



Ethnographic Exploration of Mental Health Awareness and Perception Among the Ayta Magbukun

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Abstract

The Ayta Magbukun is a prominent indigenous group inhabiting the Bataan Peninsula. This study aims to gain insight into the community's awareness and perspectives on mental health, as well as the challenges they face, given the limited information and resources readily available on their end. Using an ethnographic approach, the study was conducted through careful observations and field work, employing five voluntary tribe members selected through convenience sampling. The study revealed significant challenges in the community's ability to obtain formal mental health assistance and relevant information about mental health among Filipino indigenous people. The findings revealed that the Ayta Magbukun have a basic understanding of mental health, but their overall awareness remains limited. They mainly rely on traditional health care practices, and face challenges in accessing formal mental health services and acquiring mental health literacy. The study identified three main themes about their 1) Mental Health Awareness, 2) use of Alternative Healing, highlighting the community's reliance and preference for traditional practices; and 3) existing Barriers to Wellness that hinder their access to mental health resources. It is suggested that the community's psychological perspectives and socioeconomic conditions can significantly affect their ability to achieve overall well-being. Also, it highlights the need for culturally appropriate mental health programs and accessible mental healthcare for the Ayta Magbukun as well as for other indigenous communities in the Philippines. Generally, the paper contributes to the broader discussion of indigenous mental health and Filipino psychology by advocating for approaches that align with culturally appropriate indigenous perspectives on mental health, promoting resilience and holistic wellness in these communities.

Keywords: *Ayta Magbukun; Indigenous Psychology; Mental Health; Indigenous Healthcare Disparity; Indigenous Mental Wellness*

Introduction

The Indigenous Peoples are considered a marginalized minority, and efforts to bridge the gap between IPs and non-IPs have led to the enactment of laws, such as the Republic Act No. 8371 or the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 which guarantees IPs' access to basic services, including healthcare. Despite the provisions, there are instances wherein IPs often face various hindrances that prevent them from accessing human rights, the environment, education, and health (Gilbert, 2019). Indigenous people frequently encounter challenges such as language barriers, geographical isolation, cultural insensitivity in healthcare delivery, and a growing fear of marginalization, all of which hinder their access to mental health services.

Locally, the majority of IPs live in rural areas; have low-income, and belong to the poorest socioeconomic quintile, highlighting the disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous groups (Duante et.al, 2021). Factors such as limited access to health and education within native populations further compound these challenges. Historical accounts show that Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines have long suffered from discrimination and restricted access to education. Education can have a direct influence on health by increasing overall self-awareness about well-being and making therapy more accessible (Raguphati, 2020). The Aeta Community faces additional challenges due to how the community perceives them, including financial hardship, prejudice against people from the lowlands, reluctance to seek mental health services due to beliefs about health practices, and difficulty finding transportation (Celis et al, 2023).

Indigenous populations often have lower health indicators compared to non-indigenous populations, regardless of their location or socio-economic status (Onsay, 2022). This disparity is particularly pronounced in the realm of mental health, where conditions such as depression or anxiety may go unnoticed due to a lack of awareness and limited access to mental health support within indigenous communities (Zinck & Marmion, 2011). The exploration of indigenous ways of mental health management in specific indigenous communities in the Philippines is necessary in promoting holistic and culturally-responsive approaches to mental health care.

Indigenous people often rely on herbal remedies and faith healers as alternative approaches to address mental health challenges. These traditional practices are rooted in the beliefs and methods of their communities, which aim to directly or progressively address mental health concerns (Lewis, 2022). Indigenous healing practices reflect a holistic view of well-being, incorporating spiritual and cultural elements, as well as superstitious beliefs, to provide a sense of understanding and a potential cure for mental health issues (Villanueva, 2021; Santisteban et al., 2023). Superstitious beliefs co-existing with herbal medications, specifically, with the aim of indigenous healing, indigenous people believe that superstitions offer individuals a sense of understanding in the absence of sufficient information to develop accurate causal explanations.

The historical and cultural perspective of the Filipinos, The Philippines' mental health issue is a reflection of its long pre-colonial past. Beliefs attributing illness to changes in the natural environment, witchcraft and sorcery, violations of social norms and punishment by environmental spirits, and the healing power of shamans pervaded the archipelago long before the colonists arrived, and they continue to do so today (Ladrigo-Ignacio, et.al, 2017). In a study conducted by Balilla et. al (2013), a group of Ayta Magbukun in Mariveles, Bataan believe in a supreme being of God and also in anitos or spirit of their ancestors. Anitos are categorized into "*malaut*" (bad) or "*mabuting*" (good) *anitos*. Bad anitos are believed to cause illnesses and even possess and dwell in an Ayta's body. *Kagun*, an Ayta healer, is present to help battle and cure those illnesses. However, despite the presence of *Kagun* in their community, the Ayta Magbukun is said to engage in medical pluralism which means they use both traditional and modernized forms of healing. Similarly, in another study conducted by Martinez (2019), it

was found out that in another group of Aytas situated in Nabuclod, Pampanga the spirit anito is also present in their culture and has a very similar concept of causing illnesses and possession.

Traditional belief of spirit possession or “*sapi*” in the Philippine context is caused by spirits that may affect the tangible worlds, moreover this may manifest through dissociative trance affecting the psychological domain (Cervantes, 2022). However, in the modern times and with the advancement in medicine, it is believed that evil possession, sorcery or punishment for wrongdoing is a traditional view for mental illness (Subu et al. 2022). Furthermore, spirit possession, in the context of mental health and health professionals, is seen as a cognitive disease or disorder (Ang & Montiel, 2019). Professionals who experienced patients with possession- like cases, explained that excess dopamine in the brain is common to these patients and that it can be managed through medications, thus, ruling out any spiritual and supernatural causes. This suggests that mental illnesses are present in the tribe of the Aytas with just not enough awareness of it.

This notion is attributed in their deep-rooted culture and superstitious belief and as a way to compromise with the lack of resources to access health services and the inability to tap into the availability of public health services, specifically, mental health.

This paper focused on the Ayta Magbukun, named after their separation from other Ayta language groups, who have long inhabited the Bataan Peninsula. This study aimed to evaluate the Magbukun tribe's awareness and perception of mental health. Like the majority of indigenous people worldwide, the Ayta Magbukun understand that they are marginalized on both a social and economic level (Balilla et.al, 2013). According to studies, indigenous people in several nations are more likely to suffer from mental health issues, yet getting mental health care remains difficult owing to various obstacles. As a result, while there are existing laws in the Philippines that guarantee Indigenous peoples' rights to healthcare, they continue to live in remote places with limited access to basic social services and other possibilities (Celis, 2023). This contributes to insufficient access to mental health care and sensibility.

Studies showed that 2-3 per 100,000 is the ratio of mental health workers per population here in the Philippines and only a little over 500 psychiatrists are in practice (Lally et al. 2019), magnifying the shortage of mental health professionals in the Philippines. Individuals vulnerable to this discrepancy are populations under marginalized groups (Agner et al. 2024). In addition to that, the accessibility of mental healthcare is very limited in the Philippines and that majority of mental health care is provided in hospital settings (Lally et al. 2019). Implying that Indigenous residents and communities have little to no access to mental health services.

Depression is an alarming psychological condition among indigenous peoples throughout the world (Faruk et al. 2021). Often understood as emotional distress or disability in response to pain, suffering, and endurance on stressful life events, particularly those associated with poverty, is seen as a significant contributing factor. In indigenous communities, such events are perceived as threatening and unmanageable as a consequence, leading to the manifestations of depressive symptoms and often remain untreated (Bolinao & De Guzman, 2017). Thus, this study aims to explore the Ayta Magbukun tribe's perception of mental health, particularly on the awareness regarding mental health conditions. It seeks to identify how these conditions are interpreted within the community as well as how the psychosocial variables impact these perspectives.

Methods

Research Design

This study was informed through an ethnographic approach. Indigenous methods of research were carefully observed and practiced to immerse in a natural, respectful, and culturally acceptable manner in getting an in-depth insight of the Magbukun tribe's health condition, including their beliefs and practices about their psychological well-being and attitude (Pe-Pua, 1989). Data were collected via observations and a series of interviews to draw insights about the relevance of the Ayta Magbukuns' perspective on mental health and uncover the underlying conditions that present mental health awareness and disparities.

Participants

The participants in this study were members of the Ayta Magbukun community residing in Sitio Bayan Bayanan Pag-asa, Orani Bataan, Philippines. This location is noted for its remoteness and limited access to urban centers and healthcare facilities. This study specifically focused on this community to address the gap in knowledge regarding mental health needs and experiences of Indigenous peoples, who often have reduced access to professional mental health services compared to the majority populations, contributing to significant health disparities (Goetz et al., 2022). The ages of the participants ranged from 25 to 70 years. The gender distribution comprised of 3 females and 2 males. The participants generally came from low-income backgrounds, with the majority relying on subsistence farming and occasional manual labor for their income. This placed them primarily within the lower socioeconomic status, characterized by limited access to financial resources and formal employment opportunities.

Data Collection

This research was conducted with the help of the Local Government Unit of Orani, Bataan. The researchers secured a permit from the National Commission of Indigenous People for an ethical conduct of the study. Access to the indigenous community was facilitated by the LGU. Qualified participants were provided with detailed information and were provided with informed consent. The interview sessions lasted for about one (1) hour for each session, and were held at times most convenient for the participants. The location for the interviews, including community church and participants' homes, depended on the participants availability and accessibility.

The researchers used a semi-structured interview informed through visiting (*pagdalaw-dalaw*), interacting (*pakikisalamuha*), and conforming (*pakikibagay*). Permission to obtain audio recordings was requested then permitted, confidentiality and ethical guidelines were strictly followed, and the privacy of participants was maintained. To derive insights from the interview transcripts, thematic analysis was employed in this study. Reports and presentations were utilized to disseminate the gathered data, with continuous engagement with the LGU and community leaders for feedback and ongoing communication.

Data Analysis

Gathered data was thematically analyzed to give meaning to information that was collected, documented, and described. The method of choosing codes and developing themes is a technique for characterizing data that also incorporates interpretation. Thematic analysis has a versatility that allows it to be applied to a broad range of research questions, designs, and sample sizes, all while fitting within a variety of theoretical and epistemological frameworks (Kirgo & Varpio, 2020).

The researchers utilized semi-structured interview questions which allowed them to extract and clarify relevant data from the participants. Interview data in the form of audio recording were then

transcribed and thoroughly reviewed; this was verified by the participants to not only limit bias but to also ensure accuracy and integrity of data. The researchers then record recurring descriptions and patterns in the Ayta of Magbukun's beliefs and practices in regards to mental health conditions. Significant details and components were organized, coded, and defined. Major themes were generated, analyzed, and compared to the view and description of mental health. The thematic data also underwent expert validation in the process, to guarantee coherence, quality, and refinement of data content.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting the study, ethical criteria were followed to protect the participants' autonomy, privacy, and well-being. Ensuring the protection of the rights and welfare of indigenous communities and complies with ethical standards, securing a state approval from the National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP) is properly abided. Approval was obtained from the local government unit of Barangay Pag-asa, Orani, Bataan and the Chieftain of the Ayta Magbukun tribe in conducting this inquiry within the community. This guarantee compliance in protecting the study participants' integrity, emphasizing respect, welfare and practice of cultural sensitivity by honoring the tribe's customs and traditions. All participants were given an informed consent and attested to their understanding of the study's goals, methods, and identified risk.

Strict adherence to data privacy and confidentiality, as required by the Data Privacy Act of 2012, was followed at every stage of the research process. Researchers mindfully took precautions to protect the private information of participants, like using anonymized data and secure storage system, ethical guidelines such as informed consent, confidentiality, cultural sensitivity, and minimizing harm were followed on conducting research on the Ayta Magbukun of Sitio Bayan Bayanan's perceptions and awareness on mental health.

Results

This ethnographic inquiry aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of mental health awareness and perception among the Ayta Magbukun. Through an in-depth engagement with the cultural nuances and social dynamics of the community, three major themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) Mental Health Awareness, divided into two subthemes: (1.1) Consciousness and (1.2) Proactive. The second theme, (2) Barriers to Wellness which is divided into two subthemes of (2.1) Psychological Perception and (2.2) Socioeconomic Determinants. The last main theme is (3) Alternative Healing which consists of subthemes; (3.1) Traditional Healing and (3.2) Herbal Healing.

Mental Health Awareness

The theme features the extent of Ayta Magbukun's awareness and understanding of matters related to mental health. It explores their insights and perspectives on various aspects of mental health including steps they take to promote mental health. This involves strategies that help them effectively cope and navigate through daily stressors, support systems present within the community that helps provide psychological and emotional support to tribe members. Moreover, it delves into the preventative measures of the Ayta Magbukun in reducing risk for mental illnesses.

Consciousness

The subtheme highlights Ayta Magbukun's consciousness and awareness of the mind, particularly regarding certain aspects of mental health. Their daily experiences shed light on the extent of their understanding of mental health, particularly depression. Local terms were discovered to express different

levels of sorrow and sadness, such as "*Kakalu ka mata*" to describe a person exhibiting an extreme, pitiful level of sadness. "*Kakalu*" means emptiness, and "*kalunu-lunu*" denotes great sorrow.

"You see a person who is sad, you'd say "kakalu ka mata, kakalu ka mata" it's like their situation is pitiful... kakalu is like, in tagalog, having nothing at all in life... while kalunu lunu is like they're in great sorrow."

It was also brought to light that a tribe member is diagnosed with depression and is undergoing professional treatment, and the significance of medication to manage her condition was emphasized.

"([Identity redacted] currently she is on medication plus she gets injected with tranquilizer, since she is depressed of her family." (INT2)

Participants expressed distinctive understandings of mental health throughout the interview. One participant believes that the issue is not the cause of mental distress, but rather how the problem is perceived. It was also expressed that when it comes to matters of the mind, we need to be open-minded to have a better understanding, including what is considered right and wrong. Another participant grasped that emotional distress stems from challenges in daily life, resulting in hard-to-regulate extreme sadness.

".. In my belief I think it depends on the person when it comes to those kinds of thoughts." (INT1)

".. I'm also starting to feel sad about myself... you're a goner, you can't handle yourself." (INT4)

Consciousness of wellness also emerged, encompassing the quality of having good health and overall well-being in physical and mental aspects. According to one participant, health is something better maintained through proactive care, implying that prevention is preferable to treatment for achieving overall well-being.

"If our health is taken care of, it's better." (INT1)

Proactive

Ayta Magbukun's actions, initiatives, and attitudes promote well-being and support mental health. This includes behaviors that are beneficial for mental health and coping strategies.

The tribe practices varied help-seeking attitudes when there are members experiencing emotional distress. One participant shared that they actively advise and converse with members showing mental distress, and they would assist the member in seeking professional help if the member is feeling severe or complicated distress. Similarly, another participant sees hospitals as the place to seek help when facing mental health concerns. In contrast, one participant relies on a family-centered approach to maintain and support the mental well-being of others.

"You will talk to them if they feel sad and why they seem different. You can take them to hospitals to address their sadness if perhaps they're feeling something else that they can't explain here in the tribe." (INT1)

"What we do, as a family, when we feel something, they tell me, 'Dad, we have... implication of problems, needs, or concerns.'" (INT4)

The tribe perceived a specific government assistance for some basic needs. The detailed support covers some medical aid, financial assistance, and social services. According to one participant, a financial aid program (4Ps or Family Development Sessions) that aids to overall well-being and addresses psychosocial needs.

“They [people with mental condition] can ask for medical assistance and continuation of their medication.” (INT2)

“In 4Ps alone, ma'am... we've learned a lot from 4Ps, we're taught about cleanliness, health. Many other things like children's education.” (INT3)

Within the tribe, distinct coping strategies emerge. One common approach is community engagement, where individuals experiencing difficulties rely on advice from the community. This allows the community to alleviate someone's sadness through meaningful dialogue. Furthermore, different basic home activities, such as laundry, walking, and casual conversations, are regarded as therapeutic for some members.

“No, there's nothing, there are also many ways to pass the time. Doing laundry, going to the forest, looking for things that can be sold, like that.” (INT5)

“Sometimes, we entertain ourselves on our own. Sometimes, we chat with the folks down there in the sitio.” (INT5)

One participant expressed a dedication to positive religious coping, engaging in prayer to convey divine gratitude, find comfort, and seek guidance, which helps maintain emotional balance. She also shared that emotional management is a technique she uses to cope with stress-causing challenges and maintain a healthy mind. In contrast, another participant revealed adaptive coping strategies in the face of age-related physical limitations, demonstrating resilience against potential geriatric mental health decline.

“Do not forget to pray, because it is only through the Lord that we can find solace in prayer like that.” (INT3)

“When we have problems, let's not take them too much to heart so we won't get stressed out.” (INT3)

Barriers to Wellness

The theme examines the tribes' psychological perspectives and socioeconomic conditions, identifying challenges that the Magbukun tribe faces in achieving mental health awareness and wellness. Indicating restrict access to medical and mental healthcare services. The theme further explores the effects of these challenges, highlighting how the interrelation of these barriers affects their holistic health.

Psychological perspectives

Predominant findings showed the immense concern on the participants tendency to have an unhealthy coping-mechanism towards existing psychological distresses throughout their way of living. Some members of the Magbukun tribe have established alcohol induced disinhibition, leading to risky behaviours affecting and influencing the community. .

“My observation is that they are dealing with their problems by drinking.” (INT2)

The participants stated notable apprehension to the extensive healthcare disparity that generally exists in the community. According to the participants, this disparity has persisted for many years. One participant, a Barangay Health Worker, mentioned the need for and the lack of a community psychologist, which then stresses the absence of mental health professionals to attend to their mental health conditions.

“As of now, there is none, there is no action regarding that mental health concerns.” (INT1)

“I hope that every health center will also have a psychologist.” (INT2)

The tribe's fear of disappointment and reluctance to seek healthcare services stem from the inadequate quality of medical services and the scarcity of local government aid.

One participant, being acquainted with someone who has a mental illness, expressed fear of pharmacological dependence due to their traditional beliefs and personal perception of losing control over their health, and the potential risks involved.

“When maybe she just ran out of her medicine, but sometimes I say, I tell her not to depend too much on medication.” (INT2)

The findings also revealed that most participants from the Magbukun tribe demonstrated a lack of full comprehension about mental health. Initially, one participant stated that mental health involves an individual's thoughts and potential challenges that can impact their cognitive processes and capacity to experience mental illness. When participants were asked about their perceptions and understanding of mental health, some claimed that mental health and mental health issues do not exist in their community, despite recognizing their own experiences of mental distress and the importance of mental health interventions. Subsequently, they hesitated to answer whether they fully understand what mental health is, citing difficulties in fully explaining their awareness and perceptions on the subject.

Socioeconomic Determinants

Focusing on the Magbukun tribe, this study delves into the socioeconomic factors that influence obstacles to wellness.

The financial strain is a significant trigger for mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. This financial stress is particularly acute for families with many children and unstable employment, leading parents to worry about providing basic needs and education. Temporary relief aid offers only short-term alleviation and fails to address underlying issues, as evidenced by anecdotal accounts.

“Most of our depression comes from poverty.” (INT2)

“The main issue here is financial because if you have a family with five or six children and no stable job, you worry about where to get food for your children, how to send them to school, thoughts like that.” (INT5)

The importance of communal support networks is highlighted, serving as a critical defense against financial stressors and promoting mental well-being. Additionally, environmental stressors, such as typhoons and heavy rain, exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and fears among the tribe members.

These insights highlight the existing financial strain, communal support, and environmental stressors in influencing the mental well-being of the Magbukun tribe, suggesting a need for comprehensive strategies that encompass both economic and mental health support systems.

Alternative Healing

Alternative healing is coined to explain the different ways the Ayta Magbukun alleviate illnesses such as faith healing and herbal medicines. The Magbukun tribe has their own healer, known as a kagun, who is responsible for addressing spiritual concerns within the community. The kagun employs traditional practices and knowledge to treat different spiritual and physical conditions. Members of the tribe who receive treatment from the kagun often cite a sense of relief and recovery in their physical condition. The kagun also deals with nightmares and helps relieve their manifestations. However, if the kagun is unable to treat a patient effectively, they will recommend seeking professional medical treatment

outside the tribe. For common illnesses, the tribe relies heavily on herbal remedies derived from their rich understanding of native plants. Despite their extensive use of herbal medicine for physical ailments, there is no specific herbal remedy within the Magbukun tribe for addressing mental health challenges.

“Here in our community we refer to a kagun, we have a healer who deals with spirituality. The kagun will tell us to bring them to the professionals, they will tell it if they cannot treat the person.” (INT2)

“Here in our community, UTI is the most common illness that we encounter, our best medicine for it is the paragis and nito.” (INT5)

Discussion

The community of the Ayta Magbukun has been observed to be a developing community. Corresponding to that, the Ayta Magbukun have shown varied efforts of comprehending and managing their mental health which enable them to endure and overcome life stresses and challenges. The community shares a certain degree of mental health literacy. Health literacy outlines the ability to access, understand, appraise and apply health information across health care, illness prevention and health promotion (Tolabing et al. 2022). IPs are aware of their right to health, understanding principles like access to healthcare, medical services, and well-being. However, this awareness remains mostly intellectual, as practical access to healthcare is restricted by social determinants that prevent them from fully realizing these rights. (Horrill et al., 2018). Indigenous communities often express their mental health issues as somatic complaints, failing to recognize that their physical complaints might actually be rooted in psychological problems. (Brian & Mabulay, 2024). Health and illness are seen as a holistic experience involving multiple dimensions of human well-being, particularly physical and emotional aspects.

According to WHO, mental health is a state of psychological well-being that allows people to cope with life’s stress, understand their abilities, learn and perform well, and contribute to their community. Understanding of mental health literacy can lead to improved mental health outcomes, help-seeking behavior, and nurtures an active role in supporting others. With the culmination of these developments, the Ayta community continually faces hindrances linked to their wellbeing. The themes identified in this study concurs with a study conducted by Celis et al. (2023). The study found that the majority of the Ayta Community facing mental health intricacies are due to financial difficulty, transportation resources, hesitation on accessing healthcare services due to their cultural beliefs, and hesitations due to the perceptions and unavailability of physical and mental health services. Majority of the participants expressed the need for at least one community Psychologist and a community healthcare center. Although the tribe recognizes the idea of psychological support due to the existing psychological cases in the community, the broader functions and roles of a psychologist and other mental health professionals still required further explanations. Expressing afflictions due to physical and psychological situations where there is lack of interference.

Acquiring information from the local government of Tala, Pag-asa, Orani Bataan, Philippines where Sitio Bayan-Bayanan is located, inaccessibility of health services lies in the systemic and societal factors. The local government states the lack of health workers and trained health workers, unavailability of health interventions and services due to lack of resources, and medicinal crisis, mental health challenges are compounded further by poverty and associated factors. When compared to the general population, indigenous people do not have equal social and economic position (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021). Additionally, the Philippines have a sizable disparity existing in the accessibility of primary care facilities within 30 minutes for a minimum of 50% of the general population (Flores et al, 2021).

In spite of these, positive consciousness on wellness among the members of the tribe were observed. In general parlance, health is not just simply the absence of disease or infirmity, rather it is also the state of overall well-being, encompassing physical, mental, and social well-being. Indigenous health places a high value on the connections between physical health and mental, emotional, and spiritual stress (Fabrigas & Maniago, 2018). Research has shown a healthy body leads to a healthy mind and having the right mindset to take care of the body proves to be beneficial to the state of mind. Stress awareness was also seen among members of the tribe and awareness of stress level is an important factor for promoting psychological well-being (Zadworna et al., 2020). Being aware of life stressor helps individuals maneuver and cope through stress. However, the Ayta Magbukun experience of healthcare disparity causes a substantial volume of distress and concern, bearing disturbance on mental well-being. The major factor that has been found is healthcare disparity, playing a crucial role to the Magbukun tribe's awareness and perception on Mental Health.

On the clinical perspective, members of the Magbukun tribe have a distinct pharmacological belief that restrains them from seeking healthcare assistance and interventions. This defensive behavior is a reaction to the presence of a potential risk and threat linked with psychopharmacological treatments. Anti-anxiety medications and antidepressants are medications prone to psychological dependence (Fotedar, 2024). According to one of the participants, a member of the community has been diagnosed with mental illness and has been taking medication. As described, this person experiences panic attacks and behaves uncontrollably, often in a disruptive or chaotic manner when medication is discontinued. Regardless of the present psychological concerns, members of the Ayta Magbukun unveils pharmaceutical skepticism. Negative side effects, fear of resistance and dependence, preference for traditional medicine are some of the recognized factors to emerging fear of pharmacological medication dependence (Reese et al. 2024). The persisting healthcare disparities within the community reveals itself to be a big contributing factor on attaining overall health and mental well-being.

While there is an existing discourse of public health inaccessibility, the community members unfold abundant apprehension attributed to current and future oriented needs. Majority of the interviewed participants from the Magbukun tribe stated there is a lack of financial resources for everyday necessities; lack of access to essential medicines associated with medical crisis, and the substantial indication of physical and mental health unawareness. The Magbukun tribe and other indigenous communities have lived under identity discrimination contributing to the neglect of proliferated scarcity of physical and mental health intercessions. Genetic differences, racist policies, cultural and identity discrimination has been present to the community of the Magbukun tribe (Smye, 2023).

In view of the socioeconomic status of the Magbukun tribe, these difficulties correspond to the vulnerability of the tribe's health condition. The results have found that the majority concerning mental wellness of the Magbukun tribe are under the socioeconomic determinants with individuals of lower income being financially constrained, and stating that depression is due to financial strain. The existing structural racism on the Magbukun tribe signifies the marginality of the community. These socioeconomic determinants on health and healthcare disparities carry unequal opportunities related to financial resources, employment, education, the quality of the living environment and healthcare services (Evangelista et al. 2022). Parallel to that the socioeconomic status and health of an individual are profoundly interrelated, discerning the existing structural racism prompted with ethnic identity and social factors responsible for the adverse impact on health (Churchwell et al, 2020). Therefore, according to the members of the Magbukun tribe, mental health is seen as a condition related to socioeconomic difficulties affecting emotional wellbeing.

Poverty and lack of access in the area drove its people to rely on self-medications, explaining the prevalence of *parasantigwar* (faith healers) in the locale as well. *Parasantigwar*, similar to the Magbukun tribe's *Kagun*, is a term originated to a indigenous medicinal healers on the locale, attributed to the native

members trained on a traditional manner to be a native versions of a doctor, providing indigenous medications and is oriented to practice folk healing skills to the community members. (Bibon, 2021). Therefore, the emergence of the parasantigwar in the area was brought by passing of culture itself, and experiences on indigence and limitations of access (Bibon, 2021). Poverty and lack of access to healthcare services in the Ayta Magbukun community have necessitated a dependence on self-medication and traditional healing methods.

The Ayta Magbukun tribe's approach to healing, characterized by a blend of faith healing and herbal medicine, reflects a deeply ingrained cultural practice that has been preserved over generations. Their healer, known as the *kagun*, plays a crucial role in addressing both spiritual and physical ailments within the community. Reaching out to the *kagun* is a form of help-seeking behavior, deeply embedded in the tribe's cultural customs. Faith and traditional healing pathways are typically used as an initial source of cultural assessment before seeking medical treatment. (Badu et al, 2022). The study also found that the Ayta Magbukun's perception of mental health is closely tied to their spiritual well-being. They integrate their faith into their everyday lives as a coping mechanism and a source of inner peace. They rely on spiritual practices, including prayer, rites, and religious activities, as essential means to maintain mental well-being by seeking guidance and healing from a supreme deity. Like Anituan, a curing rite of Aytas (Patterson et al., 2018), demonstrates how the Ayta Magbukuns' spiritual practices and faith are essential components of their approach to mental health management because of their strong belief in spirits' ability to heal them and cure their illnesses (Fabrigas & Maniago, 2018). This spiritual approach stresses their integrated perspective of health and shows how their cultural and religious beliefs interact to address both mental and physical health issues. This approach resonates with a broader trend among Indigenous communities, where traditional and spiritual practices form the first line of defense against illnesses.

The *kagun* play a crucial role in the community's health-seeking behavior, emerging from a blend of cultural traditions and practical responses to poverty and limited healthcare access. The traditional healers fill a critical gap, providing essential health services that might otherwise be inaccessible. The community's reliance on the *kagun* underscores a pragmatic adaptation to their circumstances, where traditional healers become the primary source of medical care due to economic and logistical constraints. The *kagun*, as a central figure in addressing both physical and spiritual ailments, is a product of this necessity. The study by Balilla et al. (2013) further illuminates this practice, revealing Ayta Magbukun's belief in a supreme being and *anitos*, or ancestral spirits, which are classified as either "malaut" (bad) or "mabuting" (good). The bad *anitos* are believed to cause illnesses, sometimes possessing and dwelling within an individual. The continued relevance of Balilla et al. (2013) study on the *kagun* and traditional healing practices, even if some may consider them outdated, cannot be overstated. Similarly, Martinez's (2019) study on another group of Aytas in Nabuclod, Pampanga, reveals a comparable belief in *anito* spirits causing illnesses and possession. This parallel highlight a shared cultural framework among different Ayta communities, where spiritual beliefs are integral to their understanding of health and illness.

Deficiency needs evolve when people are deprived of their basic needs resulting in motivation. This motivation becomes stronger when the deficiency endures and the needs are unmet (McLeod, 2024). The deficiency in meeting their health needs within the context of their cultural framework motivates them to seek traditional healing methods first. The psychological comfort and cultural congruence offered by the *kagun*'s treatments are critical in fulfilling their immediate deficiency needs. However, if the traditional treatments prove insufficient and the health issues persist, the tribe's motivation shifts. The enduring nature of unmet health needs strengthens their resolve to seek additional help, leading them to consider professional medical treatment.

Based on the observation during the conduction of this study the Ayta Magbukun tribe has a "mind over matter" mindset and their geographical isolation are intricately connected in preserving their

traditional healing practices. This cultural belief, which emphasizes the power of the mind and spirit in overcoming physical and spiritual ailments, thrives in an environment that has remained relatively insulated from modern biomedical influences. With the advent of contemporary medicine in the modern world, the isolation of the locale has preserved the practice through years, and was embedded in their identity (Bibon, 2021). This separation from the broader medical world allows their "mind over matter" mindset to flourish, as there is less external pressure to conform to biomedical paradigms.

This study also found that natural hazards and the geographic location of the Magbukun tribe contributes significantly as an incidental factor affecting the psychological wellbeing of the members of the community. In rural or in urban areas climate and levels of pollution has been found as a determinant of psychological ailments, these influence social elements that affect persons' mental and physical health. (Bhugra et al, 2023). According to the National Institution of Health, disasters result in a wide range of emotional and physiological responses. The Magbukun tribe generally perceives natural calamities a threat to their overall well-being affecting them identified as natural disaster – induced stress.

The tribe demonstrated varied help-seeking behaviors consisting of formal, governmental, community, and family-centered help-seeking. Help-seeking attitudes have beneficial implications on self-awareness, mental well-being, and stress management (Villamor & Dy, 2022). In line with this, the community has expressed that informal help-seeking serves as support and encouragement in spite of mental distress, alleviating stress-causing problems. While formal help-seeking has helped bring to light a better understanding and awareness of depression.

With the array of challenges, several coping strategies to manage psychological distress were revealed to be practiced by the Ayta Magbukun. A common coping strategy among the tribe is participating in purposeful conversation offered by the community. Community engagement fosters empowerment and serves as a guide for awareness and responsibility for community mental health (Russell et al. 2023). Other coping strategies being practiced are engaging with preferred leisure, positive religious-coping, and adaptive coping. Positive coping style may reduce psychological risk in the face of crises (Li & Chen, 2023). The presence of different coping strategies suggests an increased resiliency and enhanced management of stressful events. However, due to the present problem of poverty and scarcity faced by the participants, this coping mechanism may also be attributed to maladaptive resilience. Maladaptive resilience is the persistent coping and putting up with tough situations that go unaddressed, ultimately tolerating situations that shouldn't be endured (Lee, 2024). This pressure to bounce-back and survive from stressful events may pose psychological problems in the long run as opposed to positive coping. Moreover, maladaptive coping is also present within the community.

As reported by the barangay officials interviewed from Brgy. Pag-asa, the most common mental health related issue reported to them is excessive alcohol consumption. Related to unhealthy coping mechanisms stated by some of the interviewed members of the Magbukun tribe, most of the members of the community resort to alcohol consumption as a maladaptive coping mechanism. Adults who appear to be dissatisfied with their living conditions have the tendency to drink to cope with negative emotions (Tartaglia & Bergagna, 2019). Substantially arising as a mediation for some members of the Magbukun tribe to common socioeconomic and psychological strain. It has been discovered that drinking intentions totally mediated the association between life satisfaction and alcohol use (Tartaglia & Bergagna, 2019). Concerning the reported and unreported cases of these mental health issues, some individuals involved were stated to reach postmortem condition without any health intervention.

Among these apparent discrepancies, the research shows that the basic mental health care required treatment of Indigenous mental health concerns is presently insufficient. The essentiality of understanding that if the correlation of physical, mental and social wellbeing has been disrupted, the

outcomes for indigenous mental health will decline (Nasir et. al, 2021), These interrelated factors in the concept of mental health are integral in maintaining overall wellbeing.

The Ayta Magbukun have perceived mental health as a long array of challenges affecting their overall wellbeing. Although this study has found that the tribe falls within the population with mental health illiteracy, common frequent struggles, like resource deprivation, natural disasters, geographic location, and the community's marginality has been found to be the primary indication of mental distress to the community. Aligned with the study conducted by Agner et al. (2024) addressing health literacy is difficult in the community under marginalized groups. The community is deeply concerned about the healthcare disparities affecting physical health issues, which have persisted for a long period of time. These gaps have created significant reluctance within the community to seek necessary assistance pertaining to their overall well being. The mental health awareness of the members of the Ayta Magbukun has been identified beneath unfamiliarity and the lack of knowledge in the context. Understanding that psychological difficulties do exist, yet proper recognition and interventions are overlooked, due to the degrees of disappointment in light of the healthcare disparity and the socioeconomic difficulties experienced by the tribe, these conditions generally affect their psychological perceptions and mental health awareness.

Conclusion

The Ayta Magbukun of Sitio Bayan-bayanan, Orani, Bataan shows some awareness on mental health, mainly on coping strategies and help-seeking attitudes, but it is insufficient and influenced by the pressure to survive difficult situations. Many are unfamiliar with depression, as formal and informal education on mental health is lacking. Misconceptions on depression persist, leading to maladaptive coping mechanisms like alcohol consumption. Ayta Magbukun faces barriers to mental health access due to healthcare disparities, poverty, and marginalization. They mainly rely on alternative healing in addressing diseases. Medical pluralism is embraced, but not everyone can afford modern medical interventions, hindering professional help-seeking.

The indigenous community healers (Kagun) attends both physical and mental health issues, but lack overall awareness of mental health due to marginalization and limited healthcare access. Despite progress in other aspects of life, poverty and geographic barriers hinder their quality of life. There is no apparent negative stigma towards mental health, but there is a need to address and support their understanding of it. Interventions such as awareness programs, training for healthcare workers, and collaboration with stakeholders are needed to improve mental health services for the Ayta Magbukun.

Recommendation

The study provided valuable insights into mental health awareness among the Ayta Magbukun but highlighted a gap in exploring specific mental health conditions. Future research should focus on their perspectives on particular conditions, considering cultural interpretations and unique treatment approaches. Limited exploration of the kagun (traditional healer) and herbal remedies calls for deeper investigation into their practices, efficacy, and integration with modern health care. Further research could examine how historical marginalization and discrimination impact mental health outcomes and perceptions. Comparative studies with other Indigenous groups in the Philippines or globally could reveal similarities and differences in mental health beliefs and practices, enriching our understanding of Indigenous mental health. Extending the study's duration could enhance participation, foster community trust, and allow for the implementation and evaluation of interventions addressing specific mental health concerns, providing practical support and solutions.

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