



THE NEWBORN BABY CEREMONY IN LABUHAN BATU, SOUTH ACEH

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Abstract:

In the Acehese community, childbirth holds sacred significance. This sacredness is reflected in specific rituals to introduce a newborn to the world. These rituals are seen as both a continuation of the Prophet Muhammad's actions and a way to maintain communication and exchange across generations. The rituals not only honor the birthing process but also provide physical and mental support to the mother after childbirth. This study focuses on the specific ritual of bathing a newborn baby, practised in the village of Blangporoh, South Aceh. Using interviews and field observations, the study reveals that this ritual continues to serve as a symbolic gesture of welcoming and integrating the baby into society. Additionally, the tradition of animal sacrifice (*Akikah*) often accompanies the bathing ritual. The sacrifice (*akikah*) for "redeeming" the child for Allah was performed "as one would redeem mortgaged land" after the ritual bathing. The guardians are in the red to Allah for a child, and this penance counterbalanced that obligation. Additionally, it established a bond between the child's parents. The author emphasizes the crucial role both rituals play in introducing the baby to the community's socio-cultural values from the very beginning of life.

Keywords: rituals, newborn baby, bathing baby, Aceh, Indonesia

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INTRODUCTION

While many first-time mothers are thrilled about pregnancy and envision a positive future, research shows motherhood is not always a bed of roses. According to Harwood, Hawrami, & Miles, (2012) highlight the challenges of adapting to emotional, physical, and social changes during this transition, leading some women to struggle. The burden of parenthood can trigger negative emotions like sadness, anxiety, and anger, suggesting not all women thrive in this new role (Herlany, 2022).

Across cultures, childbirth is revered as a sacred event. Many societies celebrate this momentous occasion with unique traditions, ceremonies, and rituals (Ohaja & Anyim, 2021). These practices serve not only to honor the birth itself but also to integrate the newborn into the community. In line with Platenkamp's theory, these rituals act as a conduit for transmitting social attributes from family members and the wider community to the child, thus solidifying their place within the social fabric (Manan, 2019).

Birth traditions, rituals, and ceremonies mark a pivotal social transition in human life, signifying a change in an individual's social responsibilities and place within the community (Iltis, 2012). For women, childbirth marks a significant shift, transitioning them from wife to mother (Winson, 2017). This event, often perceived as dangerous, is celebrated and commemorated through these practices, which also serve as a means of healing and promoting health for both mother and baby. Studies by Shetkar et al. (2016) have documented the health benefits associated with these traditions in various

cultures. Beyond physical health, these practices also provide psychological support, acting as an anti-anxiety mechanism for both mother and child during the recovery period. Research by Graham, Lobel, and DeLuca highlights the soothing effect of post-birth rituals in South Africa, demonstrating the multifaceted benefits of these traditions (Naicker, 2019).

Different cultures around the world celebrate the birth of a new child through unique practices. For instance, Taiwanese women follow special dietary restrictions for both the mother and the baby (Tseng et al., 2018). In contrast, the Beserman people in Udmurtia, Russia, give their newborns traditional herbal remedies. Moreover, in Nepal, washing rituals for newborns are performed by Nepalese communities. In essence, each culture has its own traditions, rituals, and ceremonies to mark this important life event and support the health and well-being of the mother and child (Subba, 2017; Kc, 2018).

Acehnese people hold childbirth in high regard, viewing it as a sacred process. They observe specific traditions throughout pregnancy and upon the birth of a child. One crucial ritual is bathing the infant, which carries significant meaning. This ritual symbolizes spiritual purification and is believed to offer health benefits. This study explores this practice among the Acehnese community in Blangporoh, South Aceh. It delves into the ritual process and its deeper socio-cultural significance.

METHOD

This study was conducted on the Acehnese people living in the village of Blangporoh, South Aceh. It is done by using a qualitative approach to gain a deep understanding of the rituals of bathing the infant. The data were collected during 2017-2018 using field observations and deep interviews. Then, the analysis was done on the basis of Miles and Huberman's qualitative data analyses: data reduction, data display, and drawing a conclusion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The ritual of bathing the infant consists of several rituals, which were held to support the core ritual: bathing the infant. Those are discussed in the following.

Bathing the Baby

In many villages, within seven days or later after childbirth, a series of rituals are performed. These rituals are called "descending to the water" (*paturun ka aie in Jamee, peutron bak ie* in Acehnese) or *akikah* (Arabic) (Hariyani, 2017). While the former term is more common in rural areas like Gayo and Blangporoh, the latter is preferred by city dwellers and modernists. The specific terms reflect the ritual's purpose: to position the child within a specific spatial order. In some cases, particularly for small or weak babies, the ceremony may be postponed until the 44th day after birth.

The baby is first brought outside and placed on the ground, signifying its connection to the earth. It then shows various elements like the sky, grass, and sand, representing its introduction to the surrounding environment. The baby is then bathed in water, marking its "descent" into the community. This ceremony symbolizes the baby's integration into society and religious life. It's seen as both a re-enactment of Prophet Muhammad's actions and a way to uphold traditional customs that foster intergenerational connections.

The baby's father's side takes responsibility for all expenses related to this ritual. Important timing for a ritual. The ritual to introduce a baby to society must be done at a specific time. If the seventh day after the baby's birth falls on the last Wednesday of the month (known as *rabu habéh* or *huroe na'as*), the ceremony must be postponed until the fourteenth, twenty-first, or twenty-eighth day of the baby's life. This same rule applies to other important events, such as weddings, circumcisions, and starting construction on a new house.

Steps for the ritual:

- 1) Preparation: The midwife helps the mother "descend" to the ground in front of the house.
- 2) Prayer: The midwife recites a specific prayer.

With the utmost respect, I humbly request permission to walk upon your back. Please understand that this is not meant as disrespect but rather a symbolic gesture of my devotion. In return for your generosity, I promise to carry you on my head in the future. I also ask for your forgiveness for any past transgressions.

Following sexual intercourse, a specific prayer or dua must be recited during a cleansing bath. According to the midwife, it is preferable to bathe before dawn. Otherwise, the woman risks the Earth's wrath ("*akan diserapa oleh bumu*" in Acehnese), and her actions will not be blessed ("*beureukat*" in Acehnese), but rather considered sinful due to her continued state of major ritual impurity (*hadas besar*).

After the midwife, the male and then female children carried the baby in a procession to the tomb of Syeikh Muda Waly. The baby's maternal grandmother brought along a tray of *teupông taweue* and a plate of yellow glutinous rice wrapped in heated banana leaves. The mother also carried some money given to her by her husband. Additionally, the baby's maternal aunt brought new clothes and a towel for both the baby and Ummi Halimah, the Syeikh's daughter, waiting near her father's tomb. This procession was known as "*mambawók ka kubah*," meaning "bringing the baby to the dome (Indonesian *kubah*)" of the mosque where the Syeikh's tomb is located.

At the well near the Syeikh's tomb, the baby was cleansed in a ritual bath. The Syeikh's daughter drew water from the well, considered blessed (*Jamee barakaik*), and the midwife added lime juice. While the mother's sister uttered "*bismillah*," this special water was poured over the baby's body.

After the cleansing ritual, the midwife dries the baby, and the grandmother takes it to the Syeikh's tomb. There, the baby is "cooled" (*dipeusijuek*) while being breastfed. Gifts are bestowed upon the baby with wishes for its future well-being. Yellow glutinous rice (*bu leukat kuneng*) is placed behind each ear while uttering "*bismillah*" and expressing hope that knowledge will stick to the baby like the sticky rice (*lagu nasi kunyik ko malakèk-lakèk, bak malakèklah apo yang banyak ko baraja isuk*). From a tray, husked and unhusked rice (*padi* or *padé*) are sprinkled over the baby, followed by rice flour mixed with water (*teupông taweue*) using a bunch of leaves.

In the final step, the baby is gently cradled in a cotton cloth while a soft "*bismillah*" is spoken over it at the foot of the Syeikh's tombstone. The mother and grandmother each hold an end of the cloth, swinging the baby like a cradle (*ayôn ija*) while seeking blessings (*seulawet*) for the Prophet Muhammad and his family. The midwife touches the foot of the tombstone with her right hand, then slowly touches the baby's face, hoping to inspire the child to follow in the Syeikh's footsteps of religious devotion. As a symbolic certificate bearing the parents' names, the mother gives money to the midwife, who then places some in the baby's hand.

In the Blangporoh village, there is another tradition related to *peutron bak* ie. If the newborn baby is a girl, the father will entrust her to a skilled practitioner of *silat* (traditional self-defence) for training. This practice has been observed for generations.

In this traditional ritual, a pious man known as an "*ureueng malém*" carries the newborn girl from the house and out into the open air. He balances the baby securely on his hip, often using a cloth sling for support, while another pious man protects her from the sun with an umbrella. To symbolize the baby's future bravery and resilience, a coconut is split open over the umbrella, allowing the milk to drip down. This represents the hope that she will not be afraid of rain or thunder. Finally, the split coconut is thrown over the roof and onto the backside of the house, symbolizing the discarding of any potential illnesses and ensuring the baby's good health.

In the case of a male newborn, a different ritual takes place. A highly respected and skilled swordsman, clothed in traditional Acehnese attire, carries the baby on his left hip, supported by his arm. While holding a sword in his right hand, he cuts down seven banana stalks that the baby's father had planted in front of the house. Each stalk is cut with a specific number of strokes, increasing from one to seven, symbolizing the child's growing strength and bravery. These banana stalks represent enemies, and the baby's reaction during the cutting holds meaning for his future:

- 1) If the baby remains awake, it signifies he will become fierce and courageous.
- 2) If he sleeps, it suggests he will be patient and calm in life.
- 3) Crying during the ritual is interpreted as a sign of a short lifespan.

Following the bath, a ram is sacrificed as an "*akikah*" to mark this special occasion.

Akikah

A ritual sacrifice, known as "*akikah*," was performed at approximately 9 AM after the baby girl's ritual bath at the Sheikh's well. Following local tradition, only one ram was sacrificed as this was a female child; two would have been offered for a boy. The ceremony took place in front of the baby's home. The *akikah*, derived from the Arabic word "*aqîqa*," is believed to follow the example of Prophet Muhammad, who offered two sheep for each of his grandsons, Hasan and Husayn. This ritual aims to strengthen the bond between a newborn and its parents. Local beliefs hold that the sacrificed animal grants a future material benefit on the Day of Judgment. On that day, the baby designated as the beneficiary will be able to ride the sacrificed animal as a vehicle to the judgment site, carrying a certificate bearing its parents' names, and will reunite with them there.

In preparation for the *akikah* ceremony, the baby's father lovingly washed the ram, ensuring its cleanliness. Once its fleece was dry, the mother adorned its head with a gentle touch, applying hair cream and meticulously combing its wool. To complete the ritualistic grooming, a fragrant perfume was sprayed upon its body, leaving a pleasant aroma. Finally, a mirror was strategically placed before the ram, allowing it to witness its own reflection, symbolizing clarity and self-awareness on this momentous occasion.

After feeding the ram with steamed glutinous rice and cakes, the baby's paternal cousin is brought over a covered tray called a "*dalông*" or "*talam*." This tray contained the tools needed for the "*peusijuëk*" ritual, which involves "cooling" the slaughtered ram.

The ritual begins by mixing rice grains and unhusked rice in a basin to create a mixture called "*breueh padé*." This mixture is then sprinkled over the ram with a whisk during the "cooling" process. The *breueh padé* is said to hold multiple symbolic meanings. It represents both fruitfulness and generosity, as it nourishes other living creatures when scattered. Additionally, it symbolizes humility and nobility, signifying a lack of arrogance and a sense of dignity.

Along with the rice mixture, the tray also contains a bunch of three types of leaves tied together and placed in a bowl with rice flour. These leaves were used to whisk the rice flour liquid onto the ram during the cooling ritual. Each leaf carries a unique symbolic meaning:

- 1) *Naleueng Sambô*: With its strong roots that survive in any condition, this grass symbolizes steadfast commitment (*istiqamah*), unwavering faith, and the "pin of the world" (*labang donya*).
- 2) *Cocor Bèbèk*: This leaf represents a cool household and society, reflecting a peaceful and worry-free heart. It is believed that many families lack harmony because they were not properly "cooled" through the *peusijuëk* ritual during marriage.
- 3) *Manèk Manòe*: This leaf signifies fertility, and the combination of all three leaves together symbolizes unity and harmony within a household.

The tray is yellow glutinous rice, a special offering for the ram and a treat for guests during the cooling ceremony. This rice is coloured yellow with turmeric and symbolizes unity due to its sticky nature, representing strong bonds between the ram, the baby, and the parents. The final item on the tray is a mixture of rice flour and water, called "*teupông taweue*," placed alongside the bunch of leaves. This mixture is then sprinkled onto the ram with the leaves during the cooling ritual, symbolizing unity and a peaceful state.

The *akikah* ceremony witnessed a special ritual of "cooling" the ram performed by seven individuals: the religious leader (Imam) and the baby's immediate and extended family. Notably, this number carries deeper meaning as a prime number, representing the singularity and divine nature of Allah. There are differing views on the significance of the number of people involved in the "cooling" ritual. Some believe that seven is chosen because it is unique and favored by Allah. Others suggest that the number should be odd and prime, representing healing and completeness. After the ritual, the baby's paternal uncle brings the *akikah* ram to a pre-dug hole in the front yard. The baby's maternal great-grandmother then presents another tray containing various items wrapped in a white cloth. These items symbolize preparing the baby for the afterlife, although they are not complete. It is believed that Allah will provide for the missing items. The white cloth represents purity and sincerity, and the money placed at each end symbolizes payment for completing the baby's afterlife preparations.

The *akikah* ram is prepared for sacrifice. The baby's father presents a sharp knife to the Imam, holding the rope around the ram's neck with his other hand. He declares, "This is the *akikah* ram for my daughter, Nadia." The Imam accepts the offer. The baby's paternal uncle firmly grasps the ram's feet. Following tradition, the Imam utters the bismillah and recites the shahada, the Islamic confession of faith. He dedicates the ram as the *akikah* offering for Nadia, daughter of Jamlis. He then repeats the bismillah and proclaims "*Allahu Akbar*" three times. With complete dedication, he swiftly cuts the ram's throat.

While the *akikah* ram underwent the ritual sacrifice, a white cloth was held over it. This cloth held significant meaning, symbolizing an umbrella for the baby in the hereafter. Four individuals held the cloth at its corners, each representing a specific role in the baby's life:

- 1) Front right: The baby's mother, representing her nurturing and protective role.
- 2) Front left: The baby's father, representing his strength and guidance.
- 3) Back right: The baby's maternal great-grandmother, representing wisdom and ancestral connection.
- 4) Back left: The baby's maternal grandmother, representing love and support.

This ritual and the symbolism associated with the white cloth showcase the collective hope and care bestowed upon the baby by their loved ones. After the sacrifice, the white cloth containing the "*ayapan*" items was rolled up and presented to the Imam by the baby's maternal grandfather. The Imam acknowledged its receipt.

The contents of the *ayapan* were then divided among four individuals: the Imam, the preacher, the *muazzin* (who calls people to prayer), and the mosque caretaker. During the sacrifice, the village head only observed the process. Once guests arrive, he assumes the role of welcoming them and inviting them to partake in the food provided by the family. Meanwhile, the midwife remains in the mother's room to "receive" and accompany female guests attending the *akikah* ceremony.

Opinions differ on the purpose of the akikah sacrifice. Some believe it benefits the poor, while others see it as a symbolic offering for the baby's well-being in the afterlife. In Blangporoh, tradition dictates that the midwife receives the front right leg of the sacrificed ram as part of the ritual's "perfection." This ensures the baby's "horse" in the afterlife has four legs, symbolizing a complete and blessed journey. Others view it as payment for the midwife's invaluable assistance during childbirth and postpartum care.

Beyond the sacrificed ram's front right leg, the midwife receives a complete spice set called "*aweuh complete*" from the baby's maternal grandmother. Traditionally given in Blangporoh village, this set includes rice, coconut, lemons, salt, various spices, and herbs necessary for cooking the gifted leg of lamb.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have taken a gander at the custom of *peutron bakie* "washing" an infant in Blangporoh town: We have seen it basically as a custom in real life. A new child was acquainted with its general surroundings and with Blangporoh family life through this custom. This was viewed as a re-order of the Prophet Muhammad's activities in the seventh 100 years and a continuation of the town standards to protect the relations of communications and trades across ages. The child was taken outside the house and put with its feet on the earth to allow it to see the sky interestingly, addressing the, generally speaking, spatial surroundings in which the house is arranged. The child was washed with well water, which is accepted to contain "gifts" beginning from the petitions of the previous Syeikh. From that point forward, gifts were given to the child, conveying wishes for its prosperity. The yellow glutinous rice was set behind the right and the left ears, addressing information the child would acquire later." With a heap of uniquely picked leaves, rice flour blended with water was sprinkled over the child. The baby was supported in a cotton material at the feet of the Syeikh's headstone. Subsequent to having contacted the foot of the gravestone, the Syeikh's little girl contacted the baby's face so it would be inspired "to perform her strict responsibilities as the Syeikh did". The mother gave cash to the midwife, And she thus put some cash in the child's hand as a "sign that the child has its folks' name". This service symbolised the "drop" of the child into society. From this second on, the new child is given social acknowledgment, and its custom persona is laid out inside the local area and corresponds to the founding progenitor of the town, the Syeikh. The baby's first encounter with "mother" earth is marked by the *peutron bai* ie ceremony, which is regarded as a significant moment in its development. The child isn't permitted to lie or to sit on the ground until such contact has been properly pre-arranged by a number of rituals, of which a strict banquet frames a significant part of the earth, which contains to such an extent "gift", and holds so much that is insidious. This custom can be portrayed as an "initiatorial ritual". It simultaneously evokes and implements a relationship of ongoing well-being between the Blangporoh social life and the village's founding ancestor, exposing the child to important aspects of everyday life and the natural world. The sacrifice (*akikah*) for "redeeming" the child for Allah was performed "as one would redeem mortgaged land" after the ritual bathing. The guardians are in the red to Allah for a child, and this penance counterbalanced that obligation. Additionally, it established a bond between the child's parents. The *akikah* slam provided a future gift for the child. On Judgment Day, the baby named as an *akikah* beneficiary will be able to look for its parents and ride on the sacrificial animal to the place of judgment with the certificate bearing their parents' names.

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