

Drawing Nadran: Five-Year-Old Children's Representations of Maritime Tradition and Religious Meaning in Coastal West Java

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Abstract. The annual Nadran sea festival in coastal West Java, Indonesia, is a living cultural space in which maritime heritage, communal participation, and Islamic interpretations of gratitude intersect. This study explored how five-year-old children represented and recontextualized Nadran after a culturally situated storytelling and drawing activity. Twenty-five children from an Islamic kindergarten in a coastal community produced drawings in individual draw-and-tell sessions. The story introduced Nadran as a tradition of gratitude and mentioned customary elements, including decorated boats, offerings, a buffalo head, and prayer. This focused qualitative analysis examines five cases selected because the correspondence between their drawings and child-confirmed accounts was especially clear and because they illustrated recurring patterns in the preliminary dataset. Drawings and teacher-scribed accounts were analyzed together through qualitative content analysis and social-semiotic attention to representation, repetition, salience, spatial composition, and narrative relations. Boats, seawater, flags, crowds, and movement toward the sea formed a shared maritime-processional schema. Two cases made the buffalo head visually salient, whereas others emphasized decorated boats and collective participation. Gratitude and blessing were explicit in two accounts, while the remaining children foregrounded festivity, excitement, and communal experience. The findings indicate layered cultural meaning rather than uniform theological understanding: children combined direct festival experience, family and community knowledge, and elements made available in the preceding story. Drawing-and-telling provided a developmentally responsive means of examining how children selectively reconstructed a local tradition. Because only five information-rich cases were examined in depth, the findings are illustrative rather than representative of the full group.

Keywords: coastal culture; cultural literacy; drawing-and-tell; early childhood; Nadran

INTRODUCTION

Cultural literacy in early childhood is often discussed as children's growing ability to recognize cultural symbols, participate in shared practices, and make meaning from the narratives and values circulating in their communities. This capacity is not acquired only through formal teaching. It is also formed through repeated encounters with family practices, public celebrations, places, objects, language, and collective memory. For children living in coastal communities, maritime rituals can therefore function as important cultural texts through which relationships among livelihood, community, place, and belief become intelligible.

Nadran is an annual sea festival practiced in parts of the north coast of West Java, including Cirebon and neighboring coastal areas. Its public forms commonly involve decorated boats, collective processions, prayers, shared festivities, and symbolic offerings. Previous scholarship has described Nadran as a tradition associated with fishermen's gratitude, community solidarity, and the continuity of coastal cultural heritage [1], [2]. Contemporary interpretations also show that sea-alm's traditions are not culturally static: their meanings may be negotiated through Islamic discourse, environmental awareness, tourism, and local educational activity [3]. The festival is consequently a productive context for examining how children encounter a living tradition whose cultural and religious meanings overlap.

Research with young children, however, presents a methodological challenge. Children may recognize cultural events and hold nuanced ideas about them while lacking the vocabulary or confidence to communicate these ideas through conventional interviews. Drawings can provide an alternative representational mode, but they should not be treated as transparent windows into children's minds. Their meanings are shaped by context, available semiotic resources, prior experience, the prompt, and the

interaction accompanying production [4], [5], [6], [7]. Studies of drawing-and-telling emphasize that the graphic product, spoken account, gesture, and drawing process together constitute the meaning-making event [6], [8]. More recent work similarly treats young children's drawings as cultural semiotic resources capable of communicating conceptually sophisticated meanings [9], [10].

Existing drawing research has examined children's conceptions of learning [11], science learning [12], technology-assisted learning [13], relationships [14], literacy [5], and environmental belonging [15]. Yet limited attention has been paid to how young children visually construct cultural literacy in a religiously situated local tradition. This gap is significant because an adult description of Nadran as either 'culture' or 'religion' may obscure the ways children themselves assemble its meanings. Examining their drawings and accounts can reveal which elements are shared, which are individually salient, and how religious concepts enter—or do not enter—their narratives.

This study therefore explored how five-year-old children represented and recontextualized Nadran following a culturally situated storytelling and drawing activity. It addressed two questions: (1) What visual and narrative elements were foregrounded in five information-rich representations of Nadran? and (2) How were maritime, social, ritual, and religious meanings configured across these drawings and their accompanying accounts? Rather than testing drawing ability or treating the drawings as evidence of unaided prior conceptions, the study approached each case as a situated multimodal reconstruction shaped by direct experience, community knowledge, and the preceding story.

METHODS

Research design

The study used a cross-sectional qualitative drawing analysis supported by a draw-and-tell technique. Cross-sectional refers to the production of one Nadran drawing event by each child during the same data-collection period. The integrated drawing-and-tell event, rather than the image alone, was treated as the unit of meaning. This positioning avoids treating drawings as self-sufficient psychological tests and instead understands meaning as situated across marks, labels, spoken explanation, the elicitation context, and the cultural resources available to the child [4], [6], [8].

Research context and participants

The study was conducted in September 2025 at TK Islam Laa Tahzan in Jadimulya Village, Gunung Jati District, Cirebon Regency, West Java, Indonesia. The kindergarten serves a coastal community in which fishing activities and the annual Nadran festival remain close to children's family and community life. The school had previously introduced Nadran in classroom learning, and the data were collected after that year's festival.

Twenty-five children in Kindergarten Group B completed the drawing activity. The focused analysis reported in this paper concerns five five-year-old children (three boys and two girls), all of whom had directly witnessed Nadran. Three were from fishing families and learned about the festival through family and the surrounding fishing community; two were not from fishing families and reported family as their principal source of knowledge. The five cases were selected after a preliminary review because their visual products and child-confirmed accounts showed the clearest internal correspondence and illustrated patterns that recurred in the initial dataset. The remaining 20 drawings were not included in the focused analysis; consequently, the five cases are treated as information-rich illustrations rather than a representative sample of all participating children. All names were replaced with codes P1–P5.

Drawing-and-tell procedure

Before drawing, all children heard the same story about Nadran. The story presented the festival as an expression of gratitude and referred to customary and religious elements, including blessing, offerings, a buffalo head, and prayer. No example image was displayed. The story therefore constituted a verbal stimulus and supplied concepts that children could subsequently select, omit, or reorganize in their drawings. The activity cannot be interpreted as a stimulus-free assessment of prior conceptions.

Each child then participated individually during an ongoing classroom session and responded to the prompt, "Draw what you understand about the Nadran tradition." Children could also draw Nadran as a sea festival or as an event they had witnessed. They received A4 paper and could choose among pencils, crayons, oil pastels, and colored pencils. They were not directed to draw boats, fishermen, a buffalo head, or any other particular object, and they were free to add unrelated elements. Sessions lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and occurred once for each child. The classroom remained active during data collection, so the sessions were not completely free from distraction.

Children talked while drawing. A teacher wrote the child's words on the sheet as closely as possible to the original utterance and asked the child to confirm the written account after completing the drawing. The only follow-up prompt reported was the open question, "What comes next?" Children could respond that they did not know or decline to answer. The sessions were documented through photographs rather than audio or video; consequently, a complete interactional transcript, gesture record, and intonation record were not available.

Data analysis

The unit of analysis was the integrated drawing-and-tell event rather than the graphic product alone. Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, descriptive inventory recorded manifest elements without attributing meaning: boats, sea, flags, people, weather, aircraft, the buffalo head, decorative elements, and written labels. Second, the accompanying account was read to establish the child's own identification of objects and events. Third, each case was examined through social-semiotic dimensions: representational content, narrative action, relative salience through size or repetition, spatial composition, and relations among elements [9]. Fourth, cross-case qualitative content analysis identified recurring and contrasting meaning patterns. Categories were refined by moving repeatedly between the drawings and accounts, following an inductive logic while retaining a clear distinction between visible evidence, participant-provided meaning, and researcher interpretation [16].

Three teacher-analysts who had not accompanied the drawing sessions examined the five selected cases independently. Categories were generated inductively from the visible elements and child-confirmed accounts. The analysts compared their interpretations and reached consensus by returning to the recurring themes, the graphic evidence, and the accompanying statements. No statistical inter-rater coefficient was calculated, and a formal codebook and reflexive journal were not used. These are recognized as limitations. The analysis did not assign universal psychological meanings to particular colors, locations, or sizes. Compositional observations were interpreted only when supported by the child's account or by patterned comparison across cases.

Ethical considerations

Institutional permission was obtained from the school. Parents initially provided oral permission through school-mediated WhatsApp communication. Children received an age-appropriate explanation, gave verbal assent, and were permitted to decline to answer or discontinue the activity. Formal institutional ethics committee approval had not been obtained. Written parental consent for publication of anonymized drawings was being sought before submission because school permission alone does not replace parental authorization for publication. Original names appearing on the sheets will be removed from any reproduced image, and the research records are stored with restricted access.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cross-case overview

Five information-rich drawing-and-tell events selected from the 25 completed products were examined in depth. Table 1 summarizes their manifest visual elements and the meanings explicitly available in the accompanying teacher-scribed, child-confirmed accounts. The table is descriptive; absence of an element indicates that it was not visible or recorded in the selected material, not that the child lacked knowledge of it.

Table 1. Cross-case descriptive matrix of the five selected drawing-and-tell cases.

Case	Dominant visual elements	Narrative action	Explicit social/affective meaning	Explicit religious meaning
P1	Large boat, buffalo head, smaller boats, flags, people, sea, weather, aircraft	A group travels toward the sea for Nadran	Festival, excitement, enjoyment of seeing the sea	Not explicit in available account
P2	Large boat, buffalo head, multiple boats, flags, people, sea, weather, aircraft	A boat procession participates in the sea festival	Crowd, celebration, enjoyment of seeing the buffalo head	Not explicit in available account
P3	Decorated boats, flags, sea, sun	Boats are decorated and taken to sea	Sea festival	Gratitude and blessing
P4	Multiple boats, people, flags, sea, rain, lightning, aircraft	Many people travel toward the sea	Crowd, fishermen, commemoration	Not explicit in available account

Case	Dominant visual elements	Narrative action	Explicit social/affective meaning	Explicit religious meaning
P5	Three decorated boats, flags, sea, celestial forms	Fishermen celebrate Nadran	Marine harvest, many people attending	Gratitude for marine harvest

shared maritime-processional schema

The most consistent pattern across the five drawing events was a maritime-processional schema. Every child represented one or more boats or ships, and all five located the event in relation to seawater. Flags appeared repeatedly, while people or references to a group conveyed collective participation. The children's accounts reinforced these visual patterns: one described "a group going to the middle of the sea to hold Nadran" (P1), another explained that many people joined the journey offshore (P4), and a third associated the event with the arrival of many participants (P5). The festival was therefore understood not simply as an object or isolated ritual but as coordinated movement involving boats, people, and the sea.

Repetition contributed to this shared meaning. P2, P4, and P5 produced several boats rather than a single vessel. P2 explicitly linked the choice to "many boats," while P4 explained that the drawing was made because Nadran involved many boats and was crowded. In these cases, numerical repetition functioned as a visual resource for communicating scale and social intensity. Larger central vessels in P1 and P2 further organized the scene around a principal procession, with smaller vessels extending the collective action across the page.

Flags and boat decorations were not incidental embellishments. P3 explicitly identified decorated boats and flags as features of Nadran, while P5 filled the upper edges of three vessels with repeated triangular forms. These elements differentiated festival boats from ordinary transportation and marked Nadran as a public, celebratory event. The visual prominence of decorated vessels suggests emerging recognition of culturally specific forms rather than generic knowledge of maritime objects.

Ritual salience and the buffalo-head symbol

The buffalo head appeared prominently in two drawings. In P1, it was attached to the bow of the largest central boat and explicitly labeled as a buffalo head. In P2, the head was similarly placed at the front of a large boat, with a child's account noting that seeing it was an enjoyable part of the procession. Its location at the bow, disproportionate visibility, and verbal identification made it a salient ritual sign in both cases.

Nevertheless, the accounts available for these two cases did not explain the object in theological or mystical terms. The children recognized its presence and association with the Nadran procession, but they did not state why it was used or what doctrinal meaning it carried. This distinction is analytically important. Recognition of a ritual object demonstrates event-specific cultural knowledge, yet it should not automatically be interpreted as endorsement of an adult cosmology. For these participants, the buffalo head functioned primarily as a memorable marker of the festival.

The symbol was absent from the other three drawings, which instead prioritized decorated boats, flags, crowds, weather, and movement at sea. Its uneven distribution indicates that children's Nadran literacy was not organized around a single canonical emblem. Rather, ritual knowledge varied according to what each child had noticed, remembered, heard, or considered worth representing.

Gratitude and blessing as explicit religious meanings

Religious interpretation was explicit in two accompanying accounts. P3 described Nadran as "an expression of gratitude" and added the hope "to receive blessing." P5 explained that fishermen held Nadran as gratitude for the marine harvest they had received. These accounts connected a public cultural event with a vertical moral relationship: livelihood was understood as something received and acknowledged through gratitude, while blessing expressed hope for continued divine favor.

The religious meanings were conveyed verbally more directly than visually. Neither case relied on conventional religious architecture or written sacred language. Instead, boats, sea, flags, and communal gathering became the visual setting within which gratitude and blessing were narrated. Cultural and religious meanings were therefore not represented as separate domains. The same maritime signs simultaneously referred to livelihood, festival participation, and gratitude.

At the same time, only two of the five available accounts explicitly used the concepts of gratitude or blessing. The remaining children emphasized festivity, crowds, pleasure, and the movement of the procession. The data thus support a layered conclusion rather than the claim that all visualizations were 'deeply theological.' Religious meaning was evident and important, but it coexisted with social and experiential conceptions that were not articulated in explicitly religious language.

Everyday experience and imaginative expansion

Several drawings extended beyond the core festival repertoire. Aircraft, clouds, rain, lightning, sunlight, and houses appeared beside the boats. P1 and P2 combined bright sun, rain clouds, lightning, and aircraft within a single scene; P4 surrounded multiple boats with large lightning forms; P5 added celestial forms above the vessels. These features may record remembered weather, visual excitement, or children's broader graphic repertoires. The available accounts do not permit a definitive interpretation.

Rather than treating these additions as errors or irrelevant decoration, they demonstrate that children reconstruct a cultural event using familiar semiotic resources. Their drawings are not photographic reproductions of Nadran. They are selective compositions in which culturally specific signs—decorated boats, flags, processions, and the buffalo head—interact with everyday environmental knowledge and imaginative scene-building. This interweaving is central to early cultural literacy because it shows children actively reorganizing public culture within their own representational worlds.

Drawing-and-telling as evidence of layered cultural literacy

Across cases, the drawings alone established a recognizable visual field but could not fully determine the children's intended meanings. A cluster of boats might signify transport, fishing, or celebration without the accompanying statement that the scene represented Nadran. Similarly, the concepts of gratitude and blessing were available primarily through the children's explanations. Conversely, the drawings contributed information that brief accounts did not: relative scale, repetition, spatial grouping, and the salience of particular ritual and environmental elements.

The combination revealed at least four interrelated dimensions of cultural literacy: recognition of event-specific symbols; procedural understanding of a collective journey to sea; affective participation through excitement and enjoyment; and, for some children, religious interpretation through gratitude and blessing. Cultural literacy was therefore neither a simple inventory of traditional objects nor a uniform theological framework. It was an emerging capacity to connect cultural forms with social action, place, emotion, livelihood, and belief.

Discussion

The findings show that young children can represent a culturally complex festival through a coherent combination of graphic and verbal resources. The shared maritime-processional schema indicates that their conceptions were structured around what Nadran looks like and what people do: boats are decorated, groups gather, and a procession travels toward the sea. This procedural dimension extends cultural literacy beyond naming. Children were not merely recognizing 'boats'; they were locating boats within a socially organized event.

This result supports research that regards children's drawings as culturally situated semiotic productions rather than developmental products judged only by visual realism [4], [5], [9]. Like the young children in Monteiro et al.'s study, the participants appropriated available cultural resources to make certain aspects of a phenomenon salient [9]. Repetition of boats communicated collectivity, oversized vessels organized action, and flags or decorative forms marked the difference between everyday maritime life and festival activity. These meanings became more defensible when read alongside the children's accounts.

The religious dimension requires similar interpretive care. Gratitude and blessing were explicit and culturally consequential, but they were not equally articulated by every participant. The evidence therefore suggests differentiated internalization. Some children narrated Nadran through Islamic moral vocabulary, particularly gratitude for livelihood and hope for blessing; others narrated it through social experience, excitement, and memorable ritual imagery. Such variation challenges both secular reduction and theological overgeneralization. A secular-only approach would miss how divine gratitude organizes the meaning of marine livelihood for some children. A uniformly theological reading, however, would erase the children whose accounts remained primarily social and experiential.

The buffalo-head representations sharpen this point. Adult accounts of sea-offering traditions may frame ritual objects through debates about indigenous practice, symbolism, or religious legitimacy. The children in this study did not reproduce those debates. They visually remembered the buffalo head and placed it at the front of the procession, yet their accounts treated it as an event marker or source of fascination. The finding illustrates the importance of preserving the difference between adult cultural explanation and children's expressed meaning. Cultural literacy at age five may include accurate recognition before elaborated causal or doctrinal understanding.

The multimodal approach also has methodological implications. Drawing made culturally specific knowledge visible, while telling anchored ambiguous forms and disclosed meanings such as gratitude and blessing. This accords with drawing-telling scholarship that treats image, narration, and interaction as

mutually constitutive [6], [8], [10]. It also demonstrates why fixed symbolic dictionaries are inappropriate. Lightning, scale, spatial position, or the use of a particular line cannot be assigned a universal psychological meaning without contextual confirmation. The researcher's task is to document what is visible, privilege the child's account, and make any further interpretation explicit and contestable.

For early childhood pedagogy, Nadran offers more than content for a heritage lesson. Teachers can invite children to draw what they remember, compare different representations, ask whose work and hopes are visible, and discuss why communities express gratitude for marine resources. Such activities can support cultural knowledge, narrative language, visual literacy, religious moderation, and ecological responsibility without presenting tradition as fixed or beyond question. Culturally responsive teaching in this context should create space for multiple family interpretations and avoid requiring children to reproduce one authorized meaning.

This study has several limitations. Although 25 children completed the activity, the focused analysis examined only five cases selected for the clarity and consistency of their drawing-account correspondence. Because selection followed a preliminary review, the analysis may privilege dominant or readily interpretable patterns and cannot represent the full range of the 25 children's responses. The preceding story explicitly introduced gratitude, blessing, offerings, a buffalo head, and prayer; the religious language in the accounts must therefore be understood as children's selection and recontextualization of meanings available through both prior experience and the immediate stimulus, not as evidence of wholly spontaneous theological conceptions. Teacher scribing preserved the children's words but may also have anchored or condensed their accounts. The lack of audio or video recording prevented analysis of gesture, intonation, pauses, and the full drawing sequence. No formal codebook, reflexive journal, inter-rater statistic, written parental consent at the time of collection, or institutional ethics committee approval was available. Future research should analyze the complete corpus, establish transparent sampling and coding procedures, record the full interaction, obtain prospective written consent, and compare children's representations before and after culturally situated teaching.

CONCLUSION

The five selected cases represented Nadran through a shared maritime repertoire of boats, sea, flags, processions, and collective participation while differing in the meanings they foregrounded. The buffalo head functioned as a memorable ritual marker in two cases, and gratitude and blessing were explicitly articulated in two accounts. Other cases emphasized festivity, crowds, enjoyment, and the journey to sea. These patterns indicate layered cultural reconstruction rather than uniform theological understanding. Children drew on direct festival experience, family and community knowledge, and meanings introduced in the preceding story to organize Nadran visually and verbally. Drawing-and-telling made these selections visible by joining graphic composition with child-confirmed accounts. The findings remain illustrative of five information-rich cases and should not be generalized to the full group until all 25 drawings are analyzed systematically.

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