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TRADITIONAL COPING WITH MENTAL DISORDERS: A SUMBAWA COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Mental health issues in Indonesia are increasing, but treatment is often constrained by local culture values. This study aims to determine why traditional coping mechanisms are chosen by the people of Sumbawa as a means of dealing with mental disorders in Sumbawa, using a qualitative Research design and a phenomenological approach. This study involved three participants form Sumbawa Regency who had knowledge and experience related to traditional medicine, using purposive sampling. Data analysis using Braun dan Clarke (2006) thematic analysis model. The results of study identified three main themes, namely the understanding of the Sumbawa community Sumbawa community regarding mental disorder, which are interpreted as a problem of disharmony between an individuals identity and their soul (Sala singin), challenges in handling this issue including limited understanding of mental health, social stigma, and constraints related to the lack of professional service, and the community strong preference for the Sandro figure as a culturally based coping strategy. Sandro is seen as having spiritual authory that is in line with the traditional belief in Sumbawa. This coping practice is realized throught traditional remedies integrated with the support of local communities. These findings indicate that cultural values form the basis of traditional culture-based treatments that shape an integral adaptation system of local belief.
Keywords: *Mental Disorder, Sandro, Stigma, Sumbawa Cummunity, Traditional Coping*

Abstrak

Kesehatan mental di Indonesia menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan dalam beberapa tahun belakangan, namun penanganan terhadap gangguan mental seringkali terkendala oleh nilai budaya lokal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui mengapa *coping* tradisional dipilih masyarakat Sumbawa sebagai tindakan dalam menangani gangguan mental di Sumbawa, dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif, pendekatan fenomenologis. Penelitian ini melibatkan tiga informan yang berasal dari kabupaten Sumbawa yang memiliki pengetahuan dan pengalaman terkait pengobatan tradisional dengan menggunakan pemilihan *purposive sampling*. Analisis data menggunakan analisis tematik model Braun dan Clarke (2006). Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi tiga tema utama yakini, pemahaman masyarakat Sumbawa terhadap gangguan mental yang dimaknai sebagai masalah ketidakselarasan identitas individu dengan jiwanya *(Sala singin),* Kendala penanganan berupa pemahaman yang terbatas, stigma masyarakat, dan kendala terhadap minimnya layanan profesional, serta adanya preferensi kuat terhadap figur *sandro* sebagai strategi *coping* berbasis budaya. *Sandro* dipandang memiliki otoritas spiritual yang selaras dengan keyakinan turun-temurun di Sumbawa. Praktik *coping* ini diwujudkan melalui ritual dan ramuan tradisional yang

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terintegrasi dengan adanya dukungan komunitas setempat, temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai budaya menjadi landasan penanganan berbasis budaya tradisional yang membentuk sistem adaptasi integral kepercayaan lokal.

Kata Kunci: Coping tradisional, gangguan mental, sala singin, Sandro.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mental health issues have shown an increase in prevalence across various groups. However, understanding and treatment of mental health are often influenced by local cultural values, which play a role in shaping social structures and beliefs, directly influencing individuals' understanding of mental health. The World Health Organization (2022) states that mental health relates not only to psychological conditions but also to an individual's ability to regulate emotions, maintain mental health, and maintain social and spiritual balance, all of which are manifestations of mental health.

According to the 2023 Basic Health Research (Riskesdas) data, the proportion of mental health problems nationally reached 20%, equivalent to 54 million people of the total population in Indonesia. This includes emotional disorders, anxiety, stress, and PTSD. This data is supported by the Ministry of Health (2021), which shows that 20%, or 1 in 5 Indonesians, experience emotional mental disorders, with more than 2,000 cases recorded annually. Worse still, only 8% of those with mental disorders receive professional treatment. This figure highlights the disparity between the prevalence of mental disorders and limited access to professional treatment. The importance of addressing this issue aligns with the view that individual development is a continuous process influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, and sociocultural contexts (Santrock, 2019). Balanced mental health enables individuals to develop optimally physically, emotionally, and cognitively, and to live a life in balance with their environment (Han, 2024).

In line with the importance of mental health, culture also plays a crucial role in shaping, interpreting, and responding to psychological issues, particularly mental health issues (Karthick, 2017). This process does not occur in isolation but is closely tied to the values, beliefs, and life experiences that develop within a culture. Within this framework, community support, in the form of emotional, instrumental, and informative support, plays a fundamental role in mediating individuals' resilience to mental health disorders. This support serves as an effective buffer in reducing psychological distress (Steers et al., 2019).

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Mental health issues in Indonesia are increasingly relevant to study, particularly in the Sumbawa region of West Nusa Tenggara. In Sumbawa society, the meaning of mental health is inseparable from deep-rooted collective beliefs and traditional practices. Febrian et al. (2025) suggest that collective culture is formed through the interaction between social identities and local belief systems, which contribute to shaping how individuals understand and interpret mental health. Social identities do not emerge spontaneously; rather, they are shaped by processes of selection, organization, and interpretation (Swarjana, 2022). Thus, the meaning of mental health is influenced by the social structures established by the local community. This condition gives rise to significant stigma against people with mental disorders, who, from a local perspective, are often perceived as insane, possessed, possessed by supernatural powers such as black magic or witchcraft, or as illnesses considered morally wrong and a violation of customary law (Maulana & Platini, 2019). This stigma manifests itself in various forms, ranging from negative labeling and social avoidance to discriminatory actions, as described by Goffman (Legowo & Dayanti, 2021).

In the context of these interpretations and stigmas, the treatment of mental disorders in Sumbawa is inextricably linked to the belief in the figure of the Sandro, or shaman, as a link between the physical and spiritual worlds, believed to be capable of treating various non-medical ailments. Research by Virdiyanti (2025) states that traditional healing practices have long been an integral part of Indonesian culture, providing various ways to address mental health issues. This finding aligns with studies in medical anthropology that position traditional practices as healing based on cultural values and symbolic meaning (Elsheikh, 2025). These practices are realized through customary practices such as rituals, spirituality, herbal concoctions, and guidance from shamans, which are considered capable of providing emotional support and restoring balance within the individual. Indirectly, this holistic understanding encourages communities to choose traditional coping options (Maghfira et al., 2024). Lazarus and Folkman's view in (Maryam, 2017) states that individual actions are seen as the result of a cognitive assessment of an event and the ability to choose available treatments or coping strategies. Coping strategies are actions taken by individuals to overcome situations perceived as stressful, challenging, burdensome, and beyond their capacity, influenced by cultural background, experience, and environmental factors.

Previous research conducted by (Nurhayati, 2023) demonstrated that the role of sandro is more recognized, respected, and honored by the Sumbawa community. This recognition is based on the belief that sandro possesses strength, both acquired personally and inherited from their families. The findings of this study also revealed the existence of ritual practices intertwined with low dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of modern medicine, thus constructing sandro as a treatment option deemed appropriate to local culture. Other sources state that belief in spiritual power and traditional figures in traditional healing practices also plays a role in strengthening cultural resilience and forming sustainable and integral community-based coping mechanisms (Firmayanti et al., 2024). In line with these findings, a study by Dian (2018) on the Karampung indigenous community in South Sulawesi also showed that shamans (masanro) are the primary source of treatment for illness, as they are seen as more socially accessible, economically accessible, and aligned with traditional values compared to formal health services. Consequently, traditional healing practices tend to be more dominant than formal health services.

Based on this study, traditional medicine tends to be preferred as a traditional healing system that is close to the community. However, research specifically exploring why the Sumbawa community chooses Sandro as a treatment reference for mental disorders is still scarce. The novelty of this study lies in uncovering traditional coping strategies in the treatment of mental health disorders from the perspective of the Sumbawa community, using a phenomenological approach. This study positions traditional healing practices as a Sumbawanese culturally based coping strategy. The gap between the ideal medical-based mental health approach and the actual practices practiced by the Sumbawa community indicates a cultural dynamic that is not yet fully understood by the local community. This study aims to determine why the Sumbawa community chooses traditional coping as a treatment for mental disorders in Sumbawa. Therefore, this study was conducted to answer the question, "Why do Sumbawa people choose traditional coping, especially the Sandro figure, in dealing with mental disorders in Sumbawa?" Thus, this study is expected to provide new insights into how local culture shapes community coping preferences and serve as a basis for the development of more culturally sensitive mental health services.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, aiming to gain a deep understanding of how people perceive their life processes, assign meaning to, and interpret their experiences (Cresswell, 2013). This approach was chosen because it allows for the exploration of subjective experiences regarding the meaning-making process experienced by participants. This study involved participants who had an understanding of and experience with traditional medicine in Sumbawa, including three participants from the Sumbawa Regency community, West Nusa Tenggara. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique for selecting participants deemed to possess information relevant to the research objectives. Selection was carried out intentionally based on inclusion criteria, including: (1) residents of Sumbawa Regency, (2) participants with knowledge and experience with traditional medicine, and (3) willingness to be interviewed and provide the information required for this study.

Table 1 Informant Characteristics

No	Nama (Inisial)	Domisili	Tahun Kelahiran	Umur	Jenis Kelamin
1.	QH	Moyo Hilir	1969	56	L
2.	ERA	Lape	1996	29	P
3.	SER	Sumbawa Barat	2003	22	L

To assist the data collection process, the researcher used the research instrument herself, as quoted (Sugiyono, 2024). The researcher used supporting instruments with semi-structured interview guidelines, notes, and an audio recorder. The data collection technique in this study was online interviews. Interview data collection was conducted twice, lasting 30-60 minutes each session. The interview guidelines were developed based on the coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and the social support theory of Cohen and Wills (1985).

Data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis model of Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes the following stages: (1) Data recognition by reading all interview transcripts, (2) Initial coding, (3) Theme search, (4) Theme review, (5) Theme naming, and (6) Analysis report preparation. The analysis process was carried out repeatedly until themes were obtained that represented the essence of the participants' experiences. This approach

allows the research findings to be presented systematically and contextually according to the research objectives. Data validity in this study was conducted to test the accuracy of the data generated by the researcher, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability tests (Lincolin & Guba, 1985). Credibility was achieved through triangulation of sources obtained from three participants. The data obtained was then analyzed to produce a conclusion, followed by member checking. Transferability was achieved through data presentation so that it could be applied and implemented in other cultural situations. The dependability of this study was ensured so that research updates could be carried out by auditing the entire process up to its analysis. The confirmability of the data used was confirmed based on the data obtained (Sugiyono, 2024).

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

This study identified key findings based on in-depth data analysis with informants. These findings are grouped into three main themes:
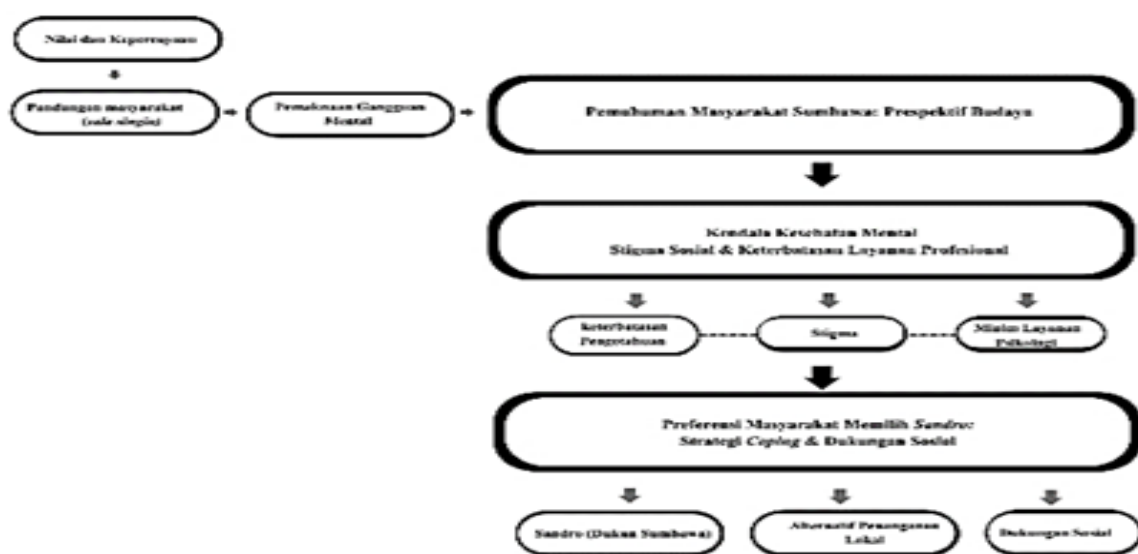

Figure 1: Research Findings

1. Sumbawa Community's Understanding of Mental Health from a Cultural Perspective

Sumbawa has a unique understanding of mental health. Research findings indicate that mental health often does not fully align with medical definitions. Mental disorders in the local context tend to be associated with spiritual aspects and identity harmony formed through a cultural framework between individuals, the environment, and customary norms.

This framework is not solely understood as a psychological condition, but rather as part of inner balance, which must align with prevailing cultural and spiritual values. This understanding is rooted in collective beliefs passed down through generations and still influences our outlook on life. To this day, almost all community activities are linked to local beliefs, including time, place, and customary norms. One cultural observer stated that this condition has become a shared understanding within the Sumbawa community.

> *"What happens in our community is indeed what exists, and it has become a common understanding of such matters. One example is names, finding a soul mate. This includes all community activities, paying attention to auspicious days, auspicious months, and so on. Failure to follow these principles will have consequences. Almost all community activities in our community are always connected, always linked to time, place, and all sorts of things, even to this day." (Qh.W2/37-45)*

Meanwhile, the modern view was interpreted by informant Era as,

> *"Mental health is where a person's psychological state is good, influenced by the surrounding environment, culture, location, and so on." (Era.W2/35)*

This interpretation builds on the term "sala singin," or "wrong name," explicitly associated with mental disorders. This condition indicates a mismatch between the name and the individual's soul or inner state, which is believed to trigger mental disorders.

> *"Usually, when a child is born, this name must be in harmony with the child's soul or mental state. If such a mismatch occurs, the child usually develops healthily. This is something I have experienced myself." (Qh.W1/70-79)*

A similar view was expressed by informant Era. From her perspective as a lawyer, she observed that the sala singin phenomenon is not only a cultural belief but also manifests in legal practice, where many individuals apply for name changes through legal channels.

> *"In everyday life, some people also request name changes in court, arguing that the wrong name is unsuitable for their personality. Therefore, it can cause illness or mental disorders." (Era.W1/81-90)*

This finding confirms that understanding of mental health in the Sumbawa community is based on beliefs that emphasize balance between the individual, customary order, and spiritual values. This framework shapes how society recognizes, assesses, and assigns

meaning, and serves as the basis for determining responses deemed socially and culturally appropriate.

2. Mental Health Barriers in Sumbawa: Social Stigma and Limited Professional Services

Meanwhile, mental health in Sumbawa faces various social and structural barriers. Primarily, limited knowledge, social stigma, and a lack of professional mental health services are key. These barriers not only influence how people interpret mental disorders but also limit their ability to seek help. In rural areas, stigma remains strong and closely linked to traditional beliefs, often resulting in apparent disorders being labeled "crazy." This labeling extends beyond language and can lead to discriminatory actions and extreme behaviors, such as eviction from home, rejection by the community, and even shackling. This situation arises because mental disorders are often perceived as disruptive, deviant behavior, or even linked to mystical elements. In this context, rural communities tend to view mental disorders as "unclear" and difficult to treat medically.

> *"Perhaps in villages, people who are targeted by black magic are often called crazy or something like that." (Se.W2/236)*
>
> *"Even in villages, I've heard of people who were shackled indoors." (Se.W1/165)*

Furthermore, rural communities' understanding of mental health tends to be limited, further reinforcing the growing stigma. Individuals with mental disorders are perceived simply as attention-seeking or exhibiting strange, fabricated behavior, so the need for treatment is overlooked.

> *"Sometimes it's considered something fabricated or exaggerated, so they don't care because they're just trying to get attention or something." (Era.W1/119)*

Unlike in villages, stigma in urban areas exhibits more diverse and subtle attitudes, and doesn't always manifest in extreme actions. Stigma in cities often manifests verbally, symbolically, and even avoidance for some.

> *"People still look down on people with mental disorders because they may be beyond treatment." (Era.W1/63)*

On the other hand, social stigma is reinforced by the limited availability of professional mental health services in Sumbawa. The main problem lies not in geographical access, but rather in the unequal distribution of professional experts. The lack of professional services

leaves people without adequate formal referrals to obtain appropriate diagnosis and treatment.

> *"If we look at the facts on the ground, people still go to traditional healers. Because in Sumbawa, there are no genuine psychologists practicing. I was looking for a psychologist yesterday." (Era.W1/210)*

> *"If mental disorders exist, there is rarely any treatment from the social services or other agencies related to people with mental disorders." (Se.W1/123)*

Social conditions and the limited availability of professional services intertwine to form structural barriers to the treatment of mental disorders in Sumbawa. This condition contributes to delays in treatment and creates limited patterns of help-seeking, which then encourages people to rely on non-formal treatment alternatives available in the local social and cultural environment.

3. Community Preferences and Reasons for Choosing Sandro: Traditional Coping Strategies and Community Social Support

The Sumbawa community demonstrates a strong preference for traditional medicine through the Sandro figure as a culturally based coping strategy integrated with community social support, despite growing awareness of professional services. The strategies used serve as adaptive mechanisms for coping with, interpreting, and managing individual psychological conditions. This preference is based on several factors, including cultural beliefs, inherited family beliefs, and the accessibility of professional services. Sandro is understood as someone with advanced religious and spiritual knowledge, as stated by an informant:

> *"Sandro has the connotation of a shaman, but what makes it different is that there, the sultanate is where they are, so they are indeed people who understand religious knowledge. They aren't shamans who study black magic; usually, Sandro is someone with a fairly advanced religious knowledge who can treat non-medical ailments." (Se.W1/273)*

> *"Sandro is someone who can heal or knows things beyond medicine" (Qh.W2/126)*

> *"In our country, Sandro might be called a shaman in Java. Sandro has special knowledge that we can say is good or bad" (Era.W2/168*)

This interpretation indicates that Sandro is not solely associated with the practice of black magic. Rather, it is an integral part of the culture that has developed to this day. Era's

informant highlighted other contributing factors, namely the strong beliefs and traditions passed down through generations within families.

"It's more about beliefs and family pressure. If someone has a strong belief, they'll definitely go straight to traditional medicine. There are also those who are pressured by family... they have no choice but to follow their family because it's like that, it's passed down through their family," (Era.W1/141).

Coping strategies used are manifested through practices such as traditional rituals, prayer, and the use of symbolic media such as water, smoke, or incense, potions, and traditional Sumbawa oils.

"I see that to this day, they still use water... something like betel lime or smoke. If people here call it incense, it's something like incense, Mak Sakemenyan." *(Qh.w1/210).*

"Some people drink it, bathe in it. But generally, treatment in Sumbawa involves drinking water and praying over it." (Era.W1/182).

Meanwhile, social support from the surrounding community also plays a role in managing mental disorders. This is manifested through acceptance, attention, and simple assistance from the community, such as providing food, drinks, and daily support.

"In my neighborhood, it's like they've accepted me, in the sense of helping with things like housing. But the community's acceptance isn't that bad; in fact, we're more protective. For example, there, it's as simple as bringing food every time someone has a relapse, even though it ends up being thrown away." (Se.W1/141)

The presence of a community helps create a sense of togetherness, reduces social isolation, and helps individuals and families cope with the psychological stress that arises from mental disorders. Thus, traditional coping strategies and community social support form an interconnected adaptive system for managing mental disorders in Sumbawa.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to determine why the Sumbawa people choose traditional coping strategies to address mental disorders. From the Sumbawa perspective, sala singin is interpreted as a form of disharmony between an individual's identity and their inner or spiritual state. This understanding forms the psychological foundation for the emergence of traditional coping strategies oriented toward restoring inner balance (Manullang et al., 2020).

Sala singin impacts not only psychological aspects but also physical conditions and the overall development of an individual (Jayanti, 2023). The findings of this study appear interconnected, indicating that traditional coping cannot exist as a separate practice but rather develops within the framework of Sumbawa culture. As in collectivist cultures, individual identity and well-being are strongly influenced by social relations, community norms, and efforts to maintain harmony with the social environment (Komisarof & Akaliyski, 2025).

This understanding indicates how communities understand and respond to mental disorders, so that their treatment is inseparable from the surrounding social and cultural environment (Subu et al., 2022). This condition highlights that coping strategies are influenced by local values, beliefs, and communities, which can significantly influence individual responses and the effectiveness of interventions (Thompson & Ally, 2024). Furthermore, the coping strategies used by the Sumbawa community are influenced by interrelated barriers, including a lack of mental health knowledge and access to professional services (Setiawan et al., 2023). Limited public understanding of mental health often leads to misinterpretations, which can exacerbate mental health stigma and hinder help-seeking efforts (Amalia & Dearly, 2025). This stigma, coupled with a lack of knowledge about available mental health resources, prevents individuals from seeking professional help, so individuals tend to rely on available coping strategies within local cultural coping mechanisms that may be ineffective (Lestari et al., 2016). This situation creates a trust gap, where sufferers feel safer seeking help from a Sandro figure than from formal services. This is also confirmed in other research demonstrating the strong influence of culture on help-seeking (Lestari, 2025). Faced with these limitations, the Sumbawa community tends to favor the Sandro figure as a traditional coping approach integrated with social support.

Sandro is viewed as a figure with spiritual authority and cultural knowledge based on religious knowledge, as established through the history of the Sumbawa region. The Sumbawa community believes it is effective in addressing non-medical problems and restoring an individual's inner balance. A study by Bertorio (2025) found that factors influencing traditional coping preferences include accessibility (80%), who consider traditional methods easy to access; cultural influence (60%), who state that treatment is driven by family tradition; and recommendations from healthcare professionals (40%). This finding aligns with the Sumbawa community's preference for traditional coping, which stems

not only from cultural beliefs but also from social closeness, family pressure, and limited access to professional services. The coping practices carried out by Sandro generally include rituals, prayers, the use of certain symbols, and traditional potions that can function as adaptive mechanisms in dealing with psychological stress.

Based on Maryam's (2017) study, Lazarus and Folkman's framework combines emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping, where individuals attempt to reduce emotional distress while seeking culturally relevant solutions. Emotion-focused coping is often viewed as a balancing factor in an individual's efforts to maintain adjustment to their environment, so specifically, the rituals and prayers performed by Sandro function as emotion-focused coping (Andriyani, 2019). These actions are intended to calm anxiety, provide spiritual hope, and reduce emotional distress experienced by individuals and families. Meanwhile, the provision of traditional potions and specific instructions from Sandro regarding behavioral changes or customary procedures that must be followed (for example, the suggestion to change the name because of sala singin) can be categorized as culturally based problem-focused coping, because it directly seeks to restore inner harmony or find solutions (Andriyani, 2019; Nurhayati, 2023). Furthermore, social support from the community also increases the success of traditional coping (Karthick, 2017). Acceptance, support, and simple assistance from the surrounding environment help reduce feelings of insecurity and further strengthen solidarity. Social support plays a crucial role in helping individuals adapt, survive, and recover (Racu and Spataru, 2024).

This attitude acts as a psychosocial barrier, assisting individuals and families in coping with mental disorders (Suwardiman, 2023). Thus, traditional coping through Sandro is not simply an alternative treatment option, but rather an integral part of a culturally based adaptation system shaped by shared meanings, structural barriers, and social support within the Sumbawa community. Weaknesses of this study include the limited number of participants and the limited scope of the study area, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the entire Sumbawa community. Future research is recommended to be more in-depth and involve more participants to obtain more in-depth data.

IV. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study indicates that the management of mental disorders in Sumbawa Regency is strongly influenced by a collective cultural framework, where mental

disorders are often interpreted as an inner disharmony that requires spiritual and customary balance. The Sumbawa community chooses traditional coping strategies through the figure of Sandro, due to strong cultural beliefs, family pressures, and structural obstacles such as social stigma and limited access to professional mental health services. This coping practice, involving rituals, prayers, and traditional herbs, integrated with community social support that acts as a psychosocial barrier, confirms that this choice is an integral part of the culturally based adaptation system in Sumbawa, not simply a substitute for medical treatment. Often with regional development, the need for professional-based mental health care is needed, so that equitable distribution of professionals can be a bridge to address mental health, thus adapting to local culture.

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