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Mental Health Issues Among Indigenous Communities and the Role of Traditional Medicine

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A B S T R A C T

Indigenous populations worldwide face significant mental health disparities stemming from historical trauma, colonization, and marginalization. The World Health Organization reports particularly concerning rates of suicide and self-harm among indigenous youth. These communities struggle with multiple interconnected challenges, including economic hardship, limited access to education, and identity crises. This narrative review es mental health issues among indigenous communities and the role of traditional medicine in addressing these challenges. This review analyzed sources from 2014 to 2024 in English and Bahasa Indonesia, including academic papers, government reports, and grey literature on indigenous peoples, mental illness, and traditional medicine. Using keywords related to indigenous/aboriginal communities, mental health, and traditional/alternative medicine, the review presented findings across 5 themes: Indigenous community challenges; health and cultural perspectives; traditional and biomedical approaches; preservation of traditional medicine; and new healthcare models. Traditional medicine faces challenges from systematic marginalization and younger generations' skepticism. The review advocates for an integrated healthcare approach that combines traditional and biomedical practices while preserving indigenous knowledge systems. This integration requires cultural competency, specialized training for healthcare professionals, and empowerment of indigenous community members in healthcare roles.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous peoples worldwide have faced profound and far-reaching historical challenges that continue to impact their communities today (Williams, 2021). Over the past century, these populations have endured systematic colonization and persistent marginalization and have developed deeply rooted internalized feelings of inferiority (Sloan and Schmitz, 2021). The complex legacy of these historical traumas continues to shape their present-day experiences and challenges (Clement, 2019; Kronauer, 2019). These communities have traditionally inhabited remote, secluded areas, often due to forced displacement or strategic isolation (Hamza, Eriksson and Staupe-Delgado, 2021). This geographical isolation has led to the systematic exclusion from modernization processes, creating a widening gap between indigenous communities and mainstream society (Malhotra, 2024; Lécuyer *et al.*, 2025). The impact of this exclusion is evident in various aspects of their lives, from limited access to basic services to reduced economic opportunities.

Indigenous populations experience significant health disparities, with notably higher rates of suicide and self-harm among youth compared to non-indigenous groups (Braga *et al.*, 2020). These mental health

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challenges often manifest during adolescence and young adulthood, during critical periods for identity formation and personal development (Eckhoff, Sørvold and Kvernmo, 2020; Kinchin *et al.*, 2020). The root causes of these issues are complex and interconnected, forming a challenging web of social, economic, and cultural factors. Economic hardship remains a persistent challenge, with many communities struggling to achieve financial stability while maintaining their traditional ways of life (Redvers *et al.*, 2023). This economic vulnerability often leads to increased dependency on state support systems, which can further erode community autonomy and self-determination (Malhotra, 2024).

In addition, limited access to quality education remains a significant barrier, with many indigenous youth facing challenges in obtaining culturally appropriate educational opportunities that respect and incorporate their traditional knowledge systems (Maringe, 2023). This educational gap contributes to ongoing cycles of disadvantage and limited economic mobility (Browman *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, identity crises and internalized trauma represent significant psychological challenges within these communities (Malhotra, 2024). The struggle to maintain cultural identity while adapting to modern society can create internal conflicts that span generations (Redvers *et al.*, 2023; Malhotra, 2024). It is further complicated by the weight of historical injustices and the challenge of preserving traditional values in an increasingly globalized world (Kania, 2019).

Moreover, the complexity of modern parenting within indigenous communities adds another layer of challenge (Bayod *et al.*, 2021; Hogan and Liddell, 2023). Parents must navigate the delicate balance between preserving cultural traditions and preparing their children for success in the contemporary world (Judijanto and Aslan, 2024). It includes addressing intergenerational trauma while fostering resilience and cultural pride in younger generations (Bayod *et al.*, 2021).

Indigenous adolescents who leave their communities to provide financial support for families often face identity crises as they abandon tribal life and confront modernization (Sokk, 2024). This transition frequently leads to homelessness, mental health challenges, and emotional distress (Eckhoff, Sørvold and Kvernmo, 2020). Additionally, healthcare workers' lack of cultural competence perpetuates racism in mental health services throughout many indigenous communities (Kirmayer and Jarvis, 2019; Kaphle *et al.*, 2022). This situation has led indigenous people to prefer traditional medicine, which is rooted in their values and cultural pride (Redvers and Blondin, 2020; Chali, Hasho and Koricha, 2021). Thus, the role of traditional medicine in adolescent mental health has become increasingly important as communities navigate modern healthcare systems and healthcare workers' insensitive attitudes toward indigenous communities. This narrative study describes mental health issues among indigenous communities and the role of traditional medicine in addressing these challenges.

METHOD

This review identified articles from all evidence related to indigenous/aboriginal people, mental illness, and traditional medicine, including academic papers, government reports, grey literature, and publications from 2014 to 2024 in Bahasa Indonesia and English. Keywords used in the search process included: indigenous, aborigine, indigenous community, indigenous people, aborigine people, mental health, mental illness, traditional medicine, alternative medicine. A total of 11 articles were obtained, which were used to answer the purpose of this article. The review results are presented in 5 themes: Indigenous communities and their challenges; Health, mental health, and culture among indigenous peoples; Traditional medicine and biomedicine; Traditional medicine as a resource to be preserved; and a new health care model for indigenous peoples.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Indigenous communities and their challenges

Indigenous peoples predominantly maintain traditional livelihoods as farmers and hunters (Malhotra, 2024; Lécuyer *et al.*, 2025), preserving ancestral practices that have sustained their communities for generations (Malhotra, 2024). They communicate primarily in their native languages, which often include unique linguistic features and cultural knowledge not found in mainstream languages (Holton, Leonard and Pulsifer, 2022; Rice, 2022). While many have received basic education in their national languages, this education frequently presents challenges in bridging traditional knowledge with modern educational systems (Rice, 2022). These communities typically adhere to their local religious practices and spiritual beliefs, which are deeply intertwined with their understanding of the natural world and their place within it (Redvers and Blondin, 2020).

These communities embody an irreplaceable genetic and cultural heritage that has evolved over thousands of years of adaptation to specific environments and social conditions (Kania, 2019). Without careful preservation efforts, this precious heritage faces the risk of disappearing within just a few generations, taking with it its unique adaptations and cultural innovations that could benefit humanity as a whole (Malhotra, 2024). The urgency of preservation becomes more apparent as younger generations increasingly engage with modern society (Bayod *et al.*, 2021).

Their traditional knowledge systems encompass a wide range of insights into local ecosystems, medicinal plants, sustainable resource management, and social organization (Chali, Hasho and Koricha, 2021). However, these valuable knowledge systems often exist primarily in oral traditions and practical demonstrations, making them particularly vulnerable to loss (Redvers and Blondin, 2020). The limited amount of documented information, combined with the challenges of translating traditional knowledge into scientific terminology and methodologies, creates significant obstacles in bridging indigenous

wisdom with contemporary scientific frameworks (Brondízio *et al.*, 2021). This gap makes it especially challenging to preserve and validate these knowledge systems within modern academic and research contexts.

Health, mental health, and culture in indigenous people

Health exists as a deeply cultural concept, with indigenous communities maintaining rich and nuanced perspectives on what truly constitutes well-being and balance in life (Redvers and Blondin, 2020). These ancient cultures have developed and preserved powerful healing traditions within their practices, passed down through generations of wisdom keepers and traditional healers (Chali, Hasho and Koricha, 2021). The way local cultural frameworks shape understanding is profound - they not only determine how communities conceptualize illness and wellness, but also influence how individuals experience health challenges and engage with healing processes (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020; Marques, Freeman and Carter, 2021). Each indigenous group maintains its own sophisticated models for understanding the delicate interplay between physical, mental, and spiritual well-being (Brondízio *et al.*, 2021; Fernández-Llamazares *et al.*, 2021).

Examining protective factors within indigenous communities, we find a remarkable interweaving of narrative identity (the stories people tell about themselves and their people), deeply held religious and spiritual practices, and the powerful cohesion found in community bonds (Reilly *et al.*, 2020). This combination creates a robust protective framework that serves multiple crucial functions (Reilly *et al.*, 2020; Usher *et al.*, 2021). It strengthens indigenous peoples' psychological resilience, provides emotional support through traditional healing practices, maintains cultural continuity across generations, and creates a strong defense against forces that might otherwise erode their unique cultural identity (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020; Marques, Freeman and Carter, 2021). These protective elements work together synergistically, each reinforcing and amplifying the others' positive effects.

Traditional medicine and biomedicine

Traditional medicine represents a profound manifestation of indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage, encompassing a diverse array of therapeutic approaches that have been refined and passed down through countless generations (Brondízio *et al.*, 2021). These healing traditions incorporate carefully selected remedies sourced from the natural world, including medicinal plants with specific properties, animal-derived materials with therapeutic qualities, and minerals known for their healing potential, alongside sophisticated spiritual healing practices that address the metaphysical aspects of wellness (Brondízio *et al.*, 2021; Chali, Hasho and Koricha, 2021). These various therapeutic approaches, whether implemented individually or combined in complementary ways, serve multiple essential functions (Braga *et al.*, 2020; Redvers *et al.*, 2023). They help maintain overall wellness through preventive practices, enable the accurate diagnosis of various conditions through traditional assessment methods, prevent the onset of

illness through protective measures, and provide effective treatments for existing ailments (Redvers and Blondin, 2020; Sokk, 2024).

In traditional societies, the conceptualization of disease and healing emerges from a rich tapestry of prescientific understandings that reflect deep cultural wisdom (Dal Lin *et al.*, 2020). Pre-industrial agrarian communities have developed intricate frameworks for understanding illness, often viewing health challenges through a multifaceted lens that considers various spiritual and supernatural dimensions (Jayawickrama and Madhanagopal, 2025). According to these traditional perspectives, illness might manifest as a consequence of negative encounters with spiritual forces, a temporary weakening of one's spiritual protective barriers, the influence of adverse fate or destiny, or as a form of divine correction or retribution (Dal Lin *et al.*, 2020). These societies have developed sophisticated systems of understanding that position supernatural forces as the fundamental origin of illness, with their religious and spiritual beliefs forming the cornerstone of their healing traditions and practices (Dal Lin *et al.*, 2020; Brondízio *et al.*, 2021; Jayawickrama and Madhanagopal, 2025).

The integration of religious and spiritual beliefs into healing practices creates comprehensive therapeutic systems that address both physical and metaphysical aspects of illness (Sokk, 2024). This holistic approach is exemplified in various indigenous healing traditions, such as among Santal healers, who maintain a sophisticated understanding of how the efficacy of their treatments is intrinsically linked to their ability to correctly identify, interpret, and address the specific spiritual forces involved in each case (Chali, Hasho and Koricha, 2021). This understanding requires not only extensive knowledge of traditional remedies but also deep spiritual insight and cultural wisdom (Sokk, 2024).

Traditional Medicine (TM) exists as a distinct and complementary approach to Western medicine, biomedicine, and pharmacological methodologies (Jayawickrama and Madhanagopal, 2025). Throughout the last century, TM has faced systematic discrimination, with its ancient traditions subjected to ridicule and its legitimate healing techniques and practitioners invalidated (Pal *et al.*, 2015; Jayawickrama and Madhanagopal, 2025). This systematic marginalization has significantly diminished TM's standing and influence within indigenous territories, particularly when compared to biomedical approaches (Brondízio *et al.*, 2021; Fernández-Llamazares *et al.*, 2021). This concerning situation underscores the pressing necessity to formally acknowledge TM practitioners and provide opportunities for them to enhance their capabilities within contemporary medical frameworks (Sinaga, Zuska and Sitorus, 2021; Dewi, 2025), while still preserving their traditional knowledge and practices (Fernández-Llamazares *et al.*, 2021).

For indigenous communities residing in remote and rural regions, where access to conventional healthcare services is severely limited (Redvers and Blondin, 2020) and the cost of transportation to medical facilities presents a significant financial burden, traditional healers continue to play an indispensable role in community health (Wulanyani *et al.*, 2020). A notable example can be found in Bali,

Indonesia, where the Balian (traditional healers) function as the primary healthcare providers, addressing both physical ailments and mental health concerns for their communities (Wulanyani *et al.*, 2020; Suwantana, 2025). Their deep integration into local social structures makes them particularly effective in providing culturally appropriate care (Sadnyana *et al.*, 2023).

The intersection of mental health and traditional healing practices is especially significant, as mental illness in many indigenous communities carries profound stigma and often generates fear regarding potential risks or dangers associated with affected individuals (Dewi, 2025). This deeply rooted stigma frequently results in a resistance to accepting medical or scientific explanations for mental health conditions (Green and Colucci, 2020). Traditional healers, deeply embedded in their communities and with an intimate understanding of local cultural contexts, are uniquely positioned to address mental health concerns (Pal *et al.*, 2015; Sinaga, Zuska and Sitorus, 2021). Their familiarity with community-specific sources of stress and anxiety enables them to provide explanations and therapeutic approaches that resonate with local cultural beliefs and practices (Sinaga, Zuska and Sitorus, 2021). This cultural alignment is exemplified in various indigenous societies worldwide, such as Nepal, where traditional understandings attribute mental illness to supernatural influences, requiring culturally specific approaches to treatment and healing (Pham *et al.*, 2021; Suwantana, 2025).

Traditional medicine as a resource to be preserved

Indigenous communities find themselves in a complex position regarding Western medicine, experiencing both curiosity and skepticism, while their deep-rooted cultural practices and traditional knowledge systems remain fundamentally intertwined with traditional medicine (Green and Colucci, 2020; Sokk, 2024). The younger generation's increasing reluctance to engage with ancestral wisdom poses a significant challenge (Machfiroh, Rohayani and Hidayat, 2024), as they often dismiss their elders' knowledge as outdated and implausible, thereby widening the gap between traditional healing practices and modern biomedical approaches (Green and Colucci, 2020). This generational disconnect makes it increasingly challenging to establish meaningful bridges between these two distinct medical paradigms.

Indigenous peoples continually work to safeguard their traditional cultural practices and spiritual healing methods within their communities (Sinaga, Zuska and Sitorus, 2021; Suwantana, 2025), recognizing the irreplaceable value of their ancestral knowledge. In many cases, healers and shamans are deliberately relocated to remote forest areas or distant locations, separated from village centers, as a protective measure against Western influences (Sokk, 2024). This physical isolation serves to preserve their precious ancestral medicinal knowledge and maintain their vital spiritual connections undisturbed by external pressures (Fernández-Llamazares *et al.*, 2021).

Despite the widespread adoption of Western religious practices among indigenous populations, traditional healers and shamans steadfastly maintain their animistic beliefs and continue their spiritual practices,

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serving as living repositories of ancient wisdom (Brondízio *et al.*, 2021). However, these knowledge keepers face mounting challenges in transmitting their extensive ethnological competence to potential successors (Brondízio *et al.*, 2021; Fernández-Llamazares *et al.*, 2021). The preservation of their profound understanding of medicinal plants becomes increasingly precarious as Western medicine begins to show interest in these botanical resources, sometimes leading to the appropriation of traditional knowledge without proper acknowledgment or preservation of its cultural context (Kania, 2019; Sokk, 2024).

Nevertheless, it has become increasingly apparent that Western medicine cannot afford to dismiss or overlook the role of traditional healers in contemporary healthcare systems (Pal *et al.*, 2015; Judijanto and Aslan, 2024; Sokk, 2024). This recognition highlights the urgent need to create respectful, mutually beneficial dialogues between traditional and modern medical practices.

New health care model of indigenous people

Indigenous healthcare systems require flexibility as they are influenced by community health status, environmental conditions, social factors, and resource availability (Zank, Araujo and Hanazaki, 2019; Barnabe, 2021). For mental health programs to succeed, professionals require specialized training to develop culturally appropriate screening tools, and building trust is crucial when working with indigenous communities (Pham *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, training programs should empower indigenous community members to work as psychologists, anthropologists, and social workers, enabling them to shape policy and bridge the gap between traditional narratives and clinical perspectives (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020).

Cultural competency in therapy can effectively combine traditional knowledge with psychiatric and psychotherapeutic approaches (Venkataramu *et al.*, 2021; Adebayo *et al.*, 2024). Indigenous psychotherapeutic training, based on cross-cultural evaluation models, should incorporate spiritual understanding to interpret symptoms and avoid misunderstandings and feelings of oppression (Venkataramu *et al.*, 2021). Traditional healers need supervision due to gaps in mental health knowledge, legislation, and human rights awareness.

An integrated and comprehensive approach to mental health is essential to build indigenous people's confidence in Western medicine and biomedicine, while promoting meditation practices and managing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Barnabe, 2021). As traditional communities have lost trust in their healing heritage and sometimes view it as inadequate or dogmatic, combining both traditional and biomedical approaches offers the best possibility for these communities (Dal Lin *et al.*, 2020). For example, people may take herbal remedies alongside modern medicine while participating in psychotherapy.

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CONCLUSION

Indigenous communities face distinct and multifaceted challenges that render them particularly susceptible to mental health concerns. These challenges stem from historical trauma, cultural displacement, and ongoing socioeconomic pressures, creating a complex web of vulnerabilities that require careful attention and understanding. The integration between traditional healing practices and biomedical approaches has emerged as a crucial strategy to address these challenges effectively, requiring thoughtful collaboration between healthcare providers from both paradigms. A significant additional challenge arises in standardizing traditional medicine to align with contemporary therapeutic protocols. A process made particularly complex by the limited availability of systematic evidence and the remarkable diversity of indigenous communities across the globe, each with its own unique healing traditions, cultural practices, and medicinal knowledge systems.

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