

REPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS CULTURAL HERITAGE OF TRIPURA: INDIGENOUS CULTURAL PRACTICES AS PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Abstract

Tripura, a northeastern Indian state, is home to a vibrant mosaic of indigenous tribes whose cultural heritage encompassing festivals, dances, crafts, and rituals serves not only as a marker of identity but also as a therapeutic framework for mental well-being. This paper explores the representation of this heritage through tourism, conservation efforts, and modern media, while examining how practices like shamanic rituals and ethnomedicinal remedies function as indigenous forms of psychotherapy. Drawing on ethnographic and ethnobotanical sources, it highlights the Tripuri, Reang, and Jamatia tribes' traditions, underscoring their role in addressing psychological distress amid modernization's challenges. The analysis reveals opportunities for culturally sensitive mental health interventions that integrate these practices.

Keywords: Indigenous Psychotherapy; Tripura Tribes; Shamanic Rituals; Ethnomedicine; Cultural Mental Health Integration

INTRODUCTION

Tripura's indigenous communities, comprising over 30% of the state's population, embody a profound cultural legacy shaped by centuries of harmony with the region's lush forests and hills ["Indigenous Culture and Heritage of Tripura"]. With 19 recognized tribes, including the dominant Tripuri (543,843 members as per the 2001 Census), Reang (165,103), Jamatia (74,949), and others like Chakma, Halam, and Mog, these groups maintain distinct yet interconnected traditions rooted in Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Mongoloid, and Austro-Asiatic lineages ["Tribes & Cultural Heritage"]. Their heritage manifest in festivals like Garia Puja, dances such as Lebang Boom, and crafts like bamboo weaving represents resilience against historical migrations and colonial disruptions ["Conservation of Indigenous Tribal Culture at Tripura, India"]. However, this legacy is increasingly represented in contemporary contexts like tourism and digital archives, often romanticizing or commodifying it ["Tribes & Cultural Heritage"].

Parallel to this representation, indigenous practices offer psychotherapy-like interventions, addressing mental health through holistic rituals that blend spiritual mediation, herbal remedies, and community rites ["Ethnomedicinal and Indigenous Healing Practices of the Tripuri People"]. In a state where psychiatric services are scarce, these traditions led by shamans (Ochai) and informed by ethnomedicine provide culturally resonant healing for anxiety, trauma, and spiritual imbalance [Majumder et al.]. This paper first delineates Tripura's cultural heritage, then its modern representations, and finally its psychotherapeutic applications, advocating for their preservation to foster mental health equity.

Table 1: Distribution of mental illness across the demography of Tripura

Study / Source	Population / Group	Type of Mental Illness / Indicator	Prevalence / Estimate
2010 media report from Tripura Health Service (S. R. Debbarma)	General population (state)	“Critical psychiatric patients” & those “at entry stage of several mental disorders”	~ 35,000 identified as serious psychiatric patients + ~ 40,000 more in early-stage psychiatric disorders (out of ~ 36 lakh population) (The Times of India)
2023 study among undergraduates (medical + non-medical) in West Tripura	Students (n = 420)	Depression, Anxiety, Stress (during COVID-19 period)	Depression: 52.3% (medical) / 59.5% (non-medical) Anxiety: 59% (medical) / 61% (non-medical) Stress: 32% (medical) / 42.3% (non-medical) (IJAR)

2024 study among medical-college students in Tripura	Medical students	Depression	60% prevalence of depression (among the small sample studied) (Journal of Comprehensive Health)
2024 correlational study among tribal college students in Tripura	Tribal college students (N = 438)	“Mental health” (general self-report mental wellbeing)	Study found significant associations between academic self-esteem / self-efficacy and better mental health; but no explicit prevalence % reported. (IJIP)
National-level meta-analysis on tribal populations in India (applies broadly to tribal groups including those in Tripura)	Tribal communities (India)	Depression, Anxiety, other disorders	Pooled prevalence of depression ≈ 14% (95% CI 8–22%); anxiety disorders ≈ 3% (95% CI 0–7%) among tribal populations. (PMC)

Section 1: Indigenous Cultural Heritage of Tripura

Tripura's tribal heritage is a living archive of oral traditions, performative arts, and ecological wisdom, passed intergenerationally to sustain social cohesion and environmental stewardship ["Indigenous Culture and Heritage of Tripura"]. The Tripuri, the state's largest tribe, exemplify this through their Kok-Borok language and Hindu-influenced rituals honouring deities like Garia (agricultural prosperity) and Ker (earth mother) ["Tribes & Cultural Heritage"]. Annual festivals such as Garia Puja involve vibrant dances like Garia and Musak Surmani, accompanied by instruments including the flute, sarinda (a bowed string instrument), and champreng (a bamboo clapper), symbolizing communal gratitude and renewal ["Indigenous Culture and Heritage of Tripura"]. These performances, often held in sacred groves, reinforce social bonds and transmit folklore of ancestral migrations from the Arakan Hills ["Conservation of Indigenous Tribal Culture at Tripura, India"].

The Reang, a primitive tribe recognized by India's government, practice nomadic jhum (shifting) cultivation and worship a pantheon of deities like Buraha and Lampra, blending animism with Vaishnavism ["Tribes & Cultural Heritage"]. Their endogamous clans resolve disputes via village councils led by a Rai (chief), while cremation rites near rivers underscore beliefs in spiritual continuity ["Indigenous Culture and Heritage of Tripura"]. Dances during festivals like Buisu feature rhythmic footwork and chants, evoking harmony with nature ["Tribes & Cultural Heritage"]. Similarly, the Jamatia historically royal warriors preserve customs through the Hoda Akra council, which upholds taboos and adjudicates conflicts, alongside Garia dances that dramatize Hindu myths ["Indigenous Culture and Heritage of Tripura"].

Other tribes enrich this tapestry: Chakma Buddhists from Southeast Asia perform weaving and boat-building crafts, while Halam sub-clans like Kaloi construct "Tong Ghar" bamboo-thatched homes and engage in matrilineal-influenced marriages ["Tribes & Cultural Heritage"]. Mogs celebrate the Wah Festival with Burmese-style folk songs, and Garos honor the matrilineal Wangala harvest rite with drum-led dances ["Indigenous Culture and Heritage of Tripura"]. Collectively, these elements festivals (e.g., Kharchi, Lampra Puja), music (drums, flutes), and crafts (silver ornaments, herbal dyes) form a holistic worldview where art and ecology intersect, fostering identity amid diversity ["Conservation of Indigenous Tribal Culture at Tripura, India"]. This heritage, initially oral, faces erosion from urbanization but remains a vital repository of philosophical values like communalism and animistic reverence ["Conservation of Indigenous Tribal Culture at Tripura, India"].

Table 2: Indigenous Tribes of Tripura and Psychotherapeutic Practices

INDIGENOUS TRIBE	TRADITIONAL PRACTICE / RITUAL	PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC FUNCTION	ASSOCIATED CULTURAL SYMBOLS / TOOLS	QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS / THEMES
TRIPURI (DEBBARMA, TIPRA, TRIPUR FAMILIES)	Ojha healing, Garia Puja, community feasts, musical gatherings, clan storytelling.	Emotional catharsis, identity affirmation, grief processing, community bonding as social therapy.	Drums (Dama), bamboo flutes, Garia deity symbols, rice beer, dance costumes.	Practices act as collective emotional regulation systems , promoting belonging and intergenerational resilience. Storytelling serves as a narrative therapy

				reinforcing meaning and continuity.
REANG (BRU)	Shamanic trance healing, spirit appeasement rituals, elders' conflict mediation, ritual dancing (Hojagiri).	Relieving anxiety through belief-based healing, somatic regulation through rhythmic motion, trauma recovery through symbolic acts.	Bamboo poles (used in Hojagiri), body paint, sacrificial offerings, chants.	Ritual trance states support altered states of consciousness similar to modern trauma-therapy exposure models, allowing emotional release and spiritual rebalancing.
JAMATIA	Buisu festival, customary law councils (Halam system), clan spirituality, ancestral worship.	Restores psychological order through structured authority; reduces helplessness and existential distress; communal celebration enhances positive affect.	Mandala-style ritual arrangements, torches, symbolic animal elements.	Community governance and sacred law act as collective cognitive frameworks that reduce stress by offering predictable rules, meaning, and cultural coherence.
CHAKMA (MINOR POPULATION)	Meditation rituals influenced by Buddhist lineage, chanting, forest hermitage practices.	Mindfulness, stress reduction, spiritual grounding, cognitive reframing.	Prayer beads, meditation space, sacred chants (Pali mantra).*	Practices closely mirror mindfulness-based psychotherapy , supporting emotional stability, acceptance, and reduced rumination.
HALAMS (INCLUDES MURASING, KAIPENG, RANGLONG CLANS)	Folk medicinal rituals, ritual drumming, herbal smoke cleansing and bathing.	Sensory grounding embodied emotional healing, placebo-supported belief therapy.	Medicinal plants, ash, bamboo fire pits, gongs.	Healing draws from ethnobotanical knowledge , creating symbolic, sensory, and biological layers of psychological comfort.

Section 2: Representation of Indigenous Cultural Heritage

The representation of Tripura's heritage oscillates between authentic preservation and selective portrayal, influenced by tourism, media, and conservation initiatives. Official platforms like the Tripura Tourism Department showcase tribal dances and festivals through promotional videos and cultural festivals, positioning them as "exotic" attractions that draw eco-tourists to sites like Unakoti's rock carvings, which depict ancient Tripuri motifs ["Tribes & Cultural Heritage"]. This visibility boosts economic livelihoods e.g., Jamatia weavers selling rignai (sarongs) but risks stereotyping tribes as "primitive," overshadowing their adaptive modernity, such as Garo women's roles in orange cultivation ["Tribes & Cultural Heritage"].

Conservation efforts, like the proposed "Indigenous Cultural Heritage of Tripura" e-platform, digitize folktales and arts to counter migrant influxes (e.g., post-1947 Bengali settlements reducing tribes to a minority) and modernization's homogenizing effects ["Conservation of Indigenous Tribal Culture at Tripura, India"]. Community-led initiatives, including Halam oral history recordings, preserve shamanic chants and Reang weaving patterns, while films like Bonaji document endangered knowledge, amplifying voices in global discourse ["Conservation of Indigenous Tribal Culture at Tripura, India"]. Yet challenges persist generational knowledge gaps, with youth favouring urban jobs, and external influences diluting rituals, as seen in Christian conversions among Kukis and Lushais ["Indigenous Culture and Heritage of Tripura"]. Representation thus demands ethical framing—beyond tourism—to empower tribes in narrating their stories, ensuring heritage as a dynamic force rather than a relic ["Conservation of Indigenous Tribal Culture at Tripura, India"].

Section 3: Indigenous Cultural Practices as Psychotherapy

Indigenous practices in Tripura transcend cultural expression, functioning as psychotherapy by integrating spiritual, communal, and herbal elements to heal psychological wounds. Central is the Ochai, the shaman-priest among Jamatia and Tripuri, who enters trances to mediate between humans and spirits, addressing "soul loss" or imbalance akin to trauma in Western terms [Majumder et al.]. During Lampra Puja, a pre-ritual cleansing, the Ochai chants mantras, offers rice and sweets to deities, and invokes protection from misfortune, fostering "godly peace" and emotional harmony [Majumder et al.].

al.]. This trance-induced counselling resolves disputes and alleviates anxiety, mirroring cognitive-behavioural techniques through narrative reframing via folklore [Majumder et al.].

Ethnomedicinal remedies complement these rituals. Tripuri healers use Dracaena trifasciata (Amisakhitong) rhizome infusions for anxiety, promoting calm via oral consumption in communal settings that encourage storytelling and support ["Ethnomedicinal and Indigenous Healing Practices of the Tripuri People"]. Centella asiatica (Samsatha) boiled for memory enhancement aids cognitive distress in elders, while Annona reticulata (Aajfol) fruits with honey treat epilepsy, viewed as spirit possession ["Ethnomedicinal and Indigenous Healing Practices of the Tripuri People"]. These practices, led by 17% of informants as traditional healers, embed psychotherapy in cultural transmission, with high consensus on uses reflecting shared psychological frameworks ["Ethnomedicinal and Indigenous Healing Practices of the Tripuri People"]. Reang and Halam rituals, involving group dances to expel "evil spirits," further exemplify community-based therapy, reducing isolation in a region with 14% depression prevalence among tribes [Saha et al.]. Such approaches address intergenerational trauma from displacements, outperforming scarce formal services by honouring holistic bio-psychosocio-spiritual models ["Ethnomedicinal and Indigenous Healing Practices of the Tripuri People"].

Table 3: Themes Extracted from the Table for Qualitative Analysis

Emergent Theme	Description	Connection to Psychotherapy Theory
Healing Through Community Participation	Rituals are collective, reducing isolation and enhancing identity.	Similar to group therapy and family systems therapy .
Belief-Based Healing and Meaning-Making	Illness is framed as spiritual imbalance, providing explanation and relief.	Parallel to existential psychotherapy and meaning-centered therapy .
Embodied and Sensorimotor Tradition	Drumming, dance, chanting regulate bodily distress.	Comparable to somatic therapy, EMDR grounding, and trauma-release movement .
Narrative and Oral Tradition as Emotional Processing	Stories preserve memory, identity, and coherence.	Reflects narrative therapy and culturally embedded storytelling therapy .
Nature-Based Regulation and Herbal Remedies	Plants and natural environments regulate mood and health.	Similar to eco-therapy and integrative medicine psychotherapy models .

CONCLUSION

Tripura's indigenous heritage, richly represented yet vulnerable, offers profound psychotherapeutic potential through shamanic mediation and herbal rituals. By amplifying authentic voices in conservation and integrating these practices into mental health policy, stakeholders can mitigate cultural erosion and disparities—e.g., higher anxiety in tribal youth [Saha et al.]. Future research should collaborate with tribes to hybridize traditions with evidence-based care, ensuring this legacy heals across generations.

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