**From rituals to rations: The intersection of culture and child nutrition in Acehnese communities**

*Dari kebiasaan ke makanan: Pertemuan antara budaya dan nutrisi anak di masyarakat Aceh*

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| 1Faculty of Medine X  2Faculty of Medine X  3Faculty of Medicine X  **\*Korespondensi:**  **0Author**  **Riwayat Artikel:**  **Penerbit:**    © The Author(s). 2024 **Open Access**  Artikel ini telah didistribusikan berdasarkan atas ketentuan *Lisensi Internasional Creative Commons Attribution* *4.0*What if? Creative Commons Certification | **Abstract** Concerningly, the prevalence of stunting cases in Aceh, Indonesia, is still high: 29.4% (2023). One of the social factors influencing stunting is the local culture around feeding practices. However, there is a dearth of research on Aceh cultures regarding feeding practices for children. This study aims to determine cultures that influence the feeding practices of children diagnosed with stunting in the Sigli City Sub-district, Pidie Regency, Aceh, Indonesia. This is qualitative research using ethnographic tools. Data was collected through participant observations, semi-structured interviews with eight mothers of children with stunting, and informal interviews with five community leaders. The findings show that there are cultures around feeding children that may promote children's growth, such as *peucicap,* rice and water belief, consuming *katuk* leaves*, and banana rice mixture. But some cultures may negatively affect children's growth, including ie mom adék*, using unwashed hands, and promoting stunting to obtain food assistance. The rest of Acehnese cultures may have neutral effects, such as *peutrôn tanôh,* avoiding seeing the full moon, and other superstitious beliefs. The findings call for applying culturally sensitive approaches to engage parents and communities in overcoming predicaments in stunting management.  **Keywords:** feeding, culture, child, parent, community, stunting **Abstrak** Prevalensi kasus stunting di Aceh masih sangat memprihatinkan yakni 29,4%. Salah satu faktor sosial yang mempengaruhi stunting adalah budaya lokal seputar praktik pemberian makan. Namun, penelitian tentang budaya Aceh mengenai praktik pemberian makan untuk anak-anak masih sangat sedikit. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui budaya yang mempengaruhi praktik pemberian makan anak yang didiagnosis stunting di Kecamatan Kota Sigli, Kabupaten Pidie, Aceh, Indonesia. Ini adalah penelitian kualitatif menggunakan alat etnografi. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan delapan ibu dari anak stunting, dan wawancara informal dengan lima tokoh masyarakat. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa ada budaya Aceh yang mendukung pertumbuhan anak seperti peucicap, prinsip nasi-air, konsumsi daun katuk, dan pemberian nasi pisang. Namun ada pula budaya yang memengaruhi secara negatif, misalkan ie mom adék, kebiasaan jarang cuci tangan, dan menjadikan anak malnutrisi sebagai alasan untuk medapatkan bantuan makanan tambahan. Budaya lain cenderung netral pengaruhnya, misalkan budaya peutrôn tanôh, larangan lihat bulan, dan beberapa kepercayaan takhayul lain. Kesimpulannya, beberapa budaya Aceh dapat secara positif, negatif, dan netral memengaruhi kesehatan anak-anak. Penelitian ini menyarankan penatalaksanaan stunting dengan memperhatikan budaya lokal untuk meningkatkan keterlibatan masyarakat demi tercapainya tujuan.  **Kata Kunci:** Anak**,** budaya, nutrisi, masyarakat, orang tua, stunting |

# **Pendahuluan**

The prevalence of stunting in Indonesia has been decreasing steadily. In 2023, the prevalence was 21.5% (Kementerian Kesehatan RI, 2024), slightly lower than the world’s rate of 22.3% (UNICEF, 2023). Aceh is one of the provinces with a high prevalence of 41.3% in 2013, which decreased by 37.3% in 2018 and 29.4% in 2023 (Dinas Sosial Aceh, 2024). However, this number remains fairly high and concerning.

One of the many districts in the province of Aceh with a high number of stunting cases is Pidie. The prevalence of stunting in Pidie increased from 27.8% in 2022 to 29.5% in 2023 (Dinkes Pidie, 2024). Therefore, this situation calls for serious efforts to reduce stunting in the district.

**Stunting and its causes**

Toddlers are diagnosed as stunted based on their physical parameters. The main stunting parameter is the height or body length according to gender.Toddlers are declared stunted if the measurement results of height or body length for age are below -2 Standard Deviation (SD) based on from WHO Child Growth Standards median (WHO, 2022).

There are three biggest causes of stunting (Tanjung, Prawitasari, & Sjarif, 2020). First, recurrent infection outbreaks cause the bodies of toddlers to be busy fighting disease. The second cause is poor nutrition during the vulnerable period of child development, namely in the first 1,000 days of life, i.e. 270 days during pregnancy plus 730 days (two years) after birth. The third cause is socioeconomic factors. This study concerns the third cause as limited literature explores the aspect of social factors influencing stunting in children, including local cultures that influence parenting practices, especially in Aceh.

For example, there is a culture of avoiding consuming fish during pregnancy that causes mother malnutrition (Zulfiani, Masthura, & Oktaviyana, 2022) and providing bananas since the child is only one day old, which may put an infant at risk for having gastrointestinal dysfunction and affect their growth (Author, 2023). However, the literature on culture describing the practice of feeding toddlers in Indonesia, particularly Aceh, is very limited (Nurfajri, Selian, & Nurlaili, 2016; Idris & Amalia, 2022; Hikmah & Pahlevi, 2023). Adequate references are long overdue to help health workers adapt counseling materials to increase community engagement in improving child health. Therefore, this research explores local cultures that may influence the parenting practices of children with stunting at 25-59 months.

# **Metode**

This study is qualitative research using ethnographic tools. It used participatory observation as the main method of data collection, accompanied by interviews. There are two groups of informants. The first group was mothers with stunted children and the second one was midwives and community leaders. The potential informants were selected from the data obtained from hospitals, pediatricians' practices, and puskesmas (community health centers) in the Sigli City Sub-District, Pidie, Aceh, Indonesia. This sub-district has the highest number of stunting cases.

The data collection focused on cultures that influence feeding practices in children with stunting. According to the local health center’s data, there were 21 children aged 25-59 months who were diagnosed with stunting. From this number, the data collection started by conducting participative observation and semi-structured interviews with three mothers and continued until it touched the point of saturated answers. In conducting the interview, researchers offered the participants several alternative ranges of time, which one considered as an appropriate time for the participant observation to take place. Researchers also employed the CARE communication strategy to explore the sensitive issue of stunting with mothers (Author 2022). To ensure the safety of the researchers during data collection in the post-conflict area of Pidie Regency, a safety protocol was established (author, 2018) in addition to the ethics approval from the ethics committee, Faculty of Medicine, Syiah Kuala University.

Finally, the saturation point was reached at eight mothers. Subsequently, researchers conducted informal interviews with five midwives and community leaders.

An audio recorder, field notes, and mobile phone camera recorded the data. Afterward, the data were transcribed, processed through several rounds of coding (Author, 2021, and then analyzed using ethnographic analysis techniques. The analysis processes produced several themes illustrated below.

# **Result and discussion**

The authors were working with the community health service team and obtaining data from their interactions with mothers of stunted children in the Kota Sigli subdistrict. The participants’ characteristics are described in the following table 1:

**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  M5  M6  M7  M8 | 43  32  39  35  37 | Mother  Mother  Mother  Mother  Mother | | Menasah Pekan  Kuala Pidie  Kuala Pidie  Tanjong Krueng  Gp. Asan |
| N1  N2  N3  S1  S2 | 40  42  38  52  50 | Nurse  Nurse  Nurse  Religious leader  Religious leader | | Kota Sigli  Kota Sigli  Kota Sigli  Gp.Asan  Gp.Blok Sawah |

The authors observed the participants’ activities when they were interacting with midwives and nurses in integrated health posts (posyandu) and also following the participants to their houses.

The findings indicate that there are many cultures around feeding children in Pidie Regency. These include *peucicap*, *peutrôn tanoh*, providing rice bananas, consuming katuk leaves to promote breastmilk, avoiding spicy food to prevent diarrhea, using unwashed hands, the culture of using unwashed hands, and superstitious belief. These cultures is described as follows.

***Peucicap***

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

*“...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 an egg yolk, it's good for a newborn] (M6, 43th).

*Peucicap* also symbolizes the wish that the infant becomes a good person, and not naughty. Their speech is sweet like honey and sugar, or children have a polite manner. Salt is given so that children's speech can be easily understood by others when they become adults.

*Peucicap* ceremony is conducted when a newborn is seven days old. All mother participants conducted *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. We gave sugar to promote sweet talks. We gave salt, so others value their words] (M7, 35th).

*“...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, to let them know that this food is salty or sweet. We give honey to avoid confusion when the children are at the age of eating regular food] (M8, 37th).

According to *Imeum Meunasah,* or Islamic religious leader, *peucicap* is an activity of providing flavored food to children to get used to regular food. He described that *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 imunisasi bayi...”* [*Peucicap* is a suggestion from the prophet. *Peucicap* is good for children or newborns. In Islam, *peucicap* is called tahnik. Tahnik uses dates. If you don't have dates, use honey. But people also use sugar and salt. It's a family tradition. The tahnik is also good for children's bodies, so they don't get sick easily. Think of it as a kind of immunizations] (S1, religious leader).

***Peutrôn tanôh***

The tradition of *peutrôn tanôh* or so-called *peutrôn aneuk* and *peugilhô tanôh* is still embraced by the participants. This ceremony is carried out after the infant is aged 44 days. This tradition is usually guided by a religious leader who understands the different types of prayer and the stages performed. 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 .

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

*“...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, 39th).

Then the coconut halves are thrown to the left and right so the child knows which direction is East and West. This symbolizes the wish for the infant to recognize the cultures around it and share knowledge with others.

In some places, as a part of the *peutrôn tanôh* ceremony, there is also a tradition of splitting banana trees. This tradition aims to promote the baby’s courage to fight crimes and defend the truth with a strong willingness in the future. For baby girls, it is recommended that their mothers to sweep the floor so that the infant will be diligent and have 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, to defend Islam. A baby boy is held by a person who is also holding a sword. if it's 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, 50th).

Subsequently, the infant is lowered to stand with his/her feet on the ground. A grilled chicken is brought in front of the infant. A religious leader takes a chicken's heart and tosses and turns it over in front of the infant. This symbolizes a wish for the infant to have a considerate heart toward its community. The ceremony ends with a feast. The grilled chicken is enjoyed by the invited guests, not given to the infant. It is merely a symbol in the ceremony.

**“Rice and water” breastmilk belief**

There is a unique perception of mother participants about breastfeeding. Some mothers perceived that breastfeeding should start from 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 only 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, menye ret wie ie. Makajih geu peugah payah bri ret unen ilèe jih, nteu barô wie, bek saboh na saboh tan...”* [People say don't breastfeed with the left breast first, breastfeeding should start from the right breast first. The right breast has more milk, it comes out profusely. The right side is rice, and the left is water. That's why it is necessary to give the right one first and then the left one, don't just give one side and not give the other one] (M7, 35th).

***Bu pisang* (banana rice)**

Parents in Pidie usually provide early complementary feeding to their infant in the early days. This tradition has been conducted for generations. The common food given is *bu pisang*, which is ripe bananas mixed with rice. According to the mother, bananas may promote the baby's weight to become healthier. Some mothers argued that their babies need more than breast milk to feel full. If they are not full, they cry a lot, due to 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 tantrum, cried a lot, she might be hungry. Her dad asked me to give her a banana. So, I did. I did it from my first child and continued to the next one] (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: don’t make them hungry, they might cry. I thought this crying baby might be hungry, it doesn't eat enough. Maybe the breastmilk is not enough? That's why I give bananas to calm my baby down] (M5, 32th).

Not only bananas, rice water and tofu are also provided to the children with stunting. They also believe that cooked rice water and tofu water may provide good benefits for children who have poor nutrition.

***Katuk* leaves, tofu, tempeh, and long beans for mothers**

Some foods are believed to increase breast milk. The ingredients used are usually *katuk* leaves [*Sauropus androgynus*] and other additions such as tofu, tempeh, and long beans. The mother participants believe that those food promotes better milk production and improve milk taste. The processing is very simple: the katuk leaves are boiled in a soup or stir-fried. Sometimes they are mixed with corn in a stew dish. Tofu tempeh are deep-fried with a sprinkle of salt.

***Ie mom adék***

*Ie mom adék* may be translated as ‘sibling’s milk’. All mother participants agreed that they should stop breastfeeding when they are pregnant with the next child. If they continue breastfeeding while being pregnant, it might negatively affect both children. One of the children might experience continuous pain, disability, difficulty or unable to speak, low intelligence, skinny, and short. 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 of her children suffered from short and skinny bodies, possibly because of the sibling 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 tu..”* [Oh, that's not allowed, people say, it is sibling breastmilk. It's already the right of its younger sibling. People say you shouldn't give it anymore. I did it for a short period of time. I was pregnant before my first born was a year old. People say, it's not allowed. People from the public health center said my children were small in sizes. I thought maybe it was because of the sibling breastmilk] (M1, 27th).

**Do’s and don’ts around diarrhea**

The mother participants believe that certain foods cause diarrhea in babies and others that stop it. They assume that all that a mother eats would be passed to the infant through breast milk. They avoid spicy foods because these kinds of food might 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 shouldn't eat something too spicy like *rujak*/spicy fruit salad, because it can cause diarrhea for the infant if it’s done during breastfeeding. A child might have diarrhea if the *mother eats the wrong food]* (M1, 27th).

To alleviate diarrhea, the mothers also believed in drinking the extract of boiled pomegranate leaves. The extract would go to 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 squeeze the pomegranate leaves and add a little salt, then it will go through breastmilk. When my child had diarrhea (diarrhea), I drank squeezed pomegranate leaves by putting a little salt and filtering it in a glass before drinking it. Then immediately give breast milk to the child. After that, the poo immediately hardens] (M4, 43th).

**Using unwashed hands**

Mother's parenting practices may also harm children, such as using unwashed hands when feeding children. 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 didn't wash my hands; I immediately gave the food. Anywhere I sat, I gave it right away. I didn't have time to find water, especially when we were outside of the house. Why should I bother to wash my hands?] (M3, 38th).

One of the midwives 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. Even washing their children's hands is also rarely done or not done properly. The midwife added that there has been promotive education to promote handwashing according to World Health Organization recommendations. However, the awareness of mothers about implementing clean and healthy living behavior is still very 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 to wash their hands. I think the poor sanitation in the environment may promote infection in children, especially within this COVID-19 situation. Most of the mothers who have stunted children, if we ask how they feed their children and why they easily get sick, answer that they did not wash their hands, they forgot it, or they didn't have time to do so. Even though the WHO 6-step handwashing lesson is already taught to mothers with stunted children, they don't apply it. I feel sorry for their children. Even worse, some mothers answered: Just think of it [the dirty hands] as ‘vitamins’ or ‘medicine’] (N1, Kota Sigli).

**Superstitions**

Various objects and some 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 are also inserted into a cloth and then placed on the chest of the pregnant woman to prevent a touch from evil spirits.

Not only that, mothers also carried garlic in their pouches during pregnancy to ward off spirits. Similarly, children are also protected by putting garlic under their bed pillows for the same purpose.

There are also prohibitions on pregnant women, such as the prohibition of seeing the full moon while pregnant. According to a 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, she should always bow down. I have waited until the completion of *madeung (*postpartum period) for each of my children. Now I have two children. Finally, I am allowed to see the moon. The seeing may make the baby's face red] (M7, 35th).

**Perception of stunting**

Several mothers think that stunting is a shameful condition, and some do not think so. When their children were diagnosed with stunting by the healthcare providers, some mothers tried to improve their children’s condition. However, other mothers used the situation to apply for food assistance from the health 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 is stunted. I worked hard to improve the situation. I gave him good food to increase his weight. Interestingly, some people are proud that their children are diagnosed with stunting. I won’t tell their names. I saw them asking for food assistance as their children’s weight were under the red line. Some people are proud to be given these food items from the health post. In my opinion, the fact that our child is diagnosed with stunting is shameful] (M2, 36th).

This study aims to explore influencing local cultures around the feeding of children with stunting in Aceh. The findings show that there are three groups of cultures: First is the group of cultures that may promote children's and mothers’ health, second is the group of cultures that negatively influence their health, and third is the group of cultures that may have neutral effects.

**Cultures that may positively promote children’s growth**

Included in this group is first: the culture of peucicap. In the earlier days of Acehnese tradition, dates were substituted with honey and fruit juices from mango, rambutan, jackfruit, sugar cane, and sapodilla (Samad, 2015). However, in this study, participants used honey, salt, and sugar.

*Peucicap* is influenced by the teaching of Prophet Muhammad SAW when welcoming a newborn baby called *tahnik*. This *tahnik* is conducted by a spiritual leader who chews yellow dates or wet dates and then a bit of the softened dates is rubbed into the palate of the baby's mouth. An expert on hadith from the Shafi'i school, namely Ibn Hajar al-'Asqanali explained the meaning of tahnik as follows:

*"Tahnik is chewing something then putting it in the baby's mouth and then rubbing it against the roof of the mouth. This is done with the aim that the baby is trained with food, as well as to strengthen it. In the ritual, let the mouth (of the baby) be opened so that (something that is chewed) enters its stomach. The main tahnik is done with dry dates (tamr). If there is no tamr, then with wet dates (ruthab). If there are no dates, can be replaced with something sweet. Of course, honey is more important than anything else”* (al-'Asqalani, 1993).

Al-Bukhari described what The Prophet did in the hadith of Abu Burdah from Abu Musa, he said:

*"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 explores the effect of *tahnik* on pathogenic bacteria shows an interesting result (Pikoli & Yunita, 2018). Dates and breastmilk have lactic acid bacteria (LAB) that can produce bacteriocin that may inhibit the growth of pathogenic bacteria. The study compares the effect of LAB on breastmilk on *Escherichia Coli* agar to the effect of LAB on the combination of dates and breastmilk. The result shows that the LAB from the combination of dates and breastmilk has a 25% stronger effect than that of LAB from breastmilk only. In conclusion, *tahnik* tradition may positively affect a baby’s gut health (Pikoli & Yunita, 2018).

While *tahnik* ceremony uses dates, *peucicap* ceremony conducted by the mother participants uses honey, salt, and sugar. These ingredients are different compared to the dates prescribed by The Prophet. Therefore, it is doubtful that the ceremony would give many benefits to the baby.

The second culture that may promote children's growth is the tradition of breastfeeding with alternating breasts. The mother participants believe that it is important to combine the right breast and the left one, using the analogy of combining "rice" and "water". This alternating strategy may trigger a shorter time for colostrum production in post-delivery time (Zhou, Han, Zhao, & Su, 2021) and increase milk production (Amir, 2014). The breastfeeding process should begin by emptying one of the breasts first and then continuing with the other breast. Emptying breast from milk may also promote better milk production.

Third, the culture of consuming katuk leaves. Studies have provided evidence that consuming katuk leaves [*Sauropus androgynus*] may act as galactagogues that promote breast milk production. These studies show that consuming boiled *katuk* leaves soup does increase breastmilk production (Dolang, Wattimena, Kiriwenno, Cahyawati, & Sillehu, 2021) and optimizes the increase of baby weight (Juliastuti, 2019). Although many cases and small sample studies have proven that consuming katuk leaves may promote milk production, there is a lack of clinical trials to support the use and dosage of katuk extract should be consumed (Primadhani, 2021). In sum, the belief is that consuming katuk leaves may be beneficial to increase breastmilk production, and further studies are needed to support the idea of consuming Sauropus androgynus.

Fourth, the culture of providing bananas as a complimentary food. This is very commonly practiced in Indonesia, including Aceh and beyond. All mother 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 Nusa Tenggara Timur (Nelista & Fembi, 2021) and Sulawesi (Yahyu, 2017). Giving bananas is done by scraping and softening along with rice.

Bananas indeed are good complementary food, easy to prepare, and available throughout the year in tropical countries (Junus & Mamu, 2022). It contains carbohydrates, protein, vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Some studies support the conclusion that providing bananas may increase a baby’s weight (Borbi, Dolan, Siddiq, Hooper, & Sami, 2020).

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 old. The practices of mother participants who gave their less than six months infants bananas may cause diarrhea that might make it hard for them to gain weight and suffer malnutrition. These situations may end up as 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 *ie mom adék* belief.

The mothers argued that they do not have time, or have 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, Admasie, Leka, Darota, & Feleke, 2021). Another study conducted on 45 stunted children also said 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, Hayana, Nurhapipa, Septiani, & Sari, 2021).

Beliefs such as *ie mom adék* or stopping breastfeeding while pregnant are also beliefs shared by all mothers in this study. Mother participants are worried that breastfeeding the older child would interfere with the pregnancy. However, literature provides evidence that tandem breastfeeding, a practice where a mother keeps breastfeeding the older child during pregnancy and the birth of the next child, is not an uncommon practice (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, Gönenç, Korucu, & Çalbayram, 2024).

**Cultures that may have neutral effects on children’s growth**

Some of the Acehnese traditions may have neutral effects. The tradition of *peutrôn tanôh* is one of them. It only intends to express gratitude for the birth of a child and introduce the child to his/her neighbors (Nurfajri, Selian, & Nurlaili, 2016). Also, the prohibition of seeing the moon while pregnant and belief in spirits or jinn may not influence feeding children. However, these beliefs might make mothers feel anxious. There is a study that reveals 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 believe that there are certain foods they consume that might harm their infants, such as spicy foods. A study in Central Kalimantan (Hervilia, Dhini, & Munifa, 2016) finds that mothers avoid spicy foods due to their effects that may cause diarrhea in infants. However, to the best of the authors’ 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 food their mothers consume (Jeong, Goun, Sung Won Park, Yeon Kyung Lee, Sun Yo, 2017).

**Conclusion**

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

In this study context, some cultures may have positive impacts on children’s health, including the tradition of peucicap, the ‘rice and water’ belief that promote bilateral breastfeeding, the culture of giving bananas as complementary feeding, and the tradition of consuming katuk leaves for mothers. However, some other cultures may negatively affect the health of children and contribute to the increasing cases of stunting in Pidie, such as the culture of using unwashed hands when feeding them, and the belief of *ie mom adék* (discontinuing breastfeeding due to pregnancy).

In addition, some cultures may have neutral influences on feeding practices. They are considered to neither promote nor inhibit breastfeeding. These include beliefs in spirits, jinn, carrying garlic, the prohibition of seeing the moon, and beliefs that mothers consuming spicy food or pomegranate leaves may cause or treat baby diarrhea. These beliefs have not been supported by evidence. Therefore, they are considered to have neutral effects on breastfeeding.

The findings of this study call for incorporating culturally sensitive approaches in stunting management. This may be applied by promoting cultures that may have positive impacts on children's health cautiously. For example, providing bananas can be suggested after the baby is six months old. The cultures with potentially negative impacts may be tolerated with several adjustments.

This study is subject to limitations. First, the limited number of participants calls for further studies with a larger number of informants. Second, the longer period of observation may reveal more cultures that are relevant to this topic. Research in the future may use combined methodologies and/or longer periods of engagement with participants to increase the trustworthiness of the findings.

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