

"Batekang Hambaruan" as the Meaning of Mental Health in Dayak Culture

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ABSTRACT

Mental health in Indigenous Peoples is often understood through clinical frameworks, thus ignoring the local meanings inherent in culture. This study aims to uncover the meaning of mental health in Dayak culture through the concept of Batekang Hambaruan as a form of inner strength. The study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach, involving participants from the sub-tribes Dayak Ngaju and Dayak Barai in Kalimantan. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results showed that mental health is defined as an individual's ability to recover, think clearly, work, and perform meaningful life roles amid life's stresses. In contrast, the condition of Balemu Hambaruan or Mamau is understood as a temporary phase of mental weakness. Mental vulnerability is influenced by economic, structural, and social labeling pressures, while mental reinforcement is shaped by cultural values such as Isen Mulang and Pintar Harati, indigenous practices, and family and community support. These findings indicate that Batekang Hambaruan represents a form of culture-based resilience in interpreting and maintaining the mental health of the Dayak community, emphasizing the importance of a culturally informed mental health approach for Indigenous communities.

Keywords: Batekang Hambaruan, Mental Health, Dayak Tribe, Indigenous Psychology, Cultural Resilience

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health is a pressing issue for global well-being today. It is an essential aspect of individual welfare, influenced by the complex interaction between biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors (World Health Organization, 2022). This view aligns with Pieper and Uden (2006), who describe mental health as a condition in which a person does not experience feelings of guilt toward themselves, has a realistic self-assessment, is able to accept personal shortcomings, and possesses the capacity to face problems and experience happiness in life.

In Indonesia, mental health issues are showing an alarming trend. Based on research conducted by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia through the 2018 Basic Health Research (Riskesdas), there has been an increase in the number of mental and emotional disorder cases among individuals over 15 years old, particularly related to symptoms of depression and anxiety. The findings reveal two key issues: the high prevalence of mental health problems and the limited access to professional mental health services in Indonesia.

This access gap becomes increasingly complex when involving Indigenous Peoples, particularly the Dayak communities in Kalimantan. Geographical conditions with remote medical facilities have shaped a society that depends on traditional healing. This is not only due to limited access to formal mental health services but also to the cultural values that have been passed down for generations through traditional healing practices (Aquarini & Febriani, 2023). For the Dayak people, mental health is not viewed through a Western clinical lens but understood as a holistic balance among human, natural, and spiritual elements, reflected in a person's ability to carry out daily activities without disruption (Ilmi, 2024).

In daily practice, the Dayak people interpret illness or mental disorder as a damaged or weakened mental condition, known as Balem Hambaruan. The word Balem means a weak or soft soul, while the term Hambaruan in the Dayak Ngaju language refers to life, soul, or spirit (Yulista, 2022). This condition is believed to arise from a weakened relationship between humans and nature or spiritual powers. In facing this vulnerability of the soul, the Dayak Ngaju people hold fast to the Isen Mulang philosophy of life, which means never to back down and to remain steadfast, as well as the Pintar Harati value, which emphasizes clarity of thought and wisdom as the foundation of mental strength in facing life's challenges. This philosophy is embodied in the concept of Batekang Hambaruan, where the soul (Hambaruan) must remain firm and strong (Batekang) so that individuals can live productive lives and avoid the condition of Balem Hambaruan, or a weak soul. In his research, Ilmi (2024) noted that for the Dayak people, a person's inability to work or engage in daily activities is understood as a sign of imbalance between the soul, nature, and the spiritual world.

Previous research in Indonesia has demonstrated that culture and spirituality play significant roles in defining health. Research by Fofid and Winarti (2025) on the Asmat Tribe indicates that health behaviors are influenced by ancestral beliefs and customary practices; however, their study did not examine the meaning of mental health as the mental force supporting individual functioning. Another study by Cholili et al. (2024) found that spirituality has a significant effect on psychological well-being, but this research focused on non-Indigenous populations and did not explore the emic concept of mental health. Meanwhile, a literature study by Novianty (2017) confirmed that culture shapes the definition of and response to mental disorders in Indonesia but did not delve into Indigenous peoples' subjective experiences or local terms representing inner strength.

Although several studies have examined traditional practices, healing rituals, and the role of spirituality among Indigenous communities, these studies generally focus on ritual structure, the role of community leaders, and the functions of traditional medicine (Aquarini & Febriani, 2023; Ilmi, 2024). Therefore, studies that specifically explore the meaning of mental health as a form of inner strength experienced in daily life remain limited—particularly within the context of the Dayak Ngaju and Dayak Barai sub-tribes.

Based on this background, this study seeks to answer how the Dayak people interpret mental health as Batekang Hambaruan—mental strength—by examining the experiences of participants from the Dayak Ngaju and Dayak Barai communities. This research explores how mental health is understood as mental fortitude that enables individuals to remain active and fulfill social roles, along with how relationships with nature, spiritual elements, and social support contribute to maintaining this balance. The urgency of this research lies in the need for a culturally informed understanding of mental health, considering that Western clinical approaches have not fully represented Indigenous frameworks of thought. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study is expected to contribute to the development of Indigenous psychology and serve as a foundation for more contextual and inclusive mental health services for the Dayak people.

METHOD

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen because it is able to explore subjective experiences and individual interpretations of their life events, especially those related to mental health in the context of Dayak culture. This research focuses on understanding the essence of the Batekang Hambaruan phenomenon as experienced by participants. In addition, this study also delves into how culture and social relationships affect their mental health experiences.

Participants

The participants in this study were three people from two Dayak sub-tribes, namely Dayak Ngaju in Central Kalimantan and Dayak Barai in West Kalimantan. The technique of taking participants was carried out by *purposive sampling*, which is deliberate selection based on certain criteria that are in accordance with the research objectives (Creswell, 2013). The inclusion criteria in this study include: (1) individuals from the Dayak tribe, (2) at least 18 years old, and (3) have experience or in-depth knowledge about customs and the meaning of psychological disorders in the context of Dayak culture. These criteria are set to ensure that participants are able to provide relevant and reflective information related to their experiences and views on mental health.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was carried out through *in-depth interviews* with a semi-structured approach. Interviews were conducted online from May to June 2025 with an average duration of 45–60 minutes. All interviews were conducted with the consent of the participants and recorded for data analysis purposes. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were given pseudonymous initials.

Research Instruments

The main instrument in this study is the researcher himself who acts as a human instrument. The preparation of interview guidelines was carried out collaboratively by the researcher with the Marginal and Indigenous Community Mental Health KR team under the guidance of the supervisor. This phenomenological study uses a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore the meaning of mental health in the cultures of the Ngaju Dayak and Dayak Barai Tribes. The interview guide included questions regarding participants' understanding of sick and mental health conditions, the meaning of mental strength (Hambaruan), and experiences of dealing with mental vulnerability in daily life. Some key questions include "What does a healthy soul mean to you?", "When is a person considered to have a strong or weakened soul?", and "What is the role of traditional rituals, cultural values, and social support in restoring soul balance?". This approach allows participants to reflect on their subjective experiences in depth in the context of the culture in which they live.

Data Analysis

The data in this study was analyzed using a thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analysis follows six systematic stages, namely: (1) *familiarization*, where the researcher reads interview transcripts repeatedly to understand the context and overall narrative; (2) *generating initial codes*, which is the process of giving initial codes to statements that are relevant to the focus of the research; (3) *searching for themes*, where the codes are categorized into sub-themes and then consolidated into initial themes; (4)

reviewing themes, namely reflecting on the interconnectedness between sub-themes and reviewing the feasibility of thematic structures; (5) *defining and naming themes*, which is to provide the right name and conceptual definition for each main theme; and (6) *producing the report*, which is to compile a thematic narrative based on field findings related to the local cultural context of the Dayak community. In this study, the data was analyzed using the *OpenCode 4.0* software.

Data Validity

To ensure the validity and validity of the data, this study refers to four *trustworthiness* criteria put forward by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely: (1) *credibility*, maintained through member checking by asking participants to verify transcripts and initial interpretations to ensure the suitability of meaning; (2) *transferability*, achieved by describing the social and cultural background of the participants in detail so that the reader can consider the applicability of the findings in other contexts; (3) *dependability*, maintained through periodic discussions with supervisors and research team members; and (4) *confirmability*, carried out by systematically documenting the entire process so that the interpretation of findings can be traced back to the data source.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Thematic analysis of interview data from three participants from the Dayak Ngaju sub-tribe in Central Kalimantan and Dayak Barai in West Kalimantan resulted in the main themes, namely: (1) Mental Vulnerability as a Condition of Weakness of the Soul, (2) The Meaning of Mental Health as the Power of the Soul (*Batekang Hambaruan*), (3) The Role of Culture in Dealing with Mental Disorders, (4) The Role of Social Relations in Strengthening the Soul. The four main themes are then synthesized in the form of a mind map to describe the relationship between themes in forming the meaning of mental health as *Batekang Hambaruan*.

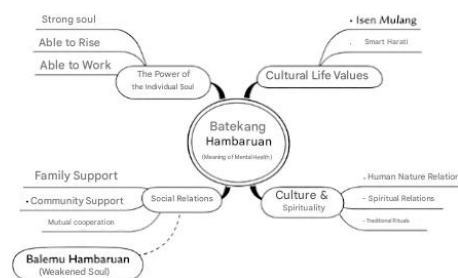


Figure 1. Mind map of the meaning of mental health (*Batekang Hambaruan*) based on the results of thematic analysis in Dayak society

Mental Vulnerability as a Condition of Weakening the Soul

Mental vulnerability in the participant's experience is understood as a state of the soul that is in a weak state and is unable to carry out life functions optimally. This condition is not interpreted as a mental disorder clinically, but is considered a part of life that arises due to economic and structural pressures, such as limited job opportunities and increasing demands

on life. This pressure makes it difficult for individuals to get up and do their activities as they should.

The mental disorders are actually more related to economic factors, structural pressures and more to do with the question of life. This Dayak person is a person who is spoiled by nature. [...] Well, but the current condition is not like that, right. Well, that's where one of the social realities of the structural pressure of the current condition is that as a result they experience problems that they even find difficult. (IF3. W1/SRU/555-570)

In the face of perceived pressure, some individuals show maladaptive responses, such as alcohol consumption or other addictive substances, which are interpreted as temporary escape attempts to relieve the perceived pressure. The condition of weakening of the soul is also attached to social labeling in the community. In the Dayak Barai community, this condition is known as *Mamau*, while the Dayak Ngaju community uses the term *Balemu Hambaruan* to describe the weakness of the soul. Although the terms are different, they refer to a similar condition, namely the inability of individuals to carry out daily roles and activities, which often encourages individuals to withdraw from the social environment.

The life value of *Isen Mulang*, which is embraced by the Dayak Ngaju community, also shapes the way individuals deal with these vulnerabilities. On the one hand, these values encourage the spirit of individuals to fight and persevere. However, on the other hand, this value actually gives rise to a tendency to refuse to look weak. As a result, mental vulnerability is not expressed openly but is stored in the inner experience of the individual.

The Meaning of Mental Health as the Power of the Soul (Batekang Hambaruan)

Mental health is defined as a strong and resilient mental condition. In Dayak culture, it is known as *Bakkang Hambaruan*. A strong soul is understood as the ability of an individual to rise from adversity, think clearly, and be able to carry out daily life functionally. Participants viewed the ability to work as a key indicator of a person's mental strength and mental health.

"... If he can still work, it is not said to be sick, he can still go to the fields. The so-called pain is when you are in bed." (IF3. W2/SRU/826-833)

The strength of the soul in *Batekang Hambaruan* is understood as a state that is constantly changing, where a person can feel the ups and downs of the condition of the soul according to the life experience that is going through. On the other hand, *the condition of Balemu Hambaruan* is understood as a condition when the strength of the soul is in a weak position. This condition is characterized by a loss of enthusiasm for life and a decline in the ability to think optimally. Participants view *Balemu Hambaruan* not as a label that is used permanently, but as a temporary condition that can be experienced by anyone and restored. Therefore, the ability to return to daily activities is seen as the main indicator of the recovery of mental strength.

The process of strengthening the soul (*A Brief History of Reform*) is interpreted as an individual process to restore *Snoring* to get back strong. This process involves an individual's efforts to get up, manage thoughts and feelings, and maintain a zest for life. In this case, mental health is understood as a dynamic process, where the strength of the soul can be strengthened or weakened along with life experiences and the support formed by the culture in the Dayak society.

The Role of Culture in Dealing with Mental Vulnerability

Culture has an important role in interpreting and dealing with mental vulnerability. Participants explained that a weakened state of the soul is understood as a disturbance of the balance of relationships between humans, nature, and spirituality. This understanding shapes the society's view that mental vulnerability is not just an individual problem, but a condition related to broader spiritual and cosmological relationships.

In dealing with these conditions, traditional rituals are understood as one of the efforts to restore the balance of the soul. Participants mentioned ritual practices such as Manyanggiang and Bebadī led by traditional leaders or Balian as a form of cultural effort in dealing with mental vulnerability. These rituals are not interpreted as multalk healing for mental disorders, but rather as a means to provide calm, hope, inner strengthening, and support that individuals who are experiencing a weakened mental condition get.

"If the Dayak people, even though they have various religions, still hold their culture as Dayaks. [...] If there are psychological problems, they are often associated with spirituality, either through dreams or omens, and are usually dealt with through traditional rituals." (IF2. W1/KA/135-146,174-176)

In addition to rituals, the life values embraced by the Dayak community also play a role in shaping the way individuals deal with mental vulnerability. Participants interpret the value *Isen Teaches* is understood as a teaching to keep fighting and not give up in the face of life's difficulties, while *Painting Harati* It is interpreted as the intelligence of the soul and mind in finding a creative and adaptive solution. These terms specifically appear in the experiences of Dayak Ngaju participants, but participants from the Dayak Barai subtribe show a harmonious meaning, even though they do not use the same terms. These values are the guidelines for life to encourage individuals to continue to strengthen their souls and continue to live even in difficult conditions.

Participants also revealed that the Dayak community does not cover themselves up to modern medical approaches in handling mental health problems. However, this approach is expected to be in line with the values and culture embraced by the local community. Thus, culture is not positioned as a substitute for medical services, but rather as a framework of meaning that provides a basis for individuals to understand and deal with mental vulnerability.

The Role of Social Relations in Strengthening the Soul

Social Relations are understood by participants as an important factor in strengthening the soul and maintaining mental health. Support from family and community is the main source of strengthening *Snoring* when the individual experiences a weakened mental condition. The presence of those closest to you gives a sense of acceptance, attention, and not being allowed to face difficulties alone.

"Well, after all, with the support of the family and the support of the surrounding community, yes, this is also a part that consciously also gives something, gives a revival for the person himself, that's it, yes, the person rises up to fight against that situation, that's right. [...] So at least if the name is Hambaruan, so at that time they said when the sick person earlier, the traumatized one was Balemū Hambaruan, what is it, the weakness of their souls, the weakness of their souls, that's it. That's why with the presence of the previous one, they actually called it by straining Hambaruan,

strengthening the soul, that's it. Now that's what it actually is, even though it's medically impossible to cure, that's right. But there are some things that are affected as a revival, yes, the rise of a new spirit, that's it. [...] Well, supported by the community again, yes, the surrounding community who was present there with the shamans ceremony, yes, well finally gradually it can, yes, there is a strengthening, because he was caused by what he was earlier, Balem Hambaruan, his weak spirit, his soul, that's it. [...] So, so that if it is at certain levels, yes, this is possible, if he did have weakness in his soul earlier, yes, so the support of his family and community can actually be able to heal, that's right". (IF3. W2/SRU/290-305)

Participants described that in Dayak society, individuals with weakened mental conditions are not necessarily excluded. The value of equality is upheld in realizing social support demonstrated by the involvement of families and communities in daily life, including accompaniment, counseling, and helping to meet basic needs. This practice of mutual cooperation and togetherness creates a conducive environment for individuals to slowly rise and carry out their life roles.

Social relations also play a role in awakening the spirit of life and strengthening the value of Isen Mulang in individuals who experience mental vulnerability. Encouragement from family and society helps individuals not to dissolve in a weakened mental condition, but to be encouraged to return to struggle and reconcile Hambaruan. Thus, social relations not only serve as emotional support, but also an important source in the process of strengthening the soul and the meaning of mental health in Dayak culture.

Discussion

This study aims to show that mental health in Dayak culture is interpreted as a strong mental condition (Batekang Hambaruan), which is reflected in an individual's ability to continue functioning in daily life. Mental health is not interpreted as the absence of problems or clinical disorders but rather as the ability of individuals to rise, think clearly, work, and perform meaningful life roles amid life's pressures. This interpretation emphasizes that health and mental illness are understood contextually and are rooted in everyday life experiences—not merely as formal clinical matters—in line with the view that mental health and resilience are shaped by cultural context and individual life functioning (Hariyono, 2024). This perspective also aligns with indigenous psychological theories that view mental health as a process embedded in culture, values, and social relationships that shape how individuals understand and respond to their life experiences.

The meaning of mental health as a soul force serves as an entry point to understanding conditions perceived differently in Dayak culture. Mental vulnerability is understood as a condition of soul weakening (Balem Hambaruan or Mamau) that arises as a response to economic, structural, and social pressures. This understanding shows that psychological suffering is considered a situational individual experience that can occur at any time and to anyone, particularly when faced with severe economic, structural, or social stress. This interpretation aligns with the views of Novianty and Hadjam (2017), who explain that in the Indonesian cultural context, mental disorders are often understood as responses to oppressive living conditions, especially in communities with limited access to mental health services and support. A similar view is presented in community mental health research by Subandi (2015),

who emphasizes that non-Western societies often interpret psychological disorders as dynamic and recoverable through the strengthening of meaning, social relationships, and environmental support.

When the soul weakens due to stress, this study found the emergence of maladaptive behavior understood as an individual's effort to relieve mental burdens. Such behavior is not seen as the main cause of mental disorders but rather as a coping response to life pressures. These findings support the research of Ungar (2021), which shows that risky coping strategies often develop in social contexts with limited supportive resources. Thus, such behavior is more accurately interpreted as a consequence of mental vulnerability rather than as the primary cause of mental disorders. From a clinical perspective, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) also argue that risky coping strategies can develop when individuals perceive environmental demands as exceeding their ability to cope. In the context of Balem Hambaruan, maladaptive behavior reflects an individual's effort to survive psychologically amid intense life pressures; therefore, it is essential to understand it within the context of environmental experiences and surrounding social structures.

Social labeling such as Mamau and Balem Hambaruan demonstrates how culture gives language to the weakened state of the soul. These terms serve as collective means of understanding psychological suffering within a cultural framework. Research by Herdiyanto and Tobing (2016) revealed that regional languages function as primary tools in constructing the understanding of mental health problems and shaping community social reactions. Meanwhile, Setianingsih et al. (2022) emphasize that this understanding is inseparable from spiritual beliefs and cultural norms upheld by traditional societies. Local language, in this sense, not only shapes the meaning of mental illness but also influences social patterns within the community, including how individuals interact, receive, and provide support (Pramana & Herdiyanto, 2018).

The meaning of mental health as mental strength forms the core finding of this study, where mental health is understood as a condition that enables individuals to function, remain active, and live meaningfully. This finding reinforces the research of Marlinda et al. (2023), which shows that the concept of health in Dayak society is closely related to the ability to be active while adding a psychological dimension in the form of mental strength as the primary foundation of mental health.

Culture plays an essential role as a framework for addressing mental vulnerability. Mental disorders are understood as disruptions in the balance of relationships between humans, nature, and the spiritual dimension. Traditional rituals and life values such as Isen Mulang and Pintar Harati function as sources of meaning, inner strength, and encouragement to persevere. These findings align with the research of Widaty et al. (2021) and Arianti & Wurdianto (2021), which show that cultural practices play a role in psychosocial strengthening, although they are not always interpreted as means of clinical healing.

Social relationships form the foundation of an important process in Reforming Hambaruan, which refers to the reawakening of a weakened soul. Family and community support help individuals feel accepted, connected, and encouraged to recover. This study demonstrates that the restoration of the soul in Dayak culture occurs through social connections within the community, which engage collectively in shared rituals and activities. This finding

corroborates the research of Octaviane et al. (2024), which shows that social support reduces feelings of loneliness and psychological distress while strengthening individual functioning in coping with life stress. This pattern aligns with the stress-buffering hypothesis proposed by Cohen and Wills (1985), which states that social support provides a protective buffer against stress, especially when the support is emotional, instrumental, and informational in nature. In Dayak society, these three forms of support are present in family relationships and traditional practices that form part of soul-strengthening healing processes.

Overall, this study suggests that Batekang Hambaruan is a holistic and dynamic construction of mental health shaped by the interaction of soul strength, cultural values, and social relationships. In this context, Batekang Hambaruan represents a form of cultural resilience that enables Dayak individuals and communities to endure and recover from life's pressures. These findings enrich the study of indigenous psychology by offering a culturally sensitive understanding of mental health while maintaining dialogue with modern psychological approaches.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that mental health in Dayak culture is interpreted as a strong mental condition (Batekang Hambaruan). Mental health is not understood as the absence of problems or clinical disorders but rather as the ability of individuals to rise, think clearly, work, and perform meaningful life roles amid life's stresses. Conversely, the condition of Balemu Hambaruan or Mamau is understood as a temporary phase of soul weakening that can be restored through the process of strengthening the soul.

The findings of this study confirm that the strength of the soul is formed through the interaction among cultural values, customary practices, and social relationships. Life principles such as Isen Mulang and Pintar Harati, along with family and community support, play important roles in maintaining and improving Hambaruan. Thus, Batekang Hambaruan can be understood as a form of culture-based resilience in interpreting and sustaining the mental health of the Dayak community.=.

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