



The meaning of ritual-spiritual practices in ethnomedicine on mental health and psychosomatic balance

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ABSTRACT

Mental health is an important aspect of human well-being, influenced not only by biological factors but also by psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. In the context of traditional societies, ethnomedicine offers a holistic approach through ritual-spiritual practices believed to help maintain mental and psychosomatic balance. This article aims to examine the meaning and role of ritual-spiritual practices in ethnomedicine for mental health and psychosomatic balance, based on scientific literature. The method used is a literature review from various related scientific journals. The results of the review indicate that ritual-spiritual practices function as coping mechanisms, enhance emotional regulation, provide social support, and influence neurobiological responses to stress. In addition, this approach contributes to reducing psychosomatic symptoms through psychological and spiritual mechanisms. Therefore, ritual-spiritual practices can be considered a complementary approach within holistic and culturally based mental health services.

Keywords: ethnomedicine, mental health, psychosomatic, spiritual.

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INTRODUCTION

Human health is influenced not only by physical factors but also by psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. In the context of traditional societies, ethnomedical practices that utilize ritual-spiritual activities such as *melukat* are believed to play a role in maintaining mental health through religious support, self-reflection, and emotional regulation.¹ These ritual-spiritual practices function not only as symbolic rites but also as mechanisms that can influence psychological and psychosomatic balance within the framework of local culture.^{1,2}

Several studies show that ritual-spiritual practices can serve as cultural coping strategies to calm the mind and strengthen mental resilience when combined with modern psychological techniques such as mindfulness.³ In addition, psycho-spiritual therapies based on religion or community have also been found to be effective in reducing anxiety in certain groups, including patients with chronic conditions.⁴ Other studies

indicate that traditional healing practices are still used in understanding mental disorders within the framework of local beliefs, although they require integration with formal healthcare services.⁵

Based on this, it is important to understand the meaning and effects of ritual-spiritual practices on mental health and psychosomatic balance as part of a holistic and contextual health approach.⁶ This narrative review aims to explore the meaning and role of ritual-spiritual practices in ethnomedicine and their influence on mental health and psychosomatic balance based on current scientific literature.

RESULTS

Defining Ethnomedicine

Ethnomedicine is an interdisciplinary field that bridges anthropology and medicine, focusing on systems of knowledge, beliefs, and health practices that develop uniquely within a particular cultural group.⁷ Etymologically, the term ethnomedicine derives from the word *ethno*, which refers

to an ethnic group or nation, and *medicine*, which denotes the practice of healing; thus, ethnomedicine can be understood as a system of treatment rooted in the philosophy and cultural values of a particular society.⁸ In contrast to the modern biomedical approach, which tends to be reductionist by separating the body into organ systems, ethnomedicine views health as a unified and integrated whole.

Within this perspective, a healthy condition is not merely defined as the absence of physical illness, but also reflects the attainment of dynamic balance among physical, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects.^{7,8} An imbalance in any of these aspects is believed to trigger disturbances in others; therefore, healing approaches in ethnomedicine are not solely oriented toward treating symptoms but also toward restoring overall harmony. In the Indonesian context, ethnomedical practices encompass various classifications of traditional healers, such as herbalists who utilize natural substances to restore physiological functions, spiritualists and

ritualists who focus on healing through supernatural and religious approaches, and diviners who identify the causes of illness through non-medical methods.⁹

Along with the advancement of scientific knowledge, ethnomedicine is no longer viewed as a traditional practice separate from modern medicine, but rather as a source of knowledge with significant potential for the development of medical therapies. Historical records indicate that several modern medicines, such as artemisinin for malaria and metformin for diabetes, originated from ethnomedical practices that subsequently underwent scientific validation.¹⁰ This demonstrates that ethnomedicine has made a significant contribution to enriching more holistic and culturally-based health approaches.

Ritual-Spiritual as a Therapeutic Modality in Mental Health

Within the framework of ethnomedicine, mental health is closely associated with the concept of spiritual balance, often referred to as “cosmic harmony.” Mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia are not only understood as consequences of neurotransmitter imbalance but also as manifestations of spiritual disturbances or a disconnection between the individual and transcendental dimensions.⁶ Therefore, ritual-spiritual practices play an important role as a form of therapeutic intervention that addresses not only psychological aspects but also the spiritual dimension of the individual.

Ritual-spiritual practices operate through various complex psychological mechanisms. One of the primary mechanisms is catharsis, in which individuals are provided with a space to express suppressed emotions within a sacred and supportive environment.^{1,2} In addition, the ritual atmosphere, involving religious symbols, prayers, and the presence of religious leaders, can build strong positive suggestion toward the healing process. This suggestion then triggers the meaning response, a psychological response arising from the meaning that individuals assign to ritual experiences, which subsequently activates self-healing mechanisms.^{1,2}

Ritual-spiritual practices also play a role in restoring an individual’s sense of control over their life. In conditions of mental

disorders, individuals often experience feelings of helplessness and loss of control. Through structured ritual processes, such as stages of prayer or purification practices, individuals are indirectly guided to rebuild a more adaptive locus of control. Furthermore, the involvement of family and community in rituals creates strong social support, functioning as a social safety net that helps reduce social isolation and enhance a sense of belonging.¹

Empirical evidence shows that rituals such as *melukat* in Bali have tangible therapeutic effects in reducing levels of anxiety and stress. The combination of hydrotherapy elements through holy water and prayer practices as a form of religious psychotherapy has been shown to produce relaxation effects and influence the activity of the limbic system in the brain, which plays a role in emotional regulation.² This reinforces the understanding that ritual-spiritual practices not only have symbolic value but also exert significant psychological and neurobiological impacts.

The Interconnection Between Spirituality and Psychosomatic Health

Psychosomatic disorders are clinical conditions that arise from complex interactions among biological, psychological, and social factors (Figure 1), which in recent developments have been expanded to include the spiritual dimension as part of the biopsychosocial-spiritual model.¹¹ The spiritual dimension in this context encompasses beliefs, ritual practices, and the search for meaning in life, all of which influence how individuals

respond to stress and illness.¹¹ Various studies demonstrate that spirituality is significantly associated with the reduction of psychosomatic symptoms and improvement in clinical outcomes.^{11,12} Individuals with higher levels of spirituality tend to exhibit lower levels of depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints, as well as better therapeutic responses. In this regard, spirituality functions as a coping mechanism that helps individuals manage stress and regulate emotional responses more adaptively.¹³

Religious ritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and regular worship have also been shown to contribute to reducing the prevalence of psychosomatic disorders, including functional gastrointestinal disorders, migraines, and cardiovascular complaints.¹⁴ These activities are associated with increased inner calm, self-control, and emotional stability, which ultimately reduce the activation of the autonomic nervous system due to chronic stress. From a neurobiological perspective, this mechanism involves the regulation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, which plays a role in regulating the body’s response to stress and influencing the immune system.¹³

The neurobiological efficacy of religious ritual practices in mitigating psychosomatic disorders is fundamentally driven by their capacity to modulate the autonomic nervous system and the HPA axis. Specifically, practices involving rhythmic breathing and focused prayer actively stimulate the vagus nerve to engage the parasympathetic nervous system, which initiates a profound relaxation

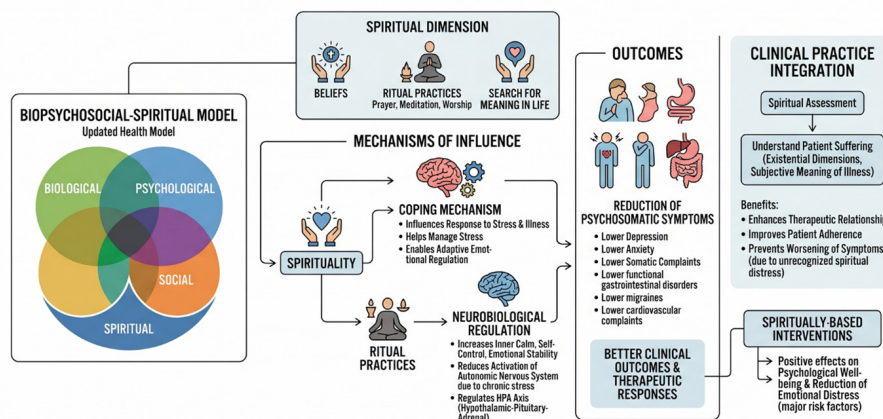


Figure 1. Interconnection between spirituality and psychosomatic health

response.¹⁵ This parasympathetic dominance significantly downregulates HPA axis activity, resulting in decreased cortisol secretion while concurrently promoting the synthesis and release of mood-stabilizing neurotransmitters such as serotonin.¹⁵ Furthermore, structured spiritual recitations induce a state of biological reciprocity, characterized by an acute reduction in stress hormones coupled with a marked upregulation of neuroprotective factors, including brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) and apelin.¹⁶ Consequently, this synchronized neuroendocrine shift counters the deleterious effects of chronic stress; by lowering the systemic cortisol load and promoting neuroplasticity, these practices restore neurochemical balance and enhance emotional regulation.

In clinical practice, the integration of spiritual aspects into the assessment of psychosomatic patients allows healthcare providers to understand patient suffering more comprehensively, including existential dimensions and the subjective meaning of illness experienced. This approach not only enhances the therapeutic relationship but also contributes to improved patient adherence to therapy and prevents the worsening of symptoms due to unrecognized spiritual distress. Furthermore, evidence from meta-analyses indicates that spiritually-based interventions have positive effects on psychological well-being and the reduction of emotional distress, which are major risk factors for psychosomatic complaints.¹³ Thus, the relationship between ritual-spiritual practices and psychosomatic disorders is interconnected through complex psychological and neurobiological mechanisms.

Cultural Perspectives on Mental Health and Preventive Roles of Spirituality

Understanding mental health cannot be separated from the cultural and spiritual context of the individual. The biopsychosocial-spiritual model emphasizes that biological, psychological, social, and spiritual factors interact in shaping an individual's mental well-being, including how individuals understand symptoms, stress, and social relationships.¹⁷ In traditional societies, mental disorders are often interpreted

through cultural and spiritual lenses, including attribution to supernatural factors or spiritual imbalance.^{17,18} Such interpretations directly influence help-seeking behavior, where individuals tend to first access ritual or spiritual community support before seeking formal medical services.¹⁷ However, contemporary literature indicates that ritual-spiritual practices not only function in a curative context but also play important roles in the promotive and preventive aspects of mental health.¹⁹

From a promotive perspective, engagement in spiritual and religious practices has been shown to be associated with increased psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and strengthened individual resilience.^{19,20} Spirituality contributes to building self-confidence, self-control, and hope, which are essential components of psychological well-being. In addition, spiritual attitudes such as inner peace, a sense of connectedness with something greater, and a sense of security within a belief system have been shown to correlate with improved mental conditions and reduced psychosomatic symptoms.¹¹

From a preventive perspective, spiritual practices function as protective factors against the development of mental disorders. Meta-analyses indicate that psycho-socio-spiritual interventions can reduce levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, while enhancing mental resilience in at-risk groups.²¹ Stress regulation through neuroendocrine mechanisms, including modulation of the HPA axis and the autonomic nervous system, also contributes to maintaining stability in the body's response to chronic stress.¹¹ In addition, religious community support helps reduce social isolation and stigma, which are major risk factors in mental disorders, particularly in collectivistic societies.¹⁷

Overall, the integration of culture, spirituality, and mental health demonstrates that ritual-spiritual practices in ethnomedicine not only possess symbolic value but also function as complementary interventions that support psychosomatic balance through psychological, social, spiritual, and biological mechanisms.¹¹ This approach enables the development of a more holistic, contextual, and patient value-sensitive healthcare system, thereby

potentially enhancing the effectiveness of promotive and preventive interventions in mental health.^{17,21}

CONCLUSION

Ritual-spiritual practices in ethnomedicine have a significant role in supporting mental health and psychosomatic balance through mechanisms involving psychological, social, spiritual, and neurobiological aspects. Ritual-spiritual practices function not only as expressions of culture and religion but also as complementary interventions that can assist individuals in managing stress, reducing anxiety, enhancing emotional regulation, and strengthening meaning in life and social support. The integration of cultural and spiritual perspectives has been shown to provide a more comprehensive understanding of patient conditions, particularly in societies where traditional values remain strong. Therefore, it is recommended that healthcare professionals, especially in the field of mental health, possess cultural sensitivity and openness in considering ritual-spiritual practices as part of a holistic, patient-centered approach. Medical education institutions are also expected to integrate the study of ethnomedicine and spirituality into their curricula to strengthen students' competencies in understanding biopsychosocial-spiritual aspects in a comprehensive manner.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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