



Tradition and nutrition: How Aceh's culture shape child condition

Tradisi dan nutrisi: Cara budaya Aceh mempengaruhi kondisi anak

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Abstract

The prevalence of stunting cases in Aceh is still very high at 29,4% (2023). One of the social factors that influence stunting is the local culture in feeding practices. This study aimed to determine the culture that influences feeding practices among children diagnosed with stunting. Qualitative research using ethnographic tools was conducted in Kota Sigli, Aceh in 2022. Data were collected through 112 hours of observation, semi-structured interviews with eight mothers of stunted children, and informal interviews with five community leaders. The data were analyzed using NVivo, and several themes were generated. Results: Child-feeding culture in Aceh plays a role in child growth, both positively and negatively. The tradition of *peucicap* with dates and breast milk contributes to gut health through the production of bacteriocins that inhibit the growth of pathogenic bacteria. The 'rice and water' belief encourages breastfeeding from both breasts, increasing colostrum production. The consumption of star gooseberry leaves and banana rice mix contributes to increased weight gain in children. However, some practices, such as *ie mom adék* and poor hygiene habits, can have a negative impact. Meanwhile, other cultures, such as *peutrôn tanôh* and superstitious beliefs, tend to be neutral towards child growth. In conclusion, the local culture in Aceh influences the feeding of stunted children, with positive, negative, or neutral effects, depending on practices such as *peucicap*, consumption of star gooseberry leaves, or poor hygiene.

Keywords: Feeding, local culture, parent, community, stunting

Abstrak

Prevalensi kasus stunting di Aceh masih sangat tinggi yakni 29,4% (2023). Salah satu faktor sosial yang mempengaruhi terjadinya stunting adalah budaya lokal dalam praktik pemberian makanan. Penelitian bertujuan untuk mengetahui budaya yang mempengaruhi praktik pemberian makanan pada anak yang didiagnosis stunting. Penelitian kualitatif dengan menggunakan perangkat etnografi, telah dilakukan Kota Sigli, Aceh, pada tahun 2022. Pengumpulan data melalui 112 jam observasi, wawancara semi terstruktur dengan delapan orang ibu yang memiliki anak stunting, dan wawancara informal dengan lima tokoh masyarakat. Analisis data secara NVivo dan menghasilkan beberapa tema. Hasil, budaya pemberian makanan pada anak di Aceh berperan dalam pertumbuhan anak, baik secara positif maupun negatif. Tradisi *peucicap* dengan kurma dan ASI berkontribusi pada kesehatan usus melalui produksi bakteriosin yang menghambat bakteri patogen. Kepercayaan 'nasi dan air' mendorong pemberian ASI dari kedua payudara, meningkatkan produksi kolostrum. Konsumsi daun katuk dan campuran nasi pisang berkontribusi terhadap peningkatan berat badan anak. Namun, beberapa praktik seperti *ie mom adék* dan kebiasaan higienitas yang buruk dapat berdampak negatif. Sementara itu, budaya lain seperti *peutrôn tanôh* dan kepercayaan takhayul cenderung bersifat netral terhadap pertumbuhan anak. Kesimpulan, budaya lokal di Aceh berpengaruh pada pemberian makanan anak stunting, dengan efek positif, negatif, atau netral, tergantung pada praktik seperti *peucicap*, konsumsi daun katuk, atau kebersihan yang buruk.

Kata Kunci: Budaya lokal, nutrisi, masyarakat, orang tua, stunting

Introduction

The prevalence of stunting has steadily decreased in Indonesia. In 2023, the prevalence was 21,5% (Kementerian Kesehatan RI, 2024), which was slightly lower than the global rate of 22,3% (UNICEF, 2023). Aceh was one of the provinces with a prevalence of 41,3% in 2013, which has decreased by 37,3% in 2018 and 29,4% in 2023 (Dinas Sosial Aceh, 2024). However, this number remains fairly high compared to the average global stunting percentage, which is 22,3% in 2022 (UNICEF, 2023).

One of the many districts in the province of Aceh that has a high number of stunting cases is Pidie. This sub-district has communities that practice Aceh's local culture. The prevalence of stunting in Pidie increased from 27,8% in 2022 to 29,5% in 2023 (Dinkes Pidie, 2024), despite various interventions from the government, such as the provision of iron supplements for girls, increasing antenatal care outreach, and protein complementary feeding for malnourished children, which calls for more innovative efforts to reduce the district's incidence of stunting.

Stunting and its causes

Toddlers are diagnosed with stunting, based on their physical parameters. The main stunting parameter was height or body length according to sex. Toddlers are declared stunted if the measurement results of height or body length for age are below -2 standard deviations (SD) based on the WHO Child Growth Standards median (WHO, 2022).

There are three main causes of stunting (Tanjung et al., 2020). First, recurrent infections, such as diarrhea, upper and lower respiratory infections, and urinary tract infections, may cause toddlers to be busy fighting diseases. These infections are a consequence of poor hygiene and sanitation due to unstandardized housing and poor access to clean water. The second cause is poor nutrition during the vulnerable period of child development, namely in the first 1.000 days of life, that is, 270 days during pregnancy plus 730 days (two years) after birth. The third cause is socioeconomic factors. This study concerns the third cause, as the limited literature explores the aspects of social factors influencing stunting in children,

including local cultures that influence parenting practices, especially in Aceh (Ramadhan et al., 2022; Ramadhan et al., 2023).

For example, there is a culture that avoids consuming fish during pregnancy that may cause maternal malnutrition because they worried that the children might have worms and smell fishy (Zulfiani et al., 2022), and provide bananas since the child is only one day old, which may put an infant at risk for gastrointestinal dysfunction and affect their growth (Ramadhan et al., 2023). However, the literature on culture describing the practice of feeding toddlers in Indonesia, particularly Aceh, is very limited (Nurfajri et al., 2016; Idris & Amalia, 2022; Hikmah & Pahlevi, 2023).

Studies have been conducted on how cultures affect food provision and children's health in other parts of Indonesia, such as providing bananas for babies in Central Sulawesi (Yahyu, 2017), palm sugar, coffee, or coconut milk for newborns in Central Kalimantan (Hervilia et al., 2016), *tahnik* practices using dates in Java (Nurutstany & Fujiyanti, 2019), and star gooseberry leaves for mothers in Yogyakarta (Budiarti & Kintoko, 2021). In addition, there are studies on local cultures around food restriction during pregnancy such as the prohibition of consuming fish for mothers to prevent babies from fishy smell in Lampung (Sutarto et al., 2022) and the prohibition of red meat in Central Java based on the belief that it might cause hypertension and miscarriage (Astuti et al., 2024).

Health interventions based on the local culture may improve stunting. For instance, the government of Yogyakarta Province in Central Java promotes the culture of *mitoni*, or a seven-month pregnancy ceremony (Nuraisyah et al., 2021), to improve the nutrition of pregnant mothers. In the Madura community living in Jember, East Java, the stunting issues were overcome by promoting *abereng* tradition, or mass cooking for a feast, regularly (Rasni et al., 2019).

Therefore, adequate references to Aceh culture and its impact on feeding practices and child health are long overdue to help health workers adapt counseling materials to increase community engagement in improving child health. This study explores the local cultures that may influence the parenting practices of children with stunting at 25-59 months.

Methods

This study is a qualitative research using ethnographic tools, such as participant observations and data recording using field notes. These tools are not entirely distinct from other qualitative methods, but they earnestly call for ethnographic tradition, which engages a commitment to deep, practical, and context-oriented explorations.

One hundred and twelve hours of participatory observation, accompanied by informal and semi-structured interviews, was used as the main data collection method. Two groups of participants were formed: mothers of stunted children, midwives, and community leaders. Potential participants were selected from the data obtained from hospitals, pediatricians' practices, and Puskesmas (Community Health Center) in the Kota Sigli Sub-District, Pidie, Aceh, Indonesia. This subdistrict had the highest number of stunting cases. Participants were chosen randomly from the data recommended by midwives in the Kota Sigli community health centers, who also acted as gatekeepers for this study.

Data collection focused on the cultures that influence feeding practices in children with stunting. According to the local health center data, 21 children aged 25-59 months were diagnosed with stunting. From this number, data collection started by conducting participative observation and informal interviews with three mothers and continued until it touched the point of saturated data. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nurses and religious leaders.

The researchers offered the participants several alternative ranges of time, which was considered appropriate for the participant observation/interviews to take place in their houses. The semi-structured interviews were guided by interview guidelines, while the informal interviews were not guided by any structured plan and were conducted during participant observations. All semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded.

Researchers have also employed the CARE communication strategy to explore the sensitive issue of stunting with mothers (Indah, 2022). To ensure the safety of researchers during data collection in the post-conflict area of the Pidie Regency, a safety protocol was established (Indah, 2018) to ensure the safety of researchers working in post-armed conflict and disaster-prone areas.

These strategies were approved by The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, Syiah Kuala University, which issued ethical approval.

Finally, the saturation point was reached for eight mothers. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five midwives and community leaders. These interviews were guided by interview guidelines.

An audio recorder, field notes, and mobile phone camera were used to record the data. Subsequently, the data were transcribed, and to ensure their validity, the authors checked the members (Candela, 2019) by sending the transcripts to the participants and asking for their feedback. Based on the feedback obtained from the member-checking procedure, the transcripts were analyzed through several rounds of coding (Prihapsari & Indah, 2021) assisted by NVivo software version 14. Initially, the authors used an open coding technique. The codes were assembled into a coding scheme that connected several important codes, and based on this scheme, the next round of coding was conducted. After the final round of coding, some themes emerged.

Result and Discussion

The authors worked with the community health service team during the data-collection phase. They obtained data from their interactions with mothers of stunted children in the Kota Sigli sub-district in January 2022.

Table 1. The characteristics of participants

Code ID	Age (y.o)	Occupation	Village
M1	27	Mother	Gp. Asan
M2	36	Mother	Pasi P. Baro
M3	38	Mother	Pasi P. Baro
M4	43	Mother	Menasah Pekan
M5	32	Mother	Kuala Pidie
M6	39	Mother	Kuala Pidie
M7	35	Mother	Tanjong Krueng
M8	37	Mother	Gp. Asan
N1	40	Nurse	Kota Sigli
N2	42	Nurse	Kota Sigli
N3	38	Nurse	Kota Sigli
S1	52	Religious leader	Gp.Asan
S2	50	Religious leader	Gp. Blok Sawah

The participants (Table 1) comprised eight mothers of children with stunting, three nurses,

and two religious leaders. Mothers and religious leaders resided in six villages in the sub-district. The nurses worked at the community health center but resided in the sub-districts next to the Kota Sigli sub-district. The participants' ages ranged from 27 to 52 years.

The authors observed the participants' activities when they interacted with midwives and nurses in integrated health posts (Posyandu) and followed them in their homes. These findings indicate that there are many cultures around feeding children in The Pidie Regency. These include *peucicap* (introduction of tastes), *peutrôn tanôh* (grounding children to know their surroundings), rice bananas, consuming star gooseberry leaves to promote breastmilk production, avoiding spicy food to prevent diarrhea, using unwashed hands, and superstitious beliefs. These cultures were described as follows.

Peucicap

According to the participants, *peucicap* is an introduction to various flavors of food for newborn children. In general, honey, sugar, and salt are the ingredients used in *peucicap* ceremonies. This tradition aims for infants to be able to distinguish the taste of food and know how food tastes outside the womb. *Peucicap* is performed by rubbing honey or fruit juices on the lips or corners of a child's mouth (Nurfajri et al., 2016). Occasionally, it is performed by sprinkling a mixture of salt and sugar around the infant's mouth. In some locations, *peucicap* is composed of honey and raw egg yolk mixtures.

"...Meuseu lagèe di gampong, ureung ken bri madu bacut, neu peuduk boh manok mirah bacut, nyan mangat kedéh di bri keu aneuk manyak watèe ban lahé." [In this village, people mix drops of honey with egg yolk, which is good for a newborn] (M6, 43 y.o).

Peucicap also symbolizes the wish of the infant to become a good person and not a naughty one. Their speech is sweet, like honey and sugar, and their children are polite. Salt is provided so that the children's speech can be easily understood by others when they become adults. A *peucicap* ceremony is conducted when a newborn is seven days old. All the participants conducted a *peucicap* ceremony for their children.

"...Nyan *peucicap* ubé ôk, peurasa meunan. Pokok jih nyan na sira, saka nyan

keu peucicap bèk bateu, beu gèt akay. Menye saka nyan nyak mamèh menye i peugah haba, sira nyan keu meuseu leumpeu i peugah lé jih, nyan beu meurasa, bagah diterimoeng lé dum ureung watèe jih rayeuk euntreuk..." [A little *peucicap* is done to introduce a baby to many tastes with the wish that he/she would become a good person. Sugar was used to promote sweet talk. We gave salt, so others valued their words] (M7, 35 y.o).

"...Katanya biar mudah makan, biar tau oh ini asin, oh ini manis. Jadi dikasih madu dulu biar dia nantinya gak bingung makan atau gak kaget..." [People said that it aims to ease children to enjoy food and to let them know that this food is salty or sweet. We used honey to avoid confusion when the children were at the age of eating regular food] (M8, 37 years).

According to *Imeum Meunasah* (Islamic religious leader), *peucicap* provides flavored food to newborns to familiarize them with regular food. He described that the *peucicap* ceremony is rooted in the *tahnik* ceremony, according to Islamic teachings. *Peucicap* has good benefits for the baby's body and has been known as traditional infant 'immunization.'

"...*Peucicap* itu sunnah sama anjuran Nabi. *Peucicap* itu baik untuk anak atau bayi baru lahir. Kalau dalam Islam, *peucicap* namanya *tahnik*. Nah *tahnik* itu pakai kurma, kalau tidak ada kurma, pakai madu. Tapi kalau sekarang ada juga yang pakai gula sama garam, itu tradisi keluarga. Kalau dalam islam namanya *tahnik* dengan kurma atau madu. *Tahnik* itu juga bagus buat badan anak, biar tidak gampang sakit, atau sering dibilang semacam imunitasi bayi..." [Peucicap is a suggestion from Prophet. *Peucicaps* are beneficial for both children and newborns. In Islam, this *peucicap* is called *tahnik*. *Tahnik* uses dates. If you do not have any data, use honey. However, people also use sugar and salt, according to family traditions. *Tahnik* is also good for children's bodies, so they do not easily become sick. Think of it as a kind of immunization] (S1, religious leader).

Peutrôn Tanôh

The tradition of *peutrôn tanôh* or the so-called *peutrôn aneuk* and *peugilhô tanôh* was embraced by the participants. The ceremony was conducted after the infant was 44 days

old. This tradition is usually guided by a religious leader who understands different types of prayer. The ceremony aims to introduce the infant to the surrounding neighborhood by feeling the ground through his/her feet so that it is not confused about where he/she is currently living.

There are several performances during the *peutrôn tanôh* ceremony. It begins by wrapping a cloth over the infant, and the cloth is then held by two people. Subsequently, a religious leader rotates the stretches of the cloth seven times while chanting prayer. A coconut is split open, and water is spilled onto the cloth. The infant was exposed to the loud sound of coconut splitting and water spilled through the cloth by a religious leader. This part of the ceremony is aimed at so that the infant is courageous and will not be shocked when it hears loud lightning bolts.

"...Kalau dibilang sama orang tua jaman dulu, dibelah kelapa biar gak takut sama petir." [Our elderly said that the purpose of exposing the sound of the coconut shell splitting to an infant is to prevent the infant from being scared of a thunderblaze.] (M6, 39 y.o).

Then, the coconut halves are thrown to the left and right so that the child knows which direction is East and West. This symbolizes the desire for the infant to recognize the culture around it and share knowledge with others. In some places, as part of the *peutrôn tanôh* ceremony, there is also the tradition of splitting banana trees. This tradition aims to promote the baby's courage to fight crimes and defend the truth with strong willingness in the future. For baby girls, it is recommended that their mothers sweep the floor to ensure that the infant is diligent and has a clean heart.

"...Jadi gini, tujuan belah pohon pisang itu kan biar kita jadi laki-laki ni harus kuat. Karena itu adat dulu, adat perang. Jadi, kalau dibelah pohon pisang ibaratnya kita punya tekad kuat buat perang untuk bela kebenaran, membela islam. Itu kan, bayi digendong dulu terus yang gendong megang pedang. Kalau perempuan, ibunya disuruh nyapu aja [tertawa] karena biar dia jadi perempuan tu hatinya bersih selalu dan rajin..." [So, you see, the purpose of splitting the banana tree is so that the infant will become a strong man and have a strong determination to fight crimes to defend the truth and to defend Islam. A baby boy is held

by a person who also holds a sword. If it is a girl, the mother will be asked to sweep the floor [laughing] so that the infant will become a woman with a clean heart and diligent] (S2, 50 y.o).

Subsequently, the infant was lowered to stand on the ground with his feet. A piece of grilled chicken was placed in front of each infant. A religious leader takes a chicken heart and tosses it in front of an infant. This symbolizes the desire of the infant to have a considerate heart in his community. The ceremony ends with a feast. The grilled chicken is enjoyed by guests and not provided to the infant. This is merely a symbol of ceremony.

"Rice and Water" Breastmilk Belief

There is a unique perception among mothers regarding breastfeeding. Some mothers perceived that breastfeeding should begin with the right breast and continue with the left breast. According to them, the milk that comes from the right breast is "rice" and the milk from the left breast is "water." If a mother gives only the right or left breast, it may cause the infant to eat without drinking, or vice versa.

"...I peugah bèk ret wie ilèe, payah bri ret uneun ilèe. Ret uneun yang lee that ie mom, tajam menan ie tren. Nyan meuseu ret uneun nyan bu, menyere ret wie ie. Makajih geu peugah payah bri ret unen ilèe jih, nteu barô wie, bek saboh na saboh tan..." [People say they do not breastfeed with the left breast first, breastfeeding should start from the right breast first. The right breast has more milk and it comes out profusely. The right side is rice, and the left side is water. This is why it is necessary to give the right one first and then the left one. Do not give one side only and do not give the other side] (M7, 35 y.o).

Bu Pisang (Banana Rice)

Parents in Pidie usually provide early complementary feeding to their infants in the early days. This tradition has been practiced for several generations. The common food is *bu pisang*, which is a ripe banana mixed with rice. According to mothers, bananas may encourage the baby's weight to become healthier. Some mothers argued that their babies required more food in addition to breast milk to feel full. If they are not full, they cry significantly because of their hunger.

"...Karena dia rewel, nangis-nangis terus kayak gitu kan, mungkin dia lapar. Kata bapak kasih pisang saja. Ya sudah ikutlah dari [anak] yang pertama sampai anak yang seterusnya gitu..." [Because she threw the tantrum, cried a lot, she might be hungry. Her dad asked me to give her banana. So, I did. I did it from my first child and continued to my next child] (M1, 27th).

"...Dibilang orang, takut dia lapar atau dia nangis. Kirain kenapa anak lapar ni, ga cukup makan? apa ASI gak cukup? Makanya dikasih pisang biar diam..." [People say: Do not make them hungry; they might cry. I thought this crying baby might be hungry; it does not eat enough. Perhaps breast milk is not enough? That is why I give bananas to calm my baby down] (M5, 32y.o).

Bananas, rice water, and tofu were also provided to the children with stunting. They also believed that cooked rice water and tofu water may benefit children with poor nutrition.

Star Gooseberry Leaves, Tofu, Tempeh, and Long Beans for Mothers

Some foods are believed to increase the production of breast milk. The ingredients used are usually star gooseberry leaves (*Sauropus androgynus*) and other additions, such as tofu, tempeh, and long beans. The mothers believed that these foods promoted better milk production and improved the milk taste. The processing is straightforward: star gooseberry leaves are boiled in soup or stir-fried. Occasionally, they are mixed with corn in stew dishes. Tofu and tempeh were deep-fried using a salt sprinkle.

Ie Mom Adék

Ie mom adék may be translated as "sibling's milk". All participants agreed that they should stop breastfeeding when they were pregnant with the next child. If breastfeeding continues during pregnancy, it might negatively affect both the children. One of the children may experience continuous pain, disability, difficulty or inability to speak, low intelligence, emaciation, and short stature.

According to a mother, she continued breastfeeding her first child when she was pregnant with her second child (who was diagnosed as stunted), with the age difference between the two children being a year. As a result, both her children suffered from short and

skinny bodies, possibly because of the sibling's breastmilk.

"...Oh ya itu kan ga boleh, katanya udah 'ie mom adék' bahasa Acehnya. Itu udah jatuh nenen adék katanya gak boleh kasih lagi. Kemarin itu saya sempat menyusui saat hamil. Soalnya adéknya, cuma beda setahun. Dengar-dengar gak bolehkan? Orang puskesmas bilang anak saya kecil-kecil dan saya terus kepikiran kayaknya karena ie mom adék itu..." [Oh, that's not allowed, people say, it is sibling breast milk. It is already the right of its younger sibling. People say that they should no longer give them. I did this for a short period of time. I was pregnant before my first child was a year old. People believe that this is not possible. People from public health centers said that their children were small. This may be because of the sibling's breast milk] (M1, 27 years).

Do's and Don'ts Around Diarrhea

The mother participants believed that certain foods might cause diarrhea in babies, while others stopped it. They assumed that all that a mother eats would be passed to the infant through breast milk. They avoid spicy foods because they may trigger diarrhea.

"Ga boleh makan yang terlalu pedas-pedas atau kayak rujak-rujak gitu karena nanti anak mencret. Kan itu pas lagi masa-masa menyusui. Ga boleh kasih nenen, nanti anaknya mencret kalau salah-salah makan," [You should not eat something too spicy like rujak/spicy fruit salad because it can cause diarrhea in infants if it is done during breastfeeding. A child may have diarrhea if the mother eats the wrong food] (M1, 27 years old).

To alleviate diarrhea, mothers also believed in drinking the extract of boiled pomegranate leaves. They believed that the extract would reach an infant through the flow of breast milk.

"Lôn ramah-ramah ie rebôh ôn geulima, lôn jép keu droe. Ramah ôn geulima lôn bri sira bacut lôn jép keudro, abéh nyan i tren ie nen. Watèe cirét si adék lôn jép ie ramah ôn geulima. Bôh sira bacut abéh nyan saréng lam glah, lôn jép, abéh nyan jôk ie nen keu si adék. Nyan langsông aju kreuh èk." [I squeeze the boiled pomegranate leaves until the water comes out and I drink it. I squeezed the

pomegranate leaves and added a small amount of salt. The juice goes through breast milk. When my child had diarrhea, I drank squeezed pomegranate leaves by putting a little salt and filtering it through a glass before drinking it. I breastfeed my child soon thereafter. Subsequently, the poo immediately hardens] (M4, 43 y.o).

Using Unwashed Hands

Mothers' parenting practices, such as using unwashed hands when feeding children, may also harm them. A mother admitted it:

"Hana ku rah jaroe nyan, ku bri aju. Bak pat-pat di duek bri aju. Hana jan bak ta mita ie menye but di lua meuseu. Keu peu ta rah jaroe?" [I did not wash my hands; I immediately gave me food. Anywhere, I sat; I gave it right away. I did not have time to find water, especially outside the house. Why should I bother to wash my hands?] (M3, 38 y.o).

One midwife said that the behavior of washing the hands of mothers or children in this community was lacking. Many mothers do not wash their hands when caring for their children. Washing children's hands is also rarely done or not done properly. The midwife added promotive education to promote handwashing using the World Health Organization recommended method. However, the awareness of mothers about implementing clean and healthy living behaviors is still lacking.

"...Kalau kita bilang masalah kurang gizi ni, stunting ini misalnya ya. Masih banyak ibu dan anak yang gak jaga cuci tangan mereka. Padahal kalau kita liat lingkungan tu ngaruh kali kan, bisa buat infeksi anaknya apalagi covid gini. Rata-rata ibu yang punya anak stunting itu waktu ditanya gimana kasih makan anaknya kok bisa sakit, pasti nanti jawabannya ya dikasih terus gitu. Ujung-ujung jawabannya memang gak pada cuci tangan, lupa lah, gak sempat. Padahal pembelajaran cuci tangan WHO 6 langkah tu sering dikasih tau sama ibu-ibu yang punya anak stunting itu. Tapi gak diterapkan sama mereka. Kasihan kan anaknya. Ada bahkan ibu yang jawab: iya kan gak apa-apa anggap ajalah vitamin, udah telanjurlah, terus dianggap gak apa-apa biar jadi obat." [If we discuss the problem of stunting, many mothers and children do not bother washing their hands. I think the Poor sanitation in the

environment may promote infection in children, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most mothers who have stunted children, if we ask how they feed their children and why they easily get sick, answered that they did not wash their hands, forgot it, or did not have time to do so. Although the WHO 6-step handwashing lesson has already been taught to mothers with stunted children, it has not been applied. I apologize for my children. Even worse, some mothers answered just think of it (the dirty hands) as 'vitamins' or 'medicine] (N1, nurse, 40 y.o).

Superstitions

Various objects and foodstuffs are prepared by the mother to ward off disturbances by spirits, so that the child is not easily startled. The antidote is usually made by inserting garlic and nail clippers into a small cloth, so that the child is not easily surprised. Meanwhile, iron scissors, safety pins, and garlic were also inserted into a cloth and placed on the chest of the pregnant woman to prevent contact with evil spirits.

In addition, mothers carried garlic in their pouches during pregnancy to ward off spirits. Children were protected by placing garlic under bed pillows for the same purpose. There are also prohibitions on pregnant women, such as the prohibition of seeing a full moon during pregnancy. According to one mother, a pregnant mother is not allowed to see the full moon to prevent her infant from having a red rash on its face, called *mierah bayi*.

"...Mirah bayi, bèk kalen-kalen nyan buleun i peugah le syik. Asai mumèe nyan, bèk kalen buleun bulat nyan. Bèk kalen nyan, payah teukui u yup. Sampz jinoe hat kaleuh madeung kaleuh mandum nyoe duwa boh aneuk, barô jeut ku kalen buleun. Karena geu pegah jeut mirah bayi geu peugah, mirah muka," [Red rash. A pregnant mother should not look at the full moon and always bow down. I waited until the completion of the *madeung* (postpartum period) for each of my children. Now I have two children. Finally, I am allowed to see the moon. Seeing may make babies' faces red] (M7, 35 y.o).

Perception of Stunting

Several mothers think that stunting is a shameful condition and some do not. When their

children were diagnosed with stunting by healthcare providers, some mothers attempted to improve their children's conditions. However, other mothers used the situation to apply for food assistance from healthcare centers.

"...Lôn ku peugah aju that sedéh ku kalen stunting nyan, ka ku usaha dumpeu nyak diek. Ku bri makanan mangat-mangat kiban cara nyak di ék timbangan. Kadang na ureung bangga aneuk beu stunting. Lôn hana. Laju ku pegah...meuseu ladôm ureung nyak di bie bahan nyan watèe lôn ku ukô aneuk lôn watèe garéh mirah nyan. Ladôm bangga ureung nyan di bri bahan pajôh nyan watèe lôn bak posyandu. Padahai aneuk stunting nyan hina that, menye meuneurôt lôn..." [Honestly, I was sad to hear that my child was stunted. I have worked hard to improve my situation. I gave him good food to increase his weight. Interestingly, some people are proud that their children are diagnosed with stunting. I will not tell you their name. I saw them asking for food assistance, as their children's weight was under the red line. Some people are proud to be given these food items in their health posts. In my opinion, the fact that our child was diagnosed with stunting is shameful] (M2, 36 years).

The influence of local culture on the feeding of stunted children in Aceh, the findings show that there are three groups of cultures: the first group of cultures that may promote children's and mothers' health, the second group of cultures that negatively influences their health, and the third group of cultures that may have neutral effects.

Cultures that May Positively Promote Children's Growth

A culture of *peucicaps* was included in this group. In the early days of the Acehese tradition, dates were substituted with honey and fruit juices from mango, rambutan, jackfruit, sugarcane, and sapedilla (Samad, 2015). However, in this study, the participants used honey, salt, and sugar.

Peucicap is influenced by the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad SAW when welcoming a newborn baby, called *tahnik*. This *tahnik* is conducted by a spiritual leader who chews yellow or wet dates, and then a bit of the softened dates are rubbed into the palate of the baby's mouth. An expert on hadith from the

Shafi'i school, namely Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani explained the meaning of *tahnik* as follows:

"*Tahnik is chewing something then rubbing it in a baby's mouth and then rubbing it against the roof of the mouth. This tradition aims to provide babies with various foods and to strengthen them. In the ritual, let the mouth (of the baby) be opened so that (something that is chewed) enters the stomach. The main tahnik experiment was conducted on dry dates (tamr). If there is no tamr, wet dates (ruthab) are used. If there are no dates, can be replaced by something sweet. Of course, honey is more important than anything else*" (Asqalani 1993). Al-Bukhari described what The Prophet did in the hadith of Abu Burdah from Abu Musa: "I was blessed with a son, so I brought him before the Prophet, so he gave him the name Ibrahim and treated him with a date (tamr)" (HR al-Bukhari, 1992).

An in vitro study that explored the effect of *Tahnik* on pathogenic bacteria showed interesting results (Pikoli & Yunita, 2018). Dates and breast milk contain lactic acid bacteria (LAB), which can produce bacteriocins that may inhibit the growth of pathogenic bacteria. This study compared the effect of LAB on breast milk on *Escherichia coli* agar to the effect of LAB on the combination of dates and breastmilk. The results showed that LAB from the combination of dates and breastmilk had a 25% stronger effect than LAB from breast milk only. In conclusion, *the tahnik* tradition may positively affect a baby's gut health (Pikoli & Yunita, 2018).

While the *Tahnik* ceremony uses dates, *the peucicap* ceremonies conducted by the mother participants use honey, salt, and sugar. These ingredients differ from the dates prescribed by Prophet. Therefore, it is doubtful whether the ceremony would be beneficial for the baby. This calls for further studies on the benefits of honey, salt, and sugar intake in newborns.

The second culture that may promote child growth is the "rice and water" belief. In short, this belief shapes the tradition of breastfeeding, with alternating breasts. The mother participants believed that it is important to combine both breasts in one sitting breastfeeding, using the analogy of combining "rice" and "water." This alternating strategy may trigger a shorter time for colostrum production during the post-delivery period (Zhou et al., 2021) and increase milk production in the long term (Amir, 2014). The breastfeeding process

should begin by emptying one breast first, and then continuing with the other. Emptying breast milk may promote milk production. However, if the breastfeeding process is stopped before the breast is empty, there is a risk of inadequate expression of hindmilk, which is rich in useful fat for the development of the nervous system (Takumi et al., 2022).

The third is the culture of consuming star gooseberry leaves. Studies have provided evidence that star gooseberry leaves [*Sauropus androgynus*] may act as galactagogues to promote breast milk production. These studies show that consuming boiled star gooseberry leaf soup increases breastmilk production (Dolang et al., 2021) and optimizes the increase in baby weight (Juliastuti, 2019).

There is a lack of clinical trials to support the use and dosage of star gooseberry extract (Primadhani, 2021) because the leaves are mostly consumed in the form of soups. One study used star gooseberry biscuits and provided them to mothers, and found that their prolactin hormone levels were increased, which increased their milk production (Indrayani, Shahib, & Husin, 2020). In summary, the consumption of star gooseberry leaves may be beneficial for increasing breast milk production. Further studies are needed to support the consumption of star gooseberry leaves.

Fourth, culture provides bananas as complementary food. This is common in Indonesia, Aceh, and other countries. All participants gave bananas to their babies to make them fuller, less fussy, and less cranky. This finding is in line with research conducted in other areas of Indonesia, such as the Nusa Tenggara Timur (Nelista & Fembi, 2021) and Sulawesi (Yahyu, 2017). Bananas were prepared by scraping the flesh and mixing it with rice. Bananas are complementary foods that are easy to prepare and available throughout the year in tropical countries (Junus & Mamu, 2022). It contains carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Some studies support the conclusion that providing bananas may increase a baby's weight (Borbi et al., 2020). Banana puree can be used as a thickening agent in infants with dysphagia (Brinker et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, bananas given to babies under six months old may cause diarrhea (Trisnawati, 2018) due to the baby's inability to digest bananas. Mothers may also give bananas

to their older babies at least six months of age. The practices of mother participants who gave their infants bananas improperly may lead to diarrhea, which might make it difficult for them to gain weight and suffer from malnutrition. Such a situation may result in stunting.

Cultures that May Negatively Affect Children's Growth

Some Acehnese cultures may negatively affect the growth of infants. This includes using unwashed hands when feeding children, and the *ie mom adék* belief.

The mothers argued that they did not have sufficient time or limited access to clean water. A study conducted in Southern Ethiopia found that stunting was more significant in mothers who did not wash their hands with soap and water (Mekonen et al., 2021). Another study conducted on 45 stunted children also reported that mothers who did not wash their hands had a risk of 0,314 suffering from stunting compared to mothers who washed their hands with soap and running water (Adriany et al., 2021).

Beliefs such as *ie mom adék* or stopping breastfeeding during pregnancy were also shared by all mothers in this study. Mother participants worried that breastfeeding their older children would interfere with pregnancy. However, the literature provides evidence that tandem breastfeeding, a practice in which a mother keeps breastfeeding the older child during pregnancy and the birth of the next child, is not uncommon (Sinkiewicz-Darol et al., 2021). There are many benefits of tandem breastfeeding, despite some challenges, such as pain and tenderness in the breasts, insomnia, and fatigue. In addition, there is evidence that breastfeeding during pregnancy does not cause abortions (Aker et al., 2024). Stopping/weaning breastfeeding may harm children, because breast milk is rich in antibodies that protect them from enteric infections (McCormick et al. 2022).

Cultures that May Have Neutral Effects on Children's Growth

Some Acehnese traditions might have neutral effects. One of them is the tradition of the *peutrôn tanôh*. It only expresses gratitude for a child's birth and introduces the child to his/her neighbors (Nurfajri et al., 2016). Although this tradition does not promote or discourage

children's physical growth, it influences parenting practices by promoting social cohesiveness (Agustina 2023).

The prohibition of seeing the moon while pregnant and belief in spirits or jinns may not influence the feeding of children. However, these beliefs may cause mothers to feel more anxious. One study revealed that breastmilk production is strongly influenced by psychological factors, sadness, depression, and various emotional tensions that may decrease or stop breastmilk production (Nagel et al., 2022).

Mothers participants also believed that certain foods they consumed might harm their infants, such as spicy foods. A study in Central Kalimantan, Hervilia et al. (2016) found that mothers avoid spicy foods because of their effects, which may cause diarrhea in infants. However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no evidence that spicy food may cause such symptoms, or whether pomegranate leaf consumption by mothers would stop diarrhea in babies. Infants are rarely affected by the flavors of the food consumed by their mothers (Jeong et al., 2017).

This study has some limitations. First, the limited number of participants calls for further studies with larger numbers of informants. Second, a longer observation period may reveal more cultures relevant to this topic. Future research should use combined methodologies and/or longer periods of engagement with participants to increase the trustworthiness of the findings.

Conclusion

Cultures may greatly affect the quality of children's health, including development and growth. However, not all cultures/traditions have negative impacts. Some cultures have a neutral or positive influence on children's health.

The findings of this study call for the incorporation of culturally sensitive approaches to stunting management. These approaches may better engage parents, traditional leaders, and community members in overcoming predicaments in stunting management. It is also important to establish educational programs for parents, promote hygiene in feeding practices, and conduct further studies on the benefits and

risks of certain local cultures in parenting practices.

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