanied by musical instruments, and has been transmitted across generations since ancestral times. As such, Bakunun represents not merely a performative art form but also a vital cultural mechanism through which collective memory, ethical values, and local identity are preserved and articulated.

The significance of this study lies in the critical condition currently faced by Bakunun. As a distinctive storytelling tradition of the Kerinci people, Bakunun is now on the verge of extinction, rendering this research particularly urgent before the tradition disappears entirely. Within the context of university students in Jambi, this study carries a dual dimension: it not only seeks to document a threatened oral tradition but also to examine how the younger generation, especially university

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<sup>5</sup> Hafiful Hadi, "Bakunun, Tradisi Mendongeng Orang Kerinci Yang Hampir Punah," 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Hadi.

students as cultural heirs, can actively contribute to sustaining oral traditions amid the pressures of modernity.

As an element of intangible cultural heritage, oral tradition confronts complex challenges related to its vitality and social relevance in contemporary society. Ensuring its continuity requires deliberate strategies that meaningfully engage younger generations. This research is therefore expected to contribute significantly to local cultural revitalization efforts and to deepen understanding of how cultural identity may be maintained and renegotiated in the era of globalization.

As a distinctive form of Kerinci oral literature that is currently endangered, Bakunun constitutes an important arena in which students may participate in cultural preservation while simultaneously constructing their own cultural identities. Accordingly, this study formulates the following research questions: (1) What characterizes the Bakunun oral tradition in Jambi? (2) What is the current state of its existence and meaning within Kerinci society amid the currents of modernity?

In line with these research questions, this study aims to explore the interrelationship between the preservation of the Bakunun tradition and the process of cultural identity formation among university students. Specifically, the objectives of this research are: first, to describe the cultural characteristics of Bakunun in Jambi; and second, to analyze the condition of its existence and its sociocultural significance within Kerinci society in the context of modern transformations.

Previous research on the local culture of Bakunun was conducted by Fiqi Nurmanda Sari (2024) in a study entitled *Bakunun, Sastra Lisan yang Nyaris Pudar: Sebuah Upaya untuk Melestarikan Budaya Lokal Jambi*. The findings indicate that Bakunun has reached a critical stage requiring urgent preservation. Without immediate intervention, there is a substantial risk that the tradition will gradually disappear or potentially be claimed by other regions or even foreign countries.

The study proposed several strategic measures: (1) conducting further research and scholarly publications on Bakunun oral literature; (2) revitalizing and adapting Bakunun for younger generations; (3) integrating Bakunun into school and university curricula; and (4) fostering institutional synergy among relevant stakeholders to ensure coordinated preservation efforts.<sup>7</sup>

Another study was conducted by M. Ali Surakhman (2020) on oral traditions in Kerinci. The findings demonstrate that oral traditions continue to play a vital role in strengthening collective memory, shaping patterns of thought, and revitalizing the noble values embedded within Kerinci society. Furthermore, these traditions contribute significantly to efforts aimed at preserving and safeguarding cultural heritage sites (*cagar budaya*) in Kerinci, functioning as a living cultural framework that sustains

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<sup>7</sup> Fiqi Nurmanda Sari, "BAKUNUN, SASTRA LISAN YANG NYARIS PUDAR: SEBUAH UPAYA UNTUK MELESTARIKAN BUDAYA," in *Proceeding the 33rd International Conference on Literature HISKI (HISKI Komisariat Palembang, 2024)*, 265–71.

historical consciousness and communal identity<sup>8</sup>.

Suci Maiza and Megi Vornika (2020) conducted a study on Kunun in Kerinci. Their research reveals that Kunun embodies a range of character values that can be effectively utilized as a medium for educational purposes. However, its implementation and sustainability have not yet been optimized due to several constraints, one of which is the limited availability of scholarly references and supporting reading materials on Kunun.<sup>9</sup>

Research on efforts to sustain local culture was conducted by Nurhayati et al. (2019). The findings indicate that the Dulmuluk performing art achieved notable success and received positive appreciation from audiences comprising academics, writers, university students, and school pupils. Furthermore, the study strongly recommends the implementation of continuous revitalization initiatives for the Dulmuluk performance tradition. Such efforts may be realized through structured training and capacity-building programs for Dulmuluk artistic groups, thereby ensuring their sustainability and intergenerational transmission.<sup>10</sup>

In the perspective of Stuart Hall (1996), cultural identity is not a fixed or immutable essence; rather, it is a dynamic construction that continuously evolves through history, representation, and social experience. Identity, therefore, should not be understood as an expression of an “authentic” or essentialized past, but as an ongoing process of “becoming” that is shaped and reshaped within specific social and cultural contexts.<sup>11</sup> In the context of preserving *Bakunun*, student involvement may be understood as part of a broader process of negotiating cultural identity amid the currents of modernization. In other words, engagement with and appreciation of oral tradition should not be viewed merely as an act of cultural preservation, but also as an effort to reconstruct and reaffirm the cultural selfhood of the younger generation in Jambi.

Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of preserving the Bakunun tradition as a vital component of Jambi’s local cultural heritage<sup>12</sup>. These prior studies have largely adopted a descriptive-preservative orientation, emphasizing documentation, revitalization initiatives, and recommendations for cultural safeguarding through educational integration and institutional

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<sup>8</sup> M Ali Surakhman, “TRADISI LISAN DAN JEJAK MASA PRA SEJARAH DALAM RITUAL ASYEIK DI KERINCI Oral Traditions and Traces of The Pre History in The Asyeik Ritual in Kerinci,” *Siddhayatra: Jurnal Arkeologi* 25, no. 2 (2020): 144–58.

<sup>9</sup> S Maiza and M Vornika, “Otonomi Kunun Kerinci Menuju Pendidikan Karakter Di Sekolah Dasar Di Kota Sungai Penuh,” *Jurnal Gramatika: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Bahasa Dan Sastra Indonesia* 6, no. 1 (2020): 105–17.

<sup>10</sup> Nurhayati Nurhayati et al., “A Model Development to Revitalize the Dulmuluk Performing Art by Applying the Structural Theory and Response Theory,” *Proceedings of the 28th International Conference on Literature: “Literature as a Source of Wisdom,”* no. July 2020 (2019): 732–41, <https://doi.org/10.24815/.v1i1.14538>.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity.*, Questions of Cultural Identity. (Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Sari, “BAKUNUN , SASTRA LISAN YANG NYARIS PUDAR : SEBUAH UPAYA UNTUK MELESTARIKAN BUDAYA”; Maiza and Vornika, “Otonomi Kunun Kerinci Menuju Pendidikan Karakter Di Sekolah Dasar Di Kota Sungai Penuh.”

collaboration. Meanwhile, the research by Nurhayati et al. (2019) on the Dulmuluk performing art in Sumatera Selatan foregrounds cultural appreciation within the context of performance art; however, it does not explicitly connect such appreciation to the processes of identity formation among younger generations.

Furthermore, earlier research has primarily focused on traditional practitioners or cultural institutions as the main agents of preservation. In contrast, the present study positions university students as cultural actors who consciously or unconsciously are engaged in reconstructing their cultural identities through their interaction with local traditions. This shift in analytical focus allows for a more dynamic understanding of cultural continuity, viewing preservation not merely as institutional safeguarding, but as an active process of identity negotiation among the youth.

## **2. Methode**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate in depth students' understanding of Bakunun and how they appreciate and contribute to the preservation of this oral tradition. Descriptive research emphasizes the systematic and comprehensive collection of information concerning local cultural phenomena, in this case, the Bakunun tradition.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with cultural figures and traditional arts practitioners, whose insights provide nuanced perspectives on the meaning, appreciation, and continuity of Bakunun.

Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive qualitative framework aimed at interpreting the meanings and values embedded in the Bakunun tradition based on the perspectives of the informants. The analytical process consisted of three primary stages. First, data reduction involves the selection, categorization, and focusing of data relevant to the research objectives while discarding information that does not support the study's focus. Second, data display, whereby findings were organized into thematic narratives to facilitate the identification of patterns emerging from interviews, observations, and documentation. Third, conclusion drawing and verification, which entailed interpreting the cultural meanings, social values, and functions of Bakunun as articulated by cultural leaders and traditional arts practitioners, while ensuring that the conclusions remained logically grounded and consistent with the empirical data.

To ensure data validity, the study employed source and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from multiple informants, including cultural leaders, traditional arts activists, and field documentation. Technique triangulation involved cross-checking findings derived from interviews, observations, and documentation to confirm consistency and accuracy. In addition, member checking was undertaken by reconfirming interpretations and findings with the informants to ensure that the meanings constructed by the researcher accurately reflected the intentions and perspectives of the cultural actors. These measures

were implemented to maintain the validity and credibility of the findings and to provide an authentic and in-depth representation of the cultural reality of Bakunun.

Data collection techniques comprised three principal methods: in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. First, in-depth interviews were conducted to comprehensively explore informants' views, experiences, and understandings regarding the values, social functions, and processes of transmission associated with Bakunun. Through this method, the researcher sought to capture both personal interpretations and collective cultural perspectives embodied by cultural figures and traditional arts practitioners.

Second, participatory (or non-participatory) observation was undertaken by directly observing the performance of Bakunun in various contexts, such as customary ceremonies, ritual events, and community cultural activities. This method enabled the researcher to grasp the social, symbolic, and expressive dimensions of the tradition, including gestures, intonation, atmosphere, and interpersonal interactions that may not be fully articulated through verbal interviews.

Third, documentation involved the collection of relevant visual and written materials, including photographs of performances, video recordings, cultural archives, traditional manuscripts, and field notes. These documentary sources served to complement and substantiate the data obtained from interviews and observations, while also providing a more comprehensive contextual understanding of the existence and preservation of the Bakunun tradition within contemporary society.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### **A. Oral Tradition**

##### **1. Conceptual Definition According to Experts**

Scholars have proposed diverse definitions of oral tradition, reflecting differing disciplinary approaches within anthropology, folklore studies, and cultural studies. Jan Vansina, in his seminal work *Oral Tradition as History*, defines oral tradition as “verbal messages from the past that have been transmitted beyond the present generation.”<sup>13</sup> This definition positions oral tradition as a historical medium that functions to preserve and transmit collective knowledge. For Jan Vansina, oral tradition constitutes a legitimate historical source, as it emerges from social mechanisms characterized by structured modes of transmission, recognized authority, and specific internal regulations. Within societies lacking a written

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<sup>13</sup> Jan M. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 1st ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/8436>.

culture, oral expression operates as a “living archive,” sustaining social legitimacy and nurturing the community’s historical consciousness<sup>14</sup>.

In contrast to Jan Vansina, who emphasizes the historical and epistemological functions of oral tradition, Ruth Finnegan, in *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts*, conceptualizes oral tradition as a form of verbal art. She argues that oral tradition is not merely a repository of knowledge, but also an artistic mode of expression that embodies social memory and collective imagination. Finnegan underscores that every oral performance occurs within a specific social context, involving a dynamic relationship between speaker and audience. Consequently, oral tradition must be understood as a communicative act rather than as a self-contained text. Its aesthetic value lies in its performative dimension, the manner in which the story is narrated, the rhythm and modulation of the voice, gestures, and improvisation, all of which generate emotional engagement and interaction with the audience<sup>15</sup>.

James Danandjaja offers a distinctive Indonesian perspective on oral tradition. In his work *Folklor Indonesia: Ilmu Gosip, Dongeng, dan lain-lain*, he explains that oral tradition constitutes an integral component of folklore that lives and develops through narratives, myths, legends, prayers, pantun, poetic verses, and other forms of folk literature. For Danandjaja, oral tradition represents a system of value transmission embedded in the everyday life of society. It is not merely a form of entertainment, but also a medium of moral education, a reinforcement of social solidarity, and a guardian of religious and customary values. In this sense, oral tradition functions as a cultural framework through which communal norms and collective identity are continuously reproduced and sustained<sup>16</sup>. This perspective situates oral tradition as a mechanism of social learning a means through which communities internalize ethical principles and local wisdom without necessarily relying on formal educational institutions. Through repeated performance, narrative transmission, and communal participation, values are not only communicated but also embodied in everyday practice, allowing cultural norms and moral frameworks to be reproduced organically across generations.

A more contextually grounded articulation of oral tradition in Indonesia is advanced by I Nengah Duija in his article *Wacana: Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia*. Duija defines oral tradition as “all forms of discourse conveyed orally, following patterned customs or

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<sup>14</sup> David Newbury, “Jan Vansina,” *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, 5, no. 1 (2017), <https://journals.uhk.cz/modernafrika/article/view/147/143>.

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices*, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203393215/ORAL-TRADITIONS-VERBAL-ARTS-RUTH-FINNEGAN/RIGHTS-AND-PERMISSIONS>.

<sup>16</sup> (Danandjaja; 2002)

conventions established within a given society.” He emphasizes that oral tradition encompasses diverse modes of cultural communication, including genealogies, myths, legends, folktales, and heroic narratives transmitted from mouth to mouth<sup>17</sup>. In his framework, oral tradition constitutes a discursive system comprising two major dimensions: oracy and orality. The dimension of oracy refers to the individual’s competence in spoken language the performative and communicative skill required to articulate narratives effectively. In contrast, orality denotes the broader epistemological condition in which knowledge, memory, and lived experience are constructed and transmitted through spoken forms. Thus, oral tradition is not merely a medium of communication, but a foundational mode of knowledge production and cultural reproduction within society<sup>18</sup>.

Duija further emphasizes that oral tradition cannot be reduced to mere verbal communication; rather, it must be understood as a cognitive system of culture. It encompasses domains related to literature, language, history, law, and traditional knowledge. In this sense, oral tradition is not exclusively the domain of so-called “non-literate” societies. Even within literate communities, it continues to function as a space for articulating non-hegemonic cultural expressions. In other words, oral tradition may operate as an arena of resistance against the dominance of written and academic discourses.<sup>19</sup> Duija’s approach thus introduces a political-cultural perspective, highlighting that oral tradition is not neutral; it is implicated in symbolic struggles between center and periphery, between writing and speech, and between structures of power and the people.

This perspective resonates with the argument of Ruth Finnegan, who rejects the rigid binary between oral and literate societies. Finnegan demonstrates that orality persists even within highly literate communities, as its social functions cannot be fully replaced by writing. Folktales, pantun, and proverbs, for instance, continue to be produced and reproduced through social practices such as ritual ceremonies, everyday conversations, and even digital media platforms.<sup>20</sup> Thus, oral tradition is inherently adaptive and dynamic. It adjusts to technological transformations and shifting modes of communication without necessarily losing the substantive values it carries. Rather than being displaced by literacy, orality evolves alongside it, continually reshaping its forms of expression while sustaining its cultural significance.

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<sup>17</sup> I Nengah Duija, “Tradisi Lisan, Naskah, Dan Sejarah; Sebuah Catatan Politik Kebudayaan,” *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* 7, no. 2 (October 31, 2005): 2, <https://doi.org/10.17510/wjhi.v7i2.296>.

<sup>18</sup> Duija.

<sup>19</sup> Duija.

<sup>20</sup> Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices*.

When synthesized, the definitions and approaches of these scholars indicate that oral tradition encompasses four principal dimensions. First, the historical dimension, as emphasized by Jan Vansina, who views oral tradition as a source of collective history and social legitimacy. Oral narratives preserve communal memory and function as instruments through which societies construct and validate their past.

Second, the aesthetic and performative dimension, as explained by Ruth Finnegan, highlights the expressive, contextual, and situational character of oral performance. Meaning is not embedded solely in the text, but emerges through voice, gesture, audience interaction, and cultural setting.

Third, the social and educational dimension, as elaborated by James Danandjaja, who positions oral tradition as a mechanism for transmitting values, norms, and collective ethics across generations. Through storytelling, proverbs, ritual speech, and customary expressions, societies cultivate moral frameworks and social cohesion.

Fourth, the cognitive and political-cultural dimension, as proposed by I Nyoman Duija, which understands oral tradition as an alternative knowledge system negotiating power relations within cultural structures. In this view, orality becomes a site of symbolic contestation between center and periphery, dominance and resistance, written authority and spoken voice.

Taken together, oral tradition can thus be understood as a multivocal communicative system reflecting how communities interpret and inhabit their world. It sustains continuity between past and present, linking ancestral memory with modern consciousness. Oral tradition does not merely transmit messages; it generates meaning, constructs identity, and reinforces social solidarity. Within Indonesia's plural cultural landscape, it serves as a vital medium for articulating local values that affirm diversity and indigenous wisdom.

Yet amid modernization and globalization, oral tradition faces significant challenges. Urbanization, digital technology, and global cultural homogenization have transformed communal spaces that once nurtured oral performance. Nevertheless, as Finnegan observes, new forms of orality now emerge in digital media—short videos, podcasts, and online platforms, presenting folktales in contemporary formats. This phenomenon demonstrates that oral tradition persists through transformation, confirming that orality remains a living force within human culture.

From the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that oral tradition constitutes a complex and multidimensional system of knowledge. It is not merely a legacy of the past, but an active medium through which values and culture are continuously actualized. To study oral tradition is to read how a community thinks, communicates, and interprets its own existence.

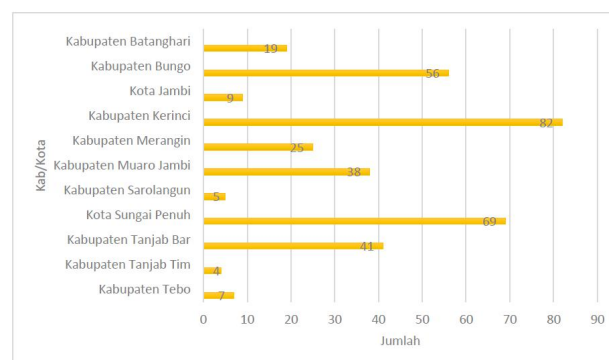
Within the framework of local cultural research, oral tradition functions as a crucial entry point for understanding identity formation, collective memory, and forms of resistance to the

homogenizing currents of global culture. It reveals how communities negotiate continuity and change, preserve symbolic capital, and articulate their worldview in ways that may not always be captured by written or institutionalized discourse.

## B. Mapping Oral Traditions in Jambi

The Province of Jambi is a region endowed with a highly diverse range of oral traditions, reflecting the ethnic, geographical, and belief-system heterogeneity of its society. Administratively, Jambi consists of nine regencies and two municipalities: Batang Hari Regency, Bungo Regency, Kerinci Regency, Merangin Regency, Muaro Jambi Regency, Sarolangun Regency, Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency, Tanjung Jabung Timur Regency, Tebo Regency, as well as Jambi and Sungai Penuh.

The diversity of landscapes ranging from coastal and riverine areas to highlands together with the plurality of ethnic communities, has generated a wide spectrum of oral cultural expressions. These include pantun, seloko, syair, ritual recitations, and customary prayers. Such traditions function not merely as media of communication and entertainment, but also as instruments of moral and spiritual education, as well as mechanisms for reinforcing social



solidarity.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 1. Summary of Oral Tradition Cultural Objects in the Province of Jambi

Source: Update of the Regional Cultural Policy Framework (Pokok Pikiran Kebudayaan Daerah) of Jambi, 2025<sup>22</sup>

Oral tradition constitutes an essential component of community culture, transmitted from generation to generation through spoken forms such as folktales, legends, advice, and proverbial expressions. It functions not merely as a medium of entertainment but as a vehicle for transmitting

<sup>21</sup> Pemerintah Provinsi Jambi, “Pemutakhiran Pokok Pikiran Kebudayaan Daerah Provinsi Jambi Tahun 2025,” Dinas Kebudayaan Dan Pariwisata Provinsi Jambi. (Jambi, 2025), <https://ppid.tanjabbarkab.go.id/storage/dokumen/>.

<sup>22</sup> Jambi.

moral values, local history, and cultural identity. Through oral tradition, knowledge and local wisdom remain alive within the collective memory of a community, continuously reinterpreted and sustained across generations.<sup>23</sup>.

Based on the data presented in the graph, Kerinci Regency ranks highest with the largest number of identified oral traditions, totaling 82 traditions. It is followed by Sungai Penuh with 69 traditions, and Bungo Regency with 56 oral traditions. Other regions include Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency, which records 41 traditions, followed by Muaro Jambi Regency with 38 traditions. Merangin Regency accounts for 25 traditions, while Batang Hari Regency has 19 traditions. Meanwhile, Jambi records 9 traditions, Tebo Regency 7 traditions, Sarolangun Regency 5 traditions, and finally Tanjung Jabung Timur Regency, with 4 identified oral traditions.<sup>24</sup>.

The variation in the number of oral traditions across regions reflects differences in the level of documentation and the intensity of cultural preservation efforts undertaken in each area. These disparities may not necessarily indicate the actual richness of traditions, but rather the extent to which they have been identified, recorded, and sustained. Therefore, it becomes a shared responsibility of local communities, scholars, and regional governments to safeguard and revitalize oral traditions so that the cultural wealth embedded within them does not disappear amid the currents of modernization and social change.<sup>25</sup>.

### C. Tradisi Bakunun

The Bakunun tradition represents one of the distinctive forms of local wisdom among the people of Kerinci Regency, deeply rooted in the oral culture of the inland communities of Jambi. The term bakunun derives from the Kerinci language and literally means “to tell a story” or “to narrate” orally.

In local dialects, the term appears in several phonetic variations such as kunaun, kunoung, sakunaun, or tendan depending on regional pronunciation and speech patterns. Despite these variations, all refer to the same activity of storytelling as a communal and performative act<sup>26</sup>. Etymologically, the root word kunun bears a close resemblance to the Classical Malay term konon, which signifies a story or report whose factual certainty may be uncertain, yet which carries wisdom and moral instruction for its listeners.

According to the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), a folktale (dongeng) is defined as a fictional story that did not truly occur, especially one recounting wondrous or extraordinary events in the distant past. Encyclopedic sources further describe folktales as a form of classical literature narrating imaginative and extraordinary occurrences, generally understood by the community as not

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<sup>23</sup> Jambi.

<sup>24</sup> Jambi.

<sup>25</sup> Jambi.

<sup>26</sup> Zarmoni (Penggiat Kebudayaan Kerinci) pada Wawancara November 2025

literally factual. They are also recognized as traditional stories transmitted orally from generation to generation.

Historically, the Bakunun tradition has existed long before the arrival of modern media such as electricity, radio, television, and smartphones particularly before the 1990s. During that period, bakunun formed an essential component of informal family education in Kerinci Regency. Parents and grandparents would narrate stories to children before bedtime. These stories commonly included legends, myths, origin narratives, fables, and animal tales, functioning simultaneously as entertainment and as vehicles for transmitting moral values, customary norms, and ethical teachings.<sup>27</sup>. The practice strengthened intergenerational bonds and cultivated reverence for ancestors and the natural environment.

From a linguistic and cultural perspective, bakunun also serves as a guardian of the Kerinci regional language. The Kerinci community possesses numerous dialects and speech variations distributed across different districts. Storytelling thus becomes a natural medium for preserving these linguistic varieties. Contemporary revitalization efforts surrounding bakunun are closely linked to broader movements aimed at safeguarding regional languages that face gradual erosion due to external linguistic influence and globalization. By narrating stories in the local language, communities reinforce cultural identity amid the pressures of modernity.

In terms of form, bakunun may be delivered in a relatively free and open narrative style, similar to bedtime storytelling. However, in some contexts it incorporates musical and performative elements. Traditionally, kunun is conveyed in a distinctive melodic rhythm resembling chant or song. Certain performances are accompanied by the traditional musical instrument known as dap, a type of frame drum characteristic of Kerinci that produces a soft rhythmic resonance as a narrative backdrop.

In several performances, the tukang kunun (storyteller) does more than simply narrate; he or she may embody characters, imitate gestures, and employ varied intonation to create dramatic atmosphere. Because it integrates spoken narration, music, and elements of simple acting, bakunun is often described as a form of traditional narrative theater an expressive synthesis of orality, rhythm, and embodied performance<sup>28</sup>.

#### **D. Types of Bakunun**

The Bakunun tradition represents one of the oldest oral heritages of the Kerinci people, continuing to live within collective memory despite the pressures of modernization. As a form of

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<sup>27</sup> Zarmoni (Penggiat Kebudayaan Kerinci) pada Wawancara November 2025

<sup>28</sup> H. H. Sunliensyar, "Bakunun, Tradisi Mendongeng Orang Kerinci Yang Hampir Punah Halaman 1 - Kompasiana.Com," <https://www.kompasiana.com/>, January 1, 2021, <https://www.kompasiana.com/hafifulhadi/5ab0bb30caf7db6b1779f0a4/bakunun-tradisi-mendongeng-orang-kerinci-yang-hampir-punah>.

cultural expression, Bakunun has functioned not merely as family entertainment in the past, but also as a medium for moral education, the transmission of customary values, ecological knowledge, and the formation of Kerinci cultural identity.

Interviews with informants indicate that the practice of Bakunun takes place in diverse social contexts from domestic spaces and customary ceremonies to community performances and is delivered through a wide range of narrative forms that are both rich and flexible.

This diversity demonstrates that Bakunun is not a singular or monolithic tradition, but rather a spectrum of oral narratives encompassing various story types, each with distinct functions and layers of meaning. In folkloristic studies, such diversity must be carefully mapped so that its structural patterns, social functions, and embedded values can be understood systematically. Based on recorded interview data and with reference to established frameworks for the classification of oral traditions, Bakunun may therefore be analytically situated within broader typologies of narrative folklore, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of its internal variation and cultural significance<sup>29</sup>. Bakunun may be classified into four principal categories: fables, legends, hikayat, and myths. These four types appear explicitly in the testimonies of informants and constitute the most dominant narrative forms within the storytelling practices of the Kerinci community in Kerinci Regency.

Each category represents not merely a distinct narrative pattern, but also reflects the community's worldview concerning the relationship between human beings and others, nature, ancestors, and the unseen realm. In this sense, mapping the types of Bakunun is not simply a technical exercise in classification, but an effort to understand the deeper cultural functions embedded within the tradition.

In the following section, each type of Bakunun will be examined in detail based on field data and narrative accounts gathered from local sources.

### 1. Fable (Animal Tales / Cerito Hewan)

Within Bakunun, fables are narratives that feature animal characters behaving like human beings. These stories employ anthropomorphism as a narrative device to convey moral lessons, social critique, and practical wisdom in an accessible manner. Informants mention that tales about napuh (mouse-deer), the clever mousedeer, Celungga and Celupat, and other animals are commonly told by parents to children before bedtime in Kerinci Regency.

### 2. Legends and Hikayat

Legends within Bakunun are narratives that connect the origins of places, natural phenomena, or historical figures with mystical elements. They often explain the genesis of rivers, lakes, villages, or unusual events through a fusion of history and mythic

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<sup>29</sup> Danandjaja, Folklor Indonesia: Ilmu Gosip, Dongeng Dan Lain Lain; Finnegan, Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices.

imagination. Examples mentioned by informants include the story of the Batang Marau Riverin which a child is transformed into a fish and the tale of Celungga and Celupat, siblings associated with Danau Kerinci.<sup>30</sup>

Hikayat, by contrast, belongs to the broader Malay literary tradition. A hikayat is a classical prose narrative containing stories, legal codes, genealogies, and accounts that may be fictional, religious, historical, biographical, or a combination thereof. Traditionally, hikayat were read or recited for consolation, to inspire courage, or to enliven communal gatherings. Well-known examples within the wider Malay world include Hikayat Hang Tuah, as well as local narratives such as Hikayat Perang Tanah Buludai, Hikayat Depati Intan, and Hikayat Sutan Bagindo.<sup>31</sup>

In the Kerinci context, the incorporation of hikayat into Bakunun illustrates the dynamic interaction between local oral tradition and the broader Malay-Islamic literary heritage.

### 3. Myth (Mite / Supernatural Narratives / Extraordinary Events)

Myths within Bakunun concern supernatural beings, spirits, ghosts, or cosmic forces. These narratives often function as mechanisms of social control, especially for children, by embedding behavioral norms within symbolic fear or reverence<sup>32</sup>.

Examples from Kerinci include the figure of Antu Gedang, a supernatural entity believed to appear when children play outside too late at night. Other myths relate to taboos imposed on pregnant women such as prohibitions against entering forests or leaving the house after dark. There are also stories about guardian spirits of the forest who must be respected through incantations, and tales of stones ascending to the sky, incorporating motifs of beings from the “upper realm” who rescue a child from unjust parents.

The Bakunun tradition, as demonstrated through its classification into fables, legends, hikayat, and myths, reveals that these narrative forms are not merely variations of storytelling, but constitute a cultural structure embedded with profound social functions. Each category embodies a distinct yet interconnected dimension of meaning within the oral system of Kerinci Regency. Through this classification, it becomes evident that every type of Bakunun carries the full spectrum of oral tradition’s functions: it serves as a repository of historical memory, a moral curriculum, a medium for identity formation, a mechanism of social control, an aesthetic and rhetorical expression, and an instrument of cultural legitimacy.

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<sup>30</sup> Zarmoni (Penggiat Kebudayaan Kerinci) pada Wawancara November 2025

<sup>31</sup> Zarmoni (Penggiat Kebudayaan Kerinci) pada Wawancara November 2025

<sup>32</sup> Zarmoni (Penggiat Kebudayaan Kerinci) pada Wawancara November 2025

### **E. Efforts to Preserve the Bakunun Tradition and Its Challenges**

The preservation of the Bakunun tradition does not occur spontaneously; it endures through the conscious involvement of cultural actors, governmental institutions, community networks, and art practitioners who actively assume responsibility for safeguarding and revitalizing Kerinci's oral narratives in Kerinci Regency.

Cultural elders, as primary inheritors of the tradition, occupy a central role in transmitting narrative knowledge, stylistic modes of delivery, and the customary values embedded in each story. They function as “guardians of narrative authority,” ensuring that Bakunun continues to be practiced in accordance with adat principles while remaining responsive to social change. Beyond the internal sphere of family and customary structures, these cultural figures also participate in public performances, village ceremonies, and informal educational activities, enabling multilayered and intergenerational transmission.

Art practitioners contribute through creative reinterpretation and formal transformation of storytelling modes. The adaptation of Bakunun into stage performances, digital videos, illustrated storytelling, and community theater expands its audience reach and sustains its relevance for younger generations. Such transformation reflects theories of cultural revitalization articulated by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, who argue that traditions may be reinforced and rearticulated through innovation without abandoning their essential identity.<sup>33</sup>

Art practitioners whether working within traditional performance settings or digital platforms have significantly expanded the scope of Bakunun preservation in Kerinci Regency. Through creative adaptations such as stage performances, illustrated folktales, short-form video content, and digital storytelling, they bridge tradition with new audiences, particularly younger generations who are more technologically oriented. Their innovations not only sustain the relevance of Bakunun, but also open new interpretive spaces while respecting its original narrative structure. In this way, Bakunun becomes not merely a relic of the past, but a contemporary medium for reflecting on identity, ethics, and the human relationship with nature.

Field observations further indicate that institutional initiatives reinforce these preservation efforts. Regional authorities particularly cultural and tourism offices regularly organize storytelling competitions and cultural festivals. The 2025 “Balik Ku Dahin” Festival, held by the government of Kerinci Regency, for example, provided a celebratory platform showcasing various Kerinci traditions, including Bakunun. Such events not only popularize local narratives but also reactivate traditional performance spaces as arenas of cultural interaction. Government initiatives to compile and publish Bakunun stories through ethnographic documentation, folklore collections, and popular

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<sup>33</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition,” *The Invention of Tradition*, January 1, 2012, 1–320, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107295636>.

publications represent important steps in transferring oral tradition into written media, thereby strengthening accessibility and continuity.

Preservation also takes place within schools, where storytelling competitions, traditional art performances, and local content curricula introduce students to Bakunun from an early age. In this respect, educational institutions function as effective sites of cultural reproduction, extending the chain of transmission from the family sphere into formal structures.

Equally vital are the tradition bearers themselves—the native storytellers from villages across Kerinci. They serve not only as sources of narrative knowledge but also as custodians of authenticity. Although many belong to older generations, their participation in festivals, customary events, and community performances keeps Bakunun alive in its performative dimension. Their willingness to be interviewed, recorded, and involved in research constitutes an invaluable form of cultural participation for scholarly documentation.

Significant support also comes from Kerinci cultural activists who operate both offline and online. Through social media platforms, local YouTube channels, cultural blogs, and educational content, they republish Bakunun narratives, interpret their philosophical values, and introduce them to wider audiences, including the Kerinci diaspora. Their digital activism creates new spaces for revitalization within the modern media ecosystem.

Cultural communities ranging from art collectives and village youth groups to customary associations further contribute to sustaining an active social ecosystem for the tradition. By organizing storytelling workshops, cultural discussions, traveling performances, and independent documentation projects, they demonstrate that preservation is not solely a governmental or academic endeavor, but a grassroots cultural movement.

Academic production also plays a decisive role. The publication of folktale collections, cultural website articles, journal papers, undergraduate theses, master's theses, and research reports does more than store narratives in textual form; it offers analytical insight into the structure, function, and dynamics of Bakunun. Written scholarship grants intellectual legitimacy and opens possibilities for integration into educational curricula, cultural programming, and future research agendas.

Overall, the preservation of Bakunun emerges as a collective undertaking involving cultural elders, artists, government bodies, communities, educational institutions, and researchers. This collaboration illustrates that oral tradition is sustained not merely through memorization but through interconnected networks of practice, innovation, advocacy, and documentation. Consequently, Bakunun remains a living cultural heritage relevant, dynamic, and resilient in the face of changing times.

Nevertheless, the relatively limited number of cultural custodians and Bakunun practitioners in Kerinci poses a serious challenge to long-term preservation. Insufficient generational regeneration weakens intergenerational transmission, even though oral tradition fundamentally depends upon lived practice, collective memory, and embodied experience. While written documentation is increasingly

available, oral tradition possesses distinctive characteristics that cannot be fully represented in text alone: vocal intonation, bodily expression, situational context, emotional interaction between storyteller and audience, and the socio-cultural space of performance.

In the context of Bakunun, performative elements ranging from narrative style and the rhythm of the Kerinci language to the sacred and historical nuances embedded in delivery are integral to its meaning. Therefore, preservation efforts cannot rely solely on textual documentation. They must also involve strengthening practitioner communities, mentoring younger generations, and creating living spaces of practice in which Bakunun continues to be performed, experienced, and interpreted as a holistic cultural expression within Kerinci society.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study affirms that Bakunun constitutes an intangible cultural heritage of the Kerinci community in Kerinci Regency, possessing multidimensional functions. It serves not only as a medium of entertainment, but also as a vehicle for moral education, a channel for transmitting customary and religious values, and a foundation for constructing local cultural identity. Bakunun should therefore be understood not merely as an oral narrative tradition, but as a system of knowledge and cultural practice that reflects the Kerinci worldview regarding humanity, nature, and the ethical foundations of life.

Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the existence of Bakunun is increasingly vulnerable. The weakening of generational regeneration, the diminishing availability of performance spaces, and the dominance of popular culture and modern media have gradually marginalized its practice. Although preservation efforts have been undertaken by cultural figures, art activists, community groups, and local authorities, these initiatives remain relatively limited and lack sustained integration within a comprehensive cultural policy framework.

Accordingly, the safeguarding of Bakunun requires a holistic strategy that extends beyond documentation toward the strengthening of its status as a living tradition. Revitalization efforts must prioritize the active transmission of performative knowledge, the creation of continuous performance spaces, and the systematic involvement of younger generations. Universities and educational institutions, in particular, hold strategic potential to serve as sites of regeneration, research, and creative reinterpretation.

Through adaptive transformation while maintaining its core values, symbolic meanings, and cultural identity, Bakunun can continue to function as a dynamic expression of Kerinci cultural heritage amid the currents of modernity.

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