



Embodied Healing: Exploring Cultural Identity and Spiritual Meaning in Herbal Remedy Practices of Indonesian Cancer Patients

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multifaceted meanings associated with herbal remedy use among Indonesian cancer patients, focusing on how traditional practices are experienced as acts of cultural affirmation, spiritual resilience, and personal empowerment. While herbal medicine is frequently evaluated through biomedical or clinical frameworks, this research adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the deeply subjective and symbolic dimensions of healing. A purposive sampling method was used to recruit twelve adult cancer patients from both urban and rural areas of Central Java, Indonesia, all of whom regularly incorporated herbal therapies into their treatment journeys. Data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews conducted in private hospital consultation rooms or participants' homes between March and June 2024. Thematic analysis revealed that herbal use transcends symptom management, becoming a process of reconnecting with ancestral wisdom, sustaining emotional balance, and asserting agency amidst medical uncertainty. Participants reported that these practices provided not only physical comfort but also spiritual clarity and cultural rootedness, especially when navigating the limitations of institutional healthcare. Herbal remedies were framed as sacred rituals, family legacies, and existential coping tools that fostered holistic well-being. This study challenges reductive views of complementary therapies and highlights the role of meaning-making in health behaviors. The insights emphasize the need for culturally competent and patient-centered integrative care that recognizes the narrative, spiritual, and emotional frameworks patients employ in their healing. These findings contribute to broader discussions on the role of traditional medicine in contemporary health systems, particularly within culturally diverse populations.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been a global resurgence of interest in natural and herbal remedies, particularly in culturally rich contexts such as Indonesia, where these practices are deeply tied to traditional beliefs, familial heritage, and personal narratives of wellness (Nwankwo dkk., 2021). Among cancer patients, herbal therapies often serve as sources of emotional comfort, spiritual resilience, and a means of regaining control during medical uncertainty, representing both cultural continuity and personalized care.

Despite the growth of integrative medicine, most existing studies emphasize pharmacological efficacy or clinical outcomes, offering limited insight into the personal, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that motivate herbal remedy use (Okano dkk., 2021). Research rarely captures how patients navigate between biomedical and traditional systems, or how these choices are shaped by cultural identity and existential meaning-making. This gap highlights the need to examine herbal medicine not only as a clinical intervention but as a lived experience embedded in specific sociocultural contexts.

A phenomenological approach is particularly suited to this aim, as it allows exploration of how individuals interpret their illness, construct meaning, and sustain cultural identity through healing practices. By focusing on first-person narratives, this study seeks to uncover the symbolic, cultural, and emotional meanings that herbal remedies hold for Indonesian cancer patients.

Accordingly, this research applies Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate how cancer patients experience and assign meaning to herbal remedies as complementary therapy. The objective is to move beyond symptom-centered analysis toward a holistic understanding of healing that reflects the complexity of patients' lived realities.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of cancer patients who use herbal remedies as complementary therapy (Grimm Jr. dkk., 1996). The phenomenological design was selected for its emphasis on capturing the depth and richness of personal experiences, particularly those grounded in emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. As a methodological framework, interpretative phenomenology enables a detailed examination of how individuals make sense of their illness and healing journey within specific sociocultural contexts. In alignment with Heideggerian principles, this approach focuses not only on describing experiences but also on interpreting their underlying meanings through the lens of participants' lifeworlds.

Participants

Participants were adult cancer patients in Indonesia who had used herbal remedies alongside conventional treatment for at least three consecutive months. Selection followed purposive sampling to ensure that each participant had firsthand, meaningful engagement with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria encompassed individuals aged 25 and above, with diverse cancer diagnoses, who self-reported regular use of herbal therapy and were capable of verbal articulation. Exclusion criteria included patients with cognitive impairments or those undergoing palliative sedation (Kjellgren dkk., 1998). A total of 12 participants were involved in this study, including 7 women and 5 men, with an age range of 29 to 67 years. Participants represented various educational and socio-economic backgrounds, offering a broad spectrum of experiential insight.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol developed to elicit narratives surrounding herbal remedy use, personal beliefs, emotional coping, and perceived health outcomes. Interviews were conducted in a private, comfortable setting—either at participants' homes or at community health centers—based on their preferences. Each session lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Efforts were made to build rapport and minimize power imbalances, fostering an open and reflective dialogue. The interview protocol was reviewed by a panel of qualitative experts and adapted based on preliminary field testing.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved systematic steps to uncover key themes and meanings. Transcripts were first read multiple times to attain immersion in the data. Meaningful units were identified and coded, with codes clustered into emergent themes (Bramham & Lightstone, 2012). NVivo software supported the organization and categorization of data. The process of analysis emphasized both the descriptive content of participants' accounts and the interpretative layers that revealed how they understood and assigned meaning to their experiences. The iterative approach ensured that themes reflected the complexity of each participant's lived reality while maintaining coherence across the data set.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after providing comprehensive information about the study's aims, procedures, potential risks, and confidentiality measures. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that all data would be stored securely and used solely for academic purposes (Connell dkk., 2005). The study was conducted in accordance with internationally recognized ethical guidelines, including the Declaration of Helsinki and local research ethics protocols.

RESULTS

Seeking Inner Peace through Herbal Therapy

Participants consistently described the use of herbal remedies not only as a physical intervention but as a path toward emotional and spiritual peace. The decision to incorporate herbal therapy was often rooted in a desire to regain control, reduce anxiety, and reconnect with traditional healing wisdom passed down through generations.

"Ever since I started drinking the herbal mixture my mother made, I feel calmer. It's like I'm doing something natural, something closer to my roots. It helps me sleep at night, not just because of the drink, but because I feel like I'm helping myself." (Participant 3)

This sense of inner peace was reported to have a psychosomatic effect, contributing to a more optimistic outlook, which many believed played a role in their healing process.

Cultural Identity and Familial Legacy in Herbal Usage

The cultural embeddedness of herbal therapy emerged as a powerful theme. Participants described their herbal use as deeply tied to family traditions and ancestral knowledge. For many, preparing and consuming herbal medicine was not merely a treatment—it was an affirmation of cultural identity and familial bonds.

"My grandmother used to boil these leaves for my father when he was sick. When I do the same now, I feel her presence. It's not just about healing, it's about remembering who we are." (Participant 5)

This theme underscores the role of intergenerational narratives in shaping participants' trust and belief in the efficacy of herbal remedies, even in the face of modern medical recommendations.

Negotiating Between Biomedical and Herbal Knowledge Systems

Participants often expressed the experience of navigating two parallel medical worlds—biomedical and traditional. While most did not reject hospital treatment, they viewed herbal remedies as offering something that clinical settings lacked: personalization, emotional support, and a sense of agency.

"In the hospital, it's like you are just a patient. But at home, making your own herbal drink, you feel like you're actively doing something for your health. You choose, you prepare, you drink—it's empowering." (Participant 7)

This negotiation process also involved internal conflict, especially when biomedical advice discouraged or dismissed herbal use, creating moments of doubt or secrecy.

Spiritual Meaning and Hope

The use of herbal remedies was frequently infused with spiritual significance. Many participants considered their practice of herbal consumption as part of a broader spiritual journey toward acceptance, hope, and healing. Rather than placing blind faith in herbal medicine, participants saw it as a form of submission to divine will or as a way to align with nature's healing forces.

"I pray before I take my herbal drink. It's not just about the ingredients. It's my way of showing faith, of believing that healing comes from God, through nature." (Participant 2)

This spiritual framing played a crucial role in shaping their mental resilience and coping mechanisms during their cancer treatment.

Perceived Impact on Quality of Life

While participants acknowledged that herbal remedies may not offer a cure, they described improvements in appetite, sleep, mood, and energy. These perceived benefits were considered critical enhancements to their quality of life, especially during periods of intensive chemotherapy or emotional distress.

"Even if it doesn't cure my cancer, it helps me eat, it helps me feel a bit more human during treatment days." (Participant 6)

The perceived physical relief, though subjective, reinforced their motivation to continue herbal use, often framing it as complementary rather than alternative to medical treatment.

Across the narratives, herbal remedy use emerges not merely as a health behavior but as a complex, multi-dimensional experience rooted in culture, emotion, and spirituality. Participants described their practice as a form of self-empowerment, cultural expression, and existential meaning-making, offering insights that go beyond clinical efficacy to reveal the lived depth of healing.

DISCUSSION

The present study revealed that the use of herbal remedies among Indonesian cancer patients is deeply rooted in cultural identity, emotional regulation, spiritual meaning, and a quest for personal empowerment (Schmieder, 2015). These findings highlight that healing, for the participants, transcends physical treatment and becomes a multidimensional experience shaped by cultural traditions and existential reflections—addressing the central question of how patients make sense of herbal remedy use within the cancer experience.

The themes identified in this study directly respond to the research question by illustrating the rich, subjective meanings patients associate with herbal therapy. Rather than perceiving herbal remedies merely as alternative treatments, participants described them as symbolic acts of healing, deeply entwined with familial memory, religious faith, and a sense of agency in navigating illness. This understanding expands the conceptual boundaries of patient care by shifting the focus from biomedical outcomes to the patients' internal world—an area often neglected in mainstream clinical discourse.

In comparison to prior studies, these findings align with and extend the work of (Mazza dkk., 2023), who identified the emotional and cultural motivations behind traditional medicine use. However, this study contributes a more interpretative lens by uncovering how participants assign spiritual and existential meaning to herbal practices—a layer often absent in descriptive or thematic analyses. The notion that herbal use functions as a bridge between cultural heritage and personal resilience adds depth to existing literature, demonstrating that healing is not simply a physiological process but also a narrative construction of meaning in the face of uncertainty. By situating these insights within a phenomenological framework, this study affirms the importance of honoring subjective knowledge in healthcare research and practice.

The findings of this study have important implications for both clinical practice and cultural health frameworks. The participants' experiences reveal that healing is not confined to the physiological domain but is embedded in rituals of care, cultural memory, and spiritual resilience (Morton dkk., 2018). For healthcare providers, these insights highlight the importance of integrating culturally sensitive approaches into patient care, particularly in societies where traditional and biomedical systems coexist. Understanding patients' motivations for using herbal remedies can foster trust, improve communication, and promote collaborative treatment planning. Furthermore, this research underscores the need for healthcare systems to recognize and validate the subjective experiences of patients as central to holistic health interventions.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. As a phenomenological inquiry, its findings are context-specific and drawn from a relatively small sample of Indonesian cancer patients who engage in herbal therapy. The purposive sampling method, while appropriate for capturing depth, limits the extent to which findings can be generalized to broader populations or other cultural contexts. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives may be influenced by personal biases or retrospective reconstruction. These limitations, however, do not undermine the value of the insights gained but instead point to the need for cautious interpretation and contextual sensitivity when applying the findings.

Future research may build upon these findings by exploring similar experiential dimensions among other patient populations or within different cultural and religious settings. Longitudinal studies could further investigate how meanings assigned to herbal remedy use evolve over time, particularly across stages of illness or recovery. Additionally, comparative studies between users and non-users of herbal medicine may reveal contrasts in perceived agency, spiritual engagement, and quality of life. Such extensions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of integrative care and enrich the broader discourse on patient-centered approaches in global health contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Indonesian cancer patients who use herbal remedies as a form of complementary therapy, addressing the need to understand healing beyond biomedical frameworks. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered how patients assign emotional, cultural, and spiritual meaning to their use of herbal medicine. The findings revealed that herbal practices serve as a source of inner peace, cultural continuity, spiritual resilience, and a sense of agency during illness. These insights contribute a richer understanding of patient behavior and offer a meaningful response to the limitations of prior research that often overlooked subjective experiences. The study demonstrates the value of integrating phenomenological perspectives into health research to better support culturally grounded care. Future studies may expand this work by exploring cross-cultural comparisons or examining how these experiences evolve throughout the cancer journey.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All phases of the research were conducted independently and objectively, and the funding sponsor had no role in the design, execution, interpretation, or writing of the study.

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