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The Belimbur Tradition through an Anthropological Lens: Exploring Social-Emotional Experiences in Early Childhood

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Abstract

The Belimbur tradition is part of the customary activities of the Erau cultural celebration in Kutai Kartanegara, East Kalimantan, and contains social and cultural meanings that are transmitted across generations. This study aims to explore children's social-emotional experiences during participation in the Belimbur tradition from an anthropological and sociocultural perspective. A qualitative approach was employed using participant observation, interviews, and literature review. The study was conducted in Tenggarong, Kutai Kartanegara, in September 2025, involving three children aged five to six years, three parents, and one cultural figure. The researcher participated in the Belimbur activity and observed children's interactions and responses during the event. Interviews were documented through written notes. The findings indicate that participation in Belimbur provided opportunities for children to interact with peers and adults, cooperate in a communal activity, express emotions, respond to unfamiliar situations, and show curiosity within the cultural setting. Adult guidance was also evident, particularly when children experienced hesitation or discomfort following unexpected water splashes. These findings suggest that Belimbur provided a culturally meaningful setting for children's social-emotional experiences through direct participation and interaction with others. The findings highlight the potential of local cultural practices as contextual resources for early childhood education while recognizing that the findings are situated within the specific cultural context of Kutai Kartanegara.

Keywords: belimbur tradition; cultural anthropology; social-emotional development; early childhood

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1. Introduction

Indonesia, as a multicultural nation, possesses a rich diversity of traditions and cultures that function not only as social identity markers but also as vehicles for value-based education. One of the local traditions that has been preserved to this day is the Erau traditional ceremony in Kutai Kartanegara, East Kalimantan.

From a cultural and historical perspective, Kutai Kartanegara has a long history as a center of political and cultural development in East Kalimantan. The Kutai Kartanegara Ing Martadipura kingdom was established in the early thirteenth century and developed into an important center of Kutai culture. Islam later became an important part of the political and cultural history of the Kutai Kartanegara Sultanate. Its cultural heritage continues to be maintained through traditional ceremonies, artistic performances, customary practices, and other forms of cultural expression (Yulianingrum et al., 2024).

Erau is one of the traditional ceremonies that holds significant value and is carefully preserved by the people of Kutai Kartanegara. The Erau ceremony consists of a series of ritual stages, including the Beluluh ceremony, which is held over four nights; the Menjamu Benua ceremony; and the Merangin ceremony, which typically takes place over three nights. In addition, there are events such as the International Cultural Parade, the Mendirikan Ayu ritual, the four-night Malam Bepelas, international

cultural performances, Beseprah (a communal dining tradition), and a closing ceremony that includes the Mengulur Naga procession and the Belimbur ritual (Ananda & Widianto, 2021).

In this context, the Belimbur tradition is part of the series of customary events within the Erau Festival, symbolizing spiritual and social purification, as well as the community's expression of gratitude for the successful implementation of traditional ceremonies. In the context of this study, several children aged five to six years were observed participating in the Belimbur activity under the accompaniment of their parents. Infants and very young children are generally not encouraged to participate because of concerns about their health and safety, particularly the risk of water entering the nose or airway during the water-splashing activity. There is no strict age limit for participation; however, in practice, children who participate are generally around four years of age and above and are expected to remain under the supervision and protection of adults throughout the activity. Their participation provided opportunities for interaction with peers and adults, exposure to culturally shared practices, and direct experiences of communal activities. Rather than assuming that participation automatically produces developmental changes, the present study focuses on the social-emotional experiences that emerged during children's participation, including interaction, cooperation, emotional expression, tolerance, and responses to social situations.

However, previous studies concerning the Belimbur tradition have predominantly examined its cultural, religious, historical, and community dimensions (Ananda & Widianto, 2021) , with limited attention to children's participation and social-emotional experiences during the tradition. The existing literature has also tended to emphasize adult perspectives, such as those of parents and cultural figures. Therefore, there is a need for qualitative research that examines children's observable participation and interactions within this local cultural practice while considering the roles of family and community. This focus does not seek to represent children's subjective perspectives directly, but rather to describe their observable social-emotional experiences within a culturally meaningful environment

This study focuses specifically on the participation of young children in the Belimbur tradition in Kutai Kartanegara and the social-emotional experiences observed during their participation. Social-emotional development is a vital aspect of early childhood education (ECE), encompassing children's ability to understand and manage emotions, establish social relationships, and adapt to various situations (Hurlock, 1991). Children with healthy social-emotional development tend to adapt more easily, show empathy, and possess good self-regulation skills (Berk, 2006). Within this context, local traditions such as Belimbur can provide meaningful environments in which children encounter social interaction and culturally valued behaviours.

Research has highlighted the importance of social and cultural interaction in children's social-emotional experiences. (Rubin, 1998) emphasizes the importance of cultural context in understanding child development. From this perspective, cultural practices such as Belimbur may provide children with opportunities to encounter social-emotional values within their community.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of social interaction in children's development of empathy and other social competencies (Arhami & Prasetiyawati, 2023). Local cultural activities may provide contexts in which children encounter such interactions naturally. Traditions also create opportunities for children to interact with family and community members, which may contribute to children's sense of social security and belonging (Bretherton, 1992). A strong sense of attachment is associated with children's sense of security and confidence in facing social situations (Diananda, 2020).

The Belimbur tradition therefore provides an important context for examining the relationship between local cultural practices and children's social-emotional experiences. This study aims to explore the social-emotional behaviours and experiences observed among young children during their participation in Belimbur, as well as the roles of parents and community members in supporting children's participation. Through a qualitative approach informed by social-emotional and sociocultural perspectives, the study seeks to contribute to a more contextual understanding of how local cultural practices may function as environments for social learning in early childhood.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the cultural meanings of the Belimbur tradition and the social-emotional experiences observed among young children during their participation. The study focused on naturally occurring interactions, children's responses, and the roles of family and community within the cultural setting rather than measuring changes in children's developmental outcomes.

In conducting this research, the researchers integrated two main approaches: the anthropological approach and the sociocultural approach. The anthropological approach was used to understand the cultural context, symbolism, and social history underlying the Belimbur tradition, as well as how it embodies values that shape the identity and spirituality of the community. Meanwhile, the sociocultural approach, as conceptualized by Lev Vygotsky, was applied to examine how children's interactions with their environment including family and cultural community contribute to their social and emotional development.

The study was conducted in Tenggarong, Kutai Kartanegara, East Kalimantan, in September 2025, at the central area of the Erau activities where the Belimbur tradition was conducted. The participants consisted of three children, three parents, and one cultural figure. The children observed were two five-year-old children and one six-year-old child. The children participated in the activity while accompanied by their parents.

The three children were treated as the primary subjects of observation, while the parents and cultural figure served as supporting informants. The parents provided contextual information regarding their children's participation, while the cultural figure provided information concerning the cultural meaning and continuity of the Belimbur tradition.

For ethical purposes, the children's identities are presented using codes: C1 and C2 for the five-year-old children and C3 for the six-year-old child. Parents are identified as P1, P2, and P3, while the cultural figure is identified as CF1.

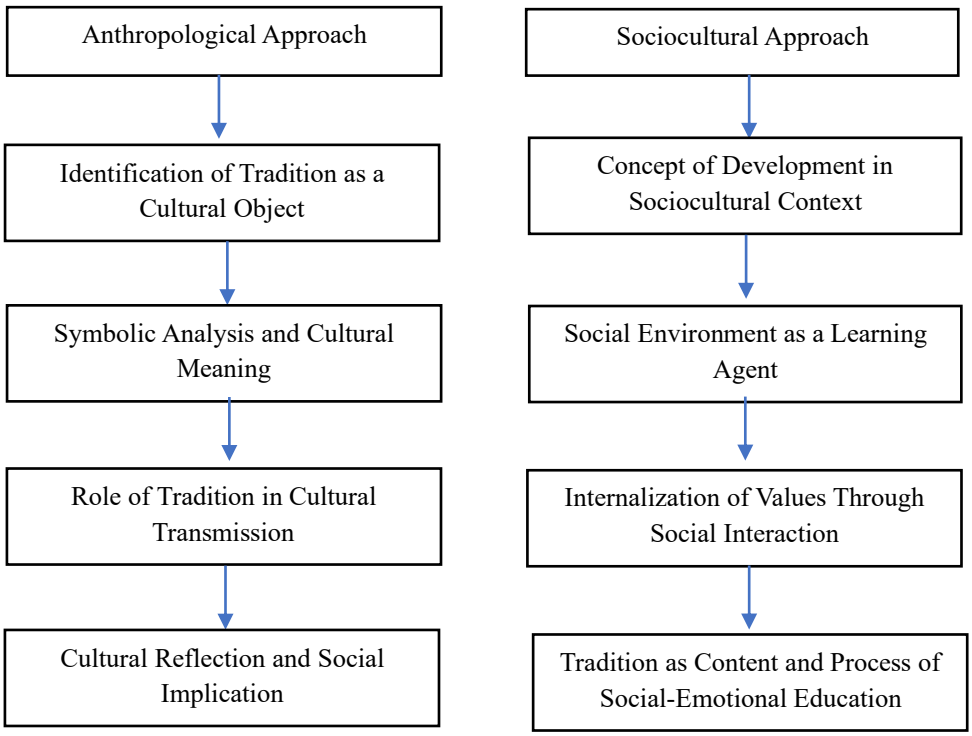


Figure 1
Flow of the Anthropological and Sociocultural Approaches

Data were collected through participant observation, interviews, and literature review. Participant observation was conducted during the implementation of the Belimbur tradition in Tenggarong. The researcher participated in the activity and directly experienced the social environment of the tradition while observing the children's participation, interactions, emotional responses, and behaviour.

The observation focused on children's interactions with peers and adults, cooperation, emotional expression, tolerance, self-control, willingness to participate, and responses to unfamiliar or unexpected situations. The researcher also observed the ways in which parents accompanied and guided their children during the activity.

Interviews were conducted with three parents and one cultural figure. The interviews were documented through written notes rather than audio or video recordings. Therefore, interview information is presented in the form of summarized accounts rather than verbatim quotations. No photographs or video recordings of the children were taken during the study. Oral consent was obtained from the children's parents for the observation. A literature review was also conducted to support the interpretation of the cultural and developmental dimensions of the findings

The collected data were analysed through a qualitative process involving data reduction, categorization, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. First, observation notes and interview notes were reviewed and reduced to information relevant to children's social-emotional experiences and the cultural meanings of the Belimbur tradition. Second, relevant data were categorized into several themes, including peer interaction, cooperation and togetherness, emotional expression and self-control, tolerance, curiosity, and family and community involvement. Third, the themes were interpreted using sociocultural and anthropological perspectives. Finally, the findings were synthesized into a descriptive interpretation of children's participation and the cultural context in which their social-emotional experiences occurred.

3. Results

The results are organized into three main aspects: the meaning and cultural learning embedded in the Belimbur tradition, children's social and emotional responses during participation, and the involvement of family and community in transmitting the values of the tradition. These findings are presented based on observations and information obtained from participants concerning children's experiences and interactions during the Belimbur tradition.

3.1 The Meaning and Learning Behind the Belimbur Tradition

The Belimbur tradition forms part of the closing activities of the Erau cultural celebration in Kutai Kartanegara. In the observed setting, community members participated in a communal water-splashing activity involving interaction among children, adults, and other community members. The three children observed in this study participated while accompanied by their parents. The cultural meaning of Belimbur is associated with communal participation, gratitude, and symbolic purification within the Erau tradition (Devi, 2020). However, in the context of the present study, the focus was not on establishing the historical origin of the tradition but on observing how children participated in the activity and interacted with others within this cultural setting

During the activity, the children were observed interacting with other children and adults. They shared the activity space and participated in water play alongside other participants. Cooperation was visible when children participated together and responded to one another during the activity. The children also encountered behavioural expectations from their parents. Parents accompanied the children, provided reminders concerning appropriate participation, and helped them respond to situations that they considered unfamiliar or uncomfortable. These interactions indicate that children's

participation was supported by adult guidance rather than occurring independently. The activity also provided opportunities for children to encounter other members of the community. Through direct participation, children experienced the communal nature of the tradition and became involved in a cultural activity shared by different generations.

The parents' accounts indicated that their children showed different responses during participation. The children generally appeared interested in the activity, but their emotional responses varied depending on the situation. When unexpectedly splashed with water, some children showed hesitation or temporary discomfort before continuing the activity with parental support. This observation suggests that participation involved opportunities for children to experience and respond to different emotional situations rather than producing uniformly positive emotional responses.

To this day, the philosophy embedded in the Belimbur tradition continues to be held in high regard by the community. Although modern life has evolved and become increasingly individualistic, the people of Kutai remain committed to preserving the tradition because they believe that the noble values passed down by their ancestors are still relevant and vital. Amid the current of modernization, Belimbur serves as a reminder of the importance of togetherness, spiritual purification, and a sense of shared identity. It also strengthens cultural continuity between generations, ensuring that these values are not lost over time. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, the preservation of the Belimbur tradition can be explained through Bronislaw Malinowski's functionalism, which posits that each cultural element serves to fulfil individual needs whether biological, psychological, or social (Barnard, 2000). In this context, Belimbur fulfills the needs for identity, social connection, and spiritual well-being. Additionally, Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism (Taum, 2014) suggests that symbols and rituals reflect the cognitive structures of a society. The Belimbur water ritual, therefore, is not merely symbolic but represents the Kutai people's way of understanding life, purity, and human relationships.

Furthermore, based on the theory of enculturation in anthropology (Saputra et al., 2024), the internalization of cultural values through activities like Belimbur is an effective way to transmit culture from older to younger generations. Children involved in this tradition do not simply learn social norms; they also begin to see themselves as part of a collective identity. This strengthens their attachment to local culture and ensures the continuity of cultural values in the face of globalization.

In this regard, preserving the Belimbur tradition is not merely an act of romanticizing the past it is a conscious effort to maintain cultural identity and continuity amid a rapidly changing and homogenizing modern world.

3.2 Children's Social-Emotional Experiences During Belimbur Participation

The Belimbur tradition is not only rooted in cultural heritage and ancestral rituals, but it is also closely linked to child development specifically, to the development of social and emotional competencies. Social-emotional development in children refers to the process through which they learn to adapt their behaviour in accordance with the rules and norms of their social environment (Femmi, 2015). In other words, social development is a child's journey of adjusting to the values, morals, and traditions within a group or community. This process is strongly influenced by parental guidance, especially in introducing various aspects of social life and societal norms (Indanah & Yulisetyaningrum, 2019).

The observations indicated several social-emotional experiences during the children's participation in Belimbur. These included willingness to interact with others, cooperation, emotional expression, tolerance, and responses to unexpected situations. The children also showed curiosity toward the activity and its social environment.

Several contextual factors appeared to support children's participation in the Belimbur activity. First, the communal and playful atmosphere provided opportunities for children to express themselves through interaction and participation in the activity. Second, the presence and involvement of parents

and other adults provided immediate social and emotional support, particularly when children encountered unfamiliar or uncomfortable situations. Third, the activity took place within a culturally meaningful context in which children participated alongside family members, peers, and other members of the community. These conditions provided opportunities for children to experience social interaction and emotional expression within a shared cultural environment.

According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, early childhood is associated with the stage of initiative versus guilt, during which children begin to explore their environment, develop initiative, and take an increasingly active role in social activities In the context of Belimbur, some children were observed initiating interaction with others and participating actively in the water-splashing activity. These observations can be understood as examples of children's social participation and initiative within the activity, rather than as evidence of a particular level of psychosocial development.

Additionally, Martin Seligman's PERMA model (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement) asserts that positive emotions, active engagement, and warm social relationships are essential for experiencing happiness (Arroisi et al., 2023). Several of these elements were observable during Belimbur, particularly children's positive emotional expressions, engagement in the activity, and interactions with others. The children's laughter, enthusiasm, and willingness to participate illustrate the positive emotional and engagement dimensions described in the PERMA framework, while their interactions with parents, peers, and community members reflect the relational dimension of the model.

Parents also reported that their children showed curiosity about local traditions and their cultural meanings. According to the parents' accounts, some children asked questions about the origin of the tradition, why people splash water, and the meaning of the activity. Such responses indicate children's interest in understanding the cultural practice they had experienced. (Renner, 2006) describes curiosity as an internal motivation to seek new information and engage in exploration. (Litman & Spielberger, 2003) similarly conceptualize curiosity as a motivation to seek new knowledge and sensory experiences. Within the context of Belimbur, children's questions therefore provided opportunities for parents to introduce cultural knowledge and explain the meaning of the tradition.

The parents also described children's willingness to interact with neighbours and peers during and around the period of participation in Belimbur. Some parents said that their children became more willing to greet neighbours or participate in play with peers outside the home. These accounts suggest that participation in the communal activity provided opportunities for children to encounter and interact with people beyond their immediate family. However, because these observations were based on parent reports and were not assessed using a longitudinal or standardized measure, they should not be interpreted as evidence of a long-term developmental effect of Belimbur participation.

The Belimbur tradition elicited varied emotional responses among the children. Positive emotions such as excitement, laughter, and enthusiasm were observed when children interacted with peers and participated in the water-splashing activity. At the same time, not all responses were positive or immediate. When unexpectedly splashed with water, some children showed hesitation or discomfort and moved closer to their parents before continuing the activity. These responses indicate that participation in Belimbur involved different emotional experiences and opportunities for children to respond to unfamiliar or unexpected situations.

From a social perspective, the children interacted with peers, parents, and other participants within the communal setting. They shared the activity space and responded to others during the water-splashing activity. The children also received guidance from their parents when participating in situations that were unfamiliar or unexpected. These observations suggest that Belimbur provided opportunities for social interaction and participation in a communal environment. However, the observed responses should be understood as contextual experiences rather than evidence of measurable improvement in children's social-emotional development

3.3 Family and Community Involvement in Cultural Transmission

The Belimbur tradition involves several social environments that interact in children's experiences. From Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, the family represents an important microsystem because parents interact directly with children and provide immediate guidance. The relationships between children's family experiences and the wider community context can be understood as part of the mesosystem, particularly when family and community participation intersect during cultural activities (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). Thus, the children's experiences during Belimbur were shaped not only by the immediate parent-child relationship but also by interactions within the broader communal setting.

From an anthropological perspective, the family plays an important role in the process of enculturation through which children encounter and learn cultural values from an early age. In the context of Belimbur, parents accompanied their children during the activity and provided guidance when children encountered unfamiliar or uncomfortable situations. Parents also helped children understand aspects of the tradition and participate appropriately in the communal activity. Thus, family and community provided important social contexts through which children encountered the meanings and practices associated with Belimbur. The continued participation of children in the tradition also provides opportunities for cultural practices to be experienced across generations.

This participation provides children with opportunities for contextual and experience-based learning within their cultural environment. Rather than indicating a direct positive impact on social-emotional development, children's participation can be understood as an opportunity to encounter social interaction, emotional expression, cooperation, and culturally shared practices. In this regard, parental accompaniment is particularly important because children may require adult support when participating in a communal activity involving unfamiliar people and unexpected situations.

Furthermore, the family serves as an important context for the transmission of cultural values. Within the context of Belimbur, parents did not merely accompany their children physically but also provided explanations, guidance, and emotional support during the activity. Through these forms of interaction, children were exposed to values associated with togetherness, cooperation, tolerance, and participation in community life. Parents' involvement may therefore support children's familiarity with local cultural practices and provide a context in which cultural values are encountered through direct experience.

UNESCO, in its framework of intangible cultural heritage emphasizes the importance of traditions as a form of "living heritage" (UNESCO, 2018). From this perspective, Belimbur can be understood as a cross-generational cultural practice in which children encounter local traditions through direct participation alongside adults and other community members. Children therefore participate not only as recipients of cultural knowledge but also as members of the community who experience and engage with the continuation of the tradition. However, the present study does not establish the extent to which such participation leads to long-term cultural transmission or changes in children's social-emotional development.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the Belimbur tradition provides a culturally meaningful context in which children encounter social-emotional experiences. Children's participation was associated with cooperation, peer interaction, tolerance, emotional expression, self-control, and curiosity toward local cultural practices. These findings are consistent with the view that children's social-emotional experiences are shaped through interaction with their social environment (Femmi, 2015), while extending this perspective by illustrating how local cultural traditions can provide naturally occurring contexts for social learning. Rather than demonstrating developmental improvement, the

findings show how social-emotional behaviours can emerge through children's participation in culturally meaningful activities involving peers, parents, and the wider community.

The findings can be interpreted through Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through observation, modelling, and interaction. During Belimbur, children participate in activities involving cooperation, sharing, and interaction with others. These experiences provide opportunities for children to observe and practice social behaviours within an authentic social environment. This interpretation is consistent with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes observation and modelling as mechanisms through which children may acquire social behaviours (Lesilolo, 2019). In the present study, Belimbur provided opportunities for children to observe and participate in social behaviours within an authentic cultural environment.

The findings are also consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and adult guidance in children's learning and development. During Belimbur, parents and other adults guide children regarding appropriate participation, safety, and interaction. Such guidance places children's learning within a social and cultural context rather than treating development as an exclusively individual process. The observed adult guidance is consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and guidance in children's learning and development (Ardania et al., 2024). In this study, parental guidance appeared particularly relevant when children encountered unfamiliar or uncomfortable situations during the activity. The children's active participation can also be understood in relation to Erikson's perspective on initiative during early childhood. Children's willingness to participate, interact, and initiate play provides opportunities to exercise initiative within a socially supportive environment (Mokalu & Boangmanalu, 2021). In addition, the positive emotional experiences observed during Belimbur correspond with the dimensions of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, and meaning discussed in the PERMA framework (Arroisi et al., 2023).

An important contribution of this study is its connection between children's social-emotional development and the transmission of cultural values. The Belimbur tradition contains values related to togetherness, cooperation, tolerance, responsibility, and emotional control, which children encounter through participation rather than only through verbal instruction. From Malinowski's functionalist perspective, cultural practices fulfil social and psychological functions within a community (Barnard, 2000). Belimbur can therefore be understood not only as a ceremonial practice but also as a mechanism that reinforces social connection and collective identity. From Lévi-Strauss's structural perspective, the water ritual also carries symbolic meanings related to purification and relationships within the community (Taum, 2014). These meanings provide children with opportunities to encounter cultural symbols through direct experience.

This process is closely related to enculturation, through which younger generations learn and internalize the values and meanings of their cultural environment. (Saputra et al., 2024)emphasize the importance of cultural processes in transmitting values across generations. Children's participation in Belimbur may contribute to cultural continuity by allowing them to experience the tradition directly and become familiar with its associated values. This finding contributes to a broader understanding of cultural heritage by positioning children not merely as recipients of tradition but as participants in its continuation. The tradition consequently functions as a form of living cultural learning in which cultural identity and social values are experienced through participation.

The involvement of family and community further strengthens this process. The findings show that parents accompany children, provide guidance, and introduce them to the meaning of the tradition, while the wider community provides opportunities for interaction with peers and adults. This can be understood through Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, which positions children's development within interconnected social environments, particularly the family and wider community (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). Theoretically, these findings contribute to an integrated understanding of early childhood

social-emotional development by connecting developmental perspectives with cultural anthropology. Social-emotional competencies can therefore be understood not only as individual developmental characteristics but also as competencies shaped through participation in culturally meaningful relationships and environments.

The findings also have practical implications for educators, parents, researchers, and community stakeholders. For early childhood educators, local cultural traditions can serve as contextual resources for learning activities related to cooperation, empathy, tolerance, communication, emotional expression, and cultural identity. Teachers can connect children's cultural experiences with classroom activities through storytelling, discussion, role play, and other developmentally appropriate activities. Parents can strengthen children's learning by accompanying them during cultural activities, explaining cultural meanings, and modelling positive social behaviour. For communities and cultural stakeholders, providing safe and inclusive opportunities for children's participation may support cultural continuity while providing children with opportunities for social interaction and emotional experiences within the cultural setting.

This study has several limitations. First, the number of children observed was limited to three children aged five to six years within one cultural setting in Tenggarong. Therefore, the findings should be understood as context-specific qualitative observations rather than generalizable evidence. Second, interviews were conducted with three parents and one cultural figure, but the interviews were documented through written notes rather than audio recordings. Consequently, the study does not present verbatim interview quotations. Third, the study did not directly interview children or use standardized instruments to measure social-emotional development. Therefore, the findings describe observable social-emotional experiences and contextual learning opportunities rather than measurable developmental changes. Future research may involve a larger number of participants, incorporate age-appropriate methods for obtaining children's perspectives, and combine qualitative observation with developmental assessment.

5. Conclusion

The Belimbur tradition represents an important form of cultural heritage within the Kutai Kartanegara community and provides a culturally meaningful environment in which children can participate alongside family, peers, and other community members. Based on observations of three children aged five to six years, participation in the tradition was associated with opportunities for social interaction, cooperation, emotional expression, tolerance, and responses to unexpected social situations.

The findings also show that children's emotional responses were not uniformly positive. Some children demonstrated hesitation or discomfort when unexpectedly splashed with water and required parental support before continuing the activity. This indicates that participation in a cultural tradition may involve diverse emotional experiences and opportunities for children to respond to unfamiliar situations.

Family and community involvement were important contextual elements of the children's participation. Parents provided immediate guidance and emotional support, while the wider cultural environment provided opportunities for interaction and exposure to local traditions. From an anthropological and sociocultural perspective, such participation may contribute to children's familiarity with cultural values through direct experience.

However, this study does not establish a causal relationship between participation in Belimbur and children's social-emotional development. The findings are based on three children in one cultural setting and on interviews documented through written notes. Therefore, the findings should be understood as context-specific qualitative evidence of children's social-emotional experiences during cultural participation. Future research may involve larger samples, direct age-appropriate exploration of

children's perspectives, and additional developmental measures to examine the relationship between cultural participation and social-emotional development more comprehensively.

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