



The Development of Children's Psychology in the Orang Rimba Community: A Cultural Psychological Analysis in Kedundung Muda Jambi

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ABSTRACT

Children's psychosocial development is inseparable from the cultural and ecological environments that structure their daily lives. This study investigates the psychosocial development of Orang Rimba children in the Kedundung Muda community of Jambi through a cultural psychology framework, arguing that culturally embedded practices remain central to understanding developmental trajectories in Indigenous contexts. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, the study integrates a literature review with secondary ethnographic analysis of caregiving norms, social organization, and cultural interaction within Orang Rimba society. The findings demonstrate that children's psychosocial development is shaped not only by customary values, kinship relations, and ecological engagements but also by the community's adaptive strategies in negotiating external pressures such as state policies, formal schooling, and forest ecological change. These pressures generate identity tensions, role ambiguities, and shifts in caregiving practices, revealing the fragility and resilience of Indigenous developmental systems under structural transformation. The study contends that culturally informed frameworks are indispensable for designing educational and social interventions that respect and sustain Indigenous lifeworlds.

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INTRODUCTION

The psychosocial development of children is fundamentally a process shaped by the complex interaction between biological factors, social environments, and cultural constructions within a community. From a cultural psychology perspective, children are not seen as universal individuals developing uniformly, but as subjects growing through patterns of meaning, social practices, and power structures that shape their lives (Rogoff, 2003; Shweder, 1990). Thus, understanding children's developmental experiences must be situated within the cultural context that frames them. The Orang Rimba community, residing in the forests of Jambi, offers a

compelling example of how culture, ecology, and state power intersect to shape the world of children. For decades, this community has led a semi-nomadic life with a robust system of customary values, strong kinship structures, and close ecological relationships. Children in this community acquire socialization through ecological learning, participation in family activities, and internalization of the forest's spirituality, which forms the basis of their identity (Sager, 2008; WARSI, 2017).

However, the psychosocial development of Orang Rimba children now faces new challenges due to significant social and ecological transformations. The expansion of oil palm plantations and Industrial Timber Plantations (HTI), settlement programs, formal school construction, and assimilative state policies have substantially altered their way of life. These changes affect not only economic aspects and living spaces but also parenting practices, social relations, and the formation of children's identities. Children are at the forefront of cultural and ecological changes they often do not fully comprehend, yet they must bear the psychological consequences. This situation creates an epistemological tension between the state's conception of "progress" and the Orang Rimba's understanding of "cultural continuity." When development policies impose formal schooling, permanent settlements, and modern administrative structures, they often conflict with the Orang Rimba's way of life and customary values, making children's psychosocial development a site of conflict between traditional identity and imposed modernity. Children experience role ambiguity, identity uncertainty, and potential psychological vulnerability due to structural changes that are culturally insensitive.

The Kedundung Muda community is one of the Orang Rimba groups experiencing the intensity of these changes. Their interactions with government programs and pressures from extractive industries place children in the middle of competing social systems. This context is important to examine because child development in indigenous communities is not only a matter of individual growth but also relates to cultural continuity and the community's capacity to maintain its collective identity. This study aims to analyze how the psychosocial development of Orang Rimba children in Kedundung Muda is shaped and transformed by cultural, ecological, and state policy dynamics. Using a cultural psychology approach, this article highlights the interaction between internal cultural practices and external pressures shaping children's developmental experiences, allowing for an understanding of their adaptation processes in the context of complex socio-ecological transformations.

Cultural psychology provides a critical framework for understanding this phenomenon. This approach views humans as subjects developing within networks of meaning, social practices, and cultural symbols internalized through socialization (Shweder, 1990; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It emphasizes that child development is not universal but is shaped by community norms, parenting practices, social relational structures, spiritual values, and ecological conditions influencing daily life. In indigenous communities, children learn through participatory learning, a process based on observation, direct involvement, and value transmission occurring organically within family activities (Rogoff, 2003). This framework highlights that the concept of "normal development" cannot be measured by the standards of modern societies oriented toward formal schooling and individual competition, positioning cultural psychology as essential for understanding Orang Rimba children's psychosocial development as rooted in their cultural and ecological worlds rather than as deviations from state-defined developmental norms.

In a cross-cultural context, Erikson's (1963) psychosocial development theory provides an analytical framework that must be reinterpreted for the Orang Rimba community. Stages such as trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame, initiative versus guilt, and industry versus inferiority need to be understood according to local context, as developmental tasks are interpreted differently across cultures, their fulfillment does not always adhere to individualistic standards, and ecological contexts determine which competencies are considered essential (Lancy, 2015). Among the Orang Rimba, trust is shaped through collective attachment relations, autonomy is expressed through freedom to explore the forest, initiative emerges through participation in family activities, and competencies relate to understanding the forest, customary rules, and social relationships rather than formal academic skills. Therefore, Erikson's theory must be considered through a local cultural lens to avoid modernity bias or pathological judgments.

The Orang Rimba's culture shapes children's parenting, social relations, and learning experiences through values of collectivism, dependence on the forest as a learning space, play arena, and identity foundation, ecological spirituality, and semi-nomadic mobility that allows ecological adaptation while maintaining distance from the outside world. Children grow through foraging and hunting practices, internalization of customary rules, social roles within the family, outdoor play developing motor, cognitive, and affective skills, and direct engagement with cultural rites. However, state interventions such as relocation, formal education, administrative integration, and industrial forest management tend to disregard local knowledge and semi-nomadic lifestyles, potentially causing identity disruption, marginalization of local epistemologies, and psychosocial burdens on children (Li, 2007; Acciaioli, 2008).

These socio-ecological transformations result in identity tension and role ambiguity for children as they confront the modern world. Orang Rimba children entering formal schools or permanent settlements experience shifts in interaction patterns, learning methods, behavioral expectations, social hierarchy, and value systems. This phenomenon produces bicultural ambivalence, where children adopt some modern values while retaining traditional identity influences, social role ambiguity between being "Orang Rimba children" and "schoolchildren," ecological identity crises due to reduced forest contact, and developmental dissonance as individualistic school values clash with Orang Rimba collectivism and spirituality. This review underscores that understanding children's psychosocial development cannot be separated from the power relations and structural changes shaping their lived experiences.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with an orientation toward cultural psychology analysis. This approach was selected as it allows for an in-depth understanding of child development dynamics rooted in values, social practices, and the ecological experiences of indigenous communities, while also enabling a critical reading of power relations that influence cultural change. To enhance methodological transparency, the study established inclusion and exclusion criteria for data sources. The sources consist of academic literature, ethnographic reports, and supporting documents that explicitly discuss child-rearing patterns, ecological dynamics, and social transformation within the Orang Rimba community. Included sources are those published between 2000 and 2023, focused on indigenous societies or cultural psychology, and providing empirical descriptions of Orang Rimba's daily life. In contrast, sources based on

opinion, popular media reports, or documents lacking a methodological foundation were excluded. Data analysis involved identifying relevant units of meaning, conducting initial coding, and grouping codes into themes consistent with the cultural psychology perspective. Validity was maintained by comparing findings across sources and re-reading texts to ensure interpretive consistency.

The study relies on secondary data collected from multiple sources. These include academic literature on cultural psychology, child development in indigenous societies, and anthropological studies of the Orang Rimba; ethnographic reports and field documents from supporting organizations such as WARSI and related research institutions in Jambi; as well as previous studies addressing socio-ecological transformations, formal education, state interventions, and identity dynamics among the Orang Rimba. Data collection focused on information reflecting child-rearing practices, patterns of socialization, changes in living spaces, and interactions between the community and state structures.

Data were collected through documentation and targeted literature review, including ethnographic searches, research reports, studies on indigenous children, and policy documents affecting the Orang Rimba community. Data selection was carried out critically, considering potential author bias, the political position of sources, and the context in which knowledge was produced, in order to avoid reproducing stereotypes or colonial perspectives.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach. Initially, data reduction was performed to identify relevant psychosocial development indicators, cultural values, and external pressures. This was followed by thematic categorization, mapping major themes such as child-rearing patterns, cultural identity, structural tensions, and ecological change. Interpretation was guided by the theories of Shweder, Rogoff, Markus, and Kitayama, as well as a critical perspective on state policies. The final step involved examining power relations to understand how policies and social structures influence child development. This approach allows for a deep yet coherent analysis that integrates both deductive and inductive reasoning.

The credibility of the findings was ensured through triangulation of multiple sources, critical evaluation of external biases in government documents, and cross-study comparisons to avoid overgeneralization. Additionally, alignment with cultural psychology frameworks ensured theoretical relevance. Through these procedures, the study aims to produce an analysis that is accurate, contextually grounded, and culturally sensitive to the Orang Rimba community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Collective Parenting Patterns and the Formation of Children's Psychosocial Foundations

In the Orang Rimba community, childcare is not solely the responsibility of biological parents, but rather the collective responsibility of the entire family and group members. This collective-adaptive parenting pattern forms a strong foundation of trust between the child and their environment. Children are accustomed to receiving care from multiple caregivers, fostering a sense of security and emotional attachment that is communal, not exclusive. Ethnographic research shows that Orang Rimba children frequently move from one family hut to another, without a rigid boundary between the nuclear and extended family. This practice reinforces emotional security because the child has multiple attachment figures. Reports of caregivers also confirm that when a child cries or is injured, other group members spontaneously provide care or

assistance without being asked. From a cultural psychology perspective, attachment in the Orang Rimba community is communal, differing from the dyadic model commonly found in Western psychology. The dimension of autonomy, as described by Erikson, emerges in unique forms; children are encouraged to explore the forest, climb trees, observe animal tracks, and interact directly with nature. This physical freedom is not just a habit, but an integral part of ecological education, which shapes the child's identity as part of a community and ecosystem, not a separate individual.

B. The Role of Forests as Spaces for Learning, Identity, and Emotional Regulation

Forests hold complex values for the Orang Rimba; besides being a food source, they are a play space, an arena for sensory exploration, a place for internalizing spiritual values, and a means of developing ecological knowledge. Children's dependence on forests means that their motor, cognitive, and social development is strongly tied to direct interaction with nature. Previous research has shown that indigenous peoples possess high ecological intelligence, developed from childhood through active participation in family activities and food gathering. However, the expansion of extractive industries has reduced access to forests, thereby narrowing children's developmental space. Forest loss not only reduces food sources but also eliminates the psychosocial space that supports children's identity, creativity, and emotional regulation. Reports from mentoring groups indicate that children are beginning to lose their ability to recognize local medicinal plants as their ranges become increasingly restricted. These ecological changes impact children's ecological competence, sensory experiences, and emotional regulation abilities, which in turn have the potential to diminish their sense of cultural competence, increase collective anxiety, and weaken their spiritual connection.

C. Formal Education and Child Development Dissonance

The introduction of formal education to Kedundung Muda introduced values, interaction structures, and learning rhythms that differed significantly from the participatory patterns of the Orang Rimba. Children in school were expected to sit still, follow instructions, accept the teacher-student hierarchy, and learn abstract material. However, interview notes and mentoring reports indicate that Orang Rimba children struggled to follow classroom routines, while they quickly mastered practical outdoor tasks, such as reading animal tracks or recognizing wind direction. This suggests that differences in learning ability are not related to cognitive capacity, but to the cultural context in which those competencies develop. This dissonance leads to identity confusion in learning, low academic motivation, and the potential for negative labeling, where children are often considered "left behind" or "lazy," even though their learning patterns are different, not inferior. A cultural psychology perspective suggests that formal schooling has the potential to become an instrument of epistemological assimilation, rather than a means of knowledge liberation.

D. State Intervention and Coloniality of Policy

Policies of permanent settlement, administrative oversight, and integration into the village system are intended as programs for fostering indigenous communities. However, these policies often embody a colonial logic, positioning indigenous communities as "less modern," judging their lives by national standards, disciplining mobility, and reducing cultural identity to a social problem. Children are the most vulnerable group, being the primary targets of schooling, vaccination, and population administration programs. The resulting psychosocial impacts include

internalized feelings of cultural inferiority, identity confusion, pressure to abandon traditional practices, and decreased self-efficacy as community members. Thus, state intervention is not neutral; it carries psychological consequences that are often overlooked.

E. Identity Tension and Social Role Ambiguity in Children

Facing a cultural space divided between tradition and modernity, Orang Rimba children experience identity tension. They navigate two often conflicting value orientations: collectivity, spirituality, and ecological attachment, as well as individualism, formal discipline, and academic orientation. This tension creates ambiguity; children feel neither fully accepted at school nor viewed differently by the community if they adopt modern values too much. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of bicultural ambivalence, which, if left unmanaged, can lead to withdrawal, decreased self-confidence, difficulty assuming social roles, and identity crises during adolescence. Several cases have documented children attending formal schools being ridiculed by peers outside the community, while members of their own community consider them "too close to outsiders," leading to the child's identity becoming unstable.

F. Psychosocial Adaptation Strategies for Children Amidst Change

Despite facing structural pressures, Orang Rimba children demonstrate a dynamic capacity for psychosocial adaptation. They continue to seek out small spaces in the forest for play and learning, adopt modern values deemed useful while maintaining traditional values, and create a hybrid identity that blends traditional and modern traditions. This adaptation demonstrates the children's ability to thrive in changing conditions, but also demonstrates that structural pressures can create fragile identities without culturally sensitive policies. These adaptation strategies emphasize that the psychosocial development of Orang Rimba children is shaped by a complex interaction between culture, environment, and social structure, requiring critical attention in any policy or educational intervention.

CONCLUSION

This study provides three main scientific contributions. First, it demonstrates how classical developmental psychology theories particularly Erikson's model can be reinterpreted within the cultural context of indigenous communities, thereby avoiding universalistic biases in understanding child development. Second, it extends the discussion on the coloniality of educational policies by highlighting how formal schooling can serve as a site of identity dissonance for indigenous children. Third, it offers a cultural psychology framework that positions ecological relations as a core component of psychosocial development, a perspective still rarely addressed in Indonesian literature.

The psychosocial development of Orang Rimba children in the Kedundung Muda community is shaped by the complex interplay of customary values, collective child-rearing practices, and ecological relations that form the foundation of their cultural identity. Within a relatively stable cultural context, children grow through participatory learning, direct engagement with the forest, and ecological-spiritual internalization. This process fosters strong social bonds, physical autonomy, and high ecological competence. However, ecological and social transformations driven by industrial expansion, state interventions, and the penetration of modernity create imbalances in this developmental process. The loss of ecological space reduces opportunities for forest-based learning and socialization, while formal education introduces norms and values often misaligned with Orang Rimba epistemology. Consequently, children

experience developmental dissonance, identity tensions, role ambiguity, and potential psychosocial vulnerability.

Cultural psychological analysis indicates that state interventions largely operate within a logic of assimilation and homogenization, failing to acknowledge and support the unique developmental mechanisms of indigenous communities. To ensure sustainable psychosocial development, culturally sensitive policies are required: respecting traditional child-rearing practices, protecting ecological spaces, and developing education aligned with the Orang Rimba's values, rhythms of life, and social practices.

Thus, understanding the psychosocial development of Orang Rimba children cannot be separated from the power structures and ecological changes they face. Supporting child development in this context means sustaining cultural continuity, collective identity, and the community's capacity to navigate and resist the pressures of modernity.

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