

# Perceived causes of mental illness and treatment practices by Traditional Healers of the Berta Community in Assosa, Ethiopia

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## Research Article

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# Abstract

Traditional healers of the Berta community play important roles in the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of patients who are with mental illness. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived causes of mental illness and their treatment methods used by the Berta community traditional healers. To achieve the intended objectives, seven well known traditional healers were selected using snowball sampling technique from the total Berta community. Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured one-to-one interviews, and they were analyzed by applying content analysis method. The findings of the study revealed that traditional healers of the Berta community detected mental illnesses through a detailed follow-up of a person's behaviors/actions and his/her daily life activities. According to these traditional healers, curse/witchcraft, harsh social condition, hereditary, substance use, and food poisoning are considered as the main causes of mental illness. To treat mental illnesses caused by either of these causes, the traditional healers use traditional and religious books (Kitab), herbal medicine, and divination bones. These traditional healing way of identifying the causes, diagnosis methods and treatment options are culturally specific. This urges collaborative work and study between the modern mental illness treatment options and the indigenous healing mechanisms.

## Introduction

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) defines mental illness as, a generic term that encompasses health problems which affect a person's feeling, thinking and behavior. It also impacts his or her functioning in the social work and in his/her daily life [3]. Mental illness is a non-communicable disease which is increasingly contributing to the global burden of diseases and disability [2, 7, 27]. To respond to this mental health crisis, 80 % of the population in Africa uses traditional medicine for treatment [32]. Based on experience and observation, indigenous healers often diagnosis mental health problems [31].

Traditional healing aims to reduce or eliminate the causes of the illness rather than targeting the symptoms and treatment methods are related to beliefs about the causes of mental illness [33]. Every region across the world has its own indigenous traditional mental illness healing methods based on the people's social beliefs, values, and aspirations [12, 14]. For instance, the Indian government promotes indigenous healing for diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders [19]. The traditional mental illness healing practices and methods differ from country to country as well as from region to region depending on cultural values, personal attitudes, philosophy, and costs of treatment [14, 15]. Traditional healing is culturally specific to treat different illnesses including mental illness. All cultures have a system of illness diagnosis to explain the causes of illness, how it can be cured, and from whom to seek help [6].

In Ethiopia, traditional healers have played a major role in the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of mental, health problems [ 4 ]. About 90% of the population relies on traditional medicine for primary mental health care services due to the presence of associated cultural and socio-economic factors, limited access and costs of modern public health services [ 5,30 ]. In Ethiopia, many people considered mental health problems as they happen because of supernatural powers, and they seek help from the supernatural activities like praying, fasting, holy water sprinkling and consulting individuals who are believed to have healing power [13] .

Traditional mental illness healing is becoming increasingly popular because of the high cost of medical health care services in modern government and private health centers to a majority of people [31] . In spite of this, the Ethiopian government does not consider mental health as a priority, and it does not allocate large amounts of money to it as compared to communicable diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV / AIDS. There have been scant studies on the area of traditional mental healing in Ethiopia. The Berta community has its own culturally appropriate indigenous traditional methods to prevent, diagnose, and treat the patients' mental health problems. Few local previous studies [8, 13] focused only on conceptualization of mental illness and practice of treating mental illness. Thus, a more comprehensive study seems in need to develop mental health policy and practice in Ethiopia, promote the available Berta community's indigenous healing practice of mental illness, to inform for Ministry of Health to give more value to the traditional mental illness healing practices and to add to the body of knowledge of mental health research which will serve as a reference for other researchers who will conduct research on indigenous healing practices. The current study aimed on investigating how traditional healers of the Berta community detect mental illness, identify perceived causes and signs and symptoms, assess the diagnostic methods and find out the traditional healing practices to treat mental illness.

## Research Questions

To address the target objectives, the following research questions were stated to guide this study

- How do the traditional healers of the Berta community know about mental illness, its causes and its symptoms?
- What methods do traditional healers use to identify people who are with mental illness?
- How do the traditional healers of the Berta community treat mental illness?

## Perceived Causes of mental illness and their treatment methods used by traditional healers

Indigenous traditional healers in African countries have their own perspectives about the causes of mental illness. While Africans explain or understand the causes of mental illness as because of supernatural causes and religious facts, people in western countries considered it as it is because of biological and psychological causes [31]

In Ethiopia, traditional healers in different parts of the country attribute the causes of mental illnesses to evil spirits like *zar* and *jinni* spirits, magic, demons, witchcraft, and the evil eye [ 5,13]. Traditional healers also attributed mental illness to supernatural causes such as witchcraft, angry ancestors, and God's punishment [29 ]. Overall, previous studies[5,6,22,26,28] identified various and diversified perceived causal factors of mental illness such as God's punishment or wrath, evil eye, bewitchments, sorcery, disregard of cultural norms, spirit or demonic possessions, genetic endowment, problems with nerves or brains in general, brain accidents and other physical causes, stress due to loss of belongings, shock due to bad life event (death, sudden loss of property), curse, spirit possession, economic problems, family conflicts, death of relatives, unmet or unresolved love, excessive learning or study, wondering in the middle of the night, sitting alone in the dark empty room, wondering in the middle of the day.

Coming to the target community, many Ethiopians also attributed mental health problems to supernatural powers and tends to seek service from the supernatural agents such as praying, fasting, holy water sprinkling, and consulting individuals who presumed to have special powers of healing mental health problems [5]. This study showed that self-talking, talking nonsense, shouting, impaired self-care such as not washing, laughing at inappropriate times, eating dirty foods, carrying dirty things, uttering incoherently, wandering away from home, aggression, fighting, confusion and strange behavior, crying, and isolation (desire to be alone) are perceived symptoms of a mentally ill person[ 5 ].

## **Diagnoses methods used to identify people with mental illness by Traditional healers**

Traditional healers use a culturally accepted diagnosis of illness, and they have their own mechanisms to classify people with mental illness. spiritual and traditional healers in Ethiopia make their assessment and diagnosis of a person with a mental disorder based on traditional and religious books such as *'Awude-negest*, *Metshafe-tibebi* (book of wisdom), *Firie-Kewakibt* (a book telling one's fate matching your birth date with stars), *Metshafe-fewus* (book of healing), *Etsedebdabe* (a book listing herbal medicine), and they also use herbal plants[ 6,34 ].

## **Traditional mental illness healing methods**

Various treatment methods are used by traditional healers in the Berta community. Herbal remedies, ritual objects, prayer methods, and prescribed behaviors for preventive purpose have been mostly used to treat mental illness patients by traditional herbalist [18]. There are various traditional methods used by traditional healers including herbs, appeasing the spirits and divination depending on the perceived cause [1]. Likewise, [22] found mental illness treatment methods such as cleansing evil spirits through steaming, burning herbs, enema administering, induced vomiting, traditional incisions, performing rituals and traditional medicine.

## Theoretical framework

Many conceptual-explanatory frameworks of mental illness have not been put forward in the science. However, Explanatory Model of Mental Illness is important to theoretical framework and to explain perceived causes, diagnoses, and treatment methods of mental illness. The explanatory model provides valuable information about the influence of the illness for the patient and their family, and it helps to build an understanding of their wider beliefs systems, to give proper attention and to explain several mental and physical illnesses [9]. The explanatory model of mental illness assumes mental illness as a culturally determined process of understanding the causes, symptoms and treatments of mental illness [17]. According to this model, culturally determined beliefs explain other illness people's behaviors, health and help-seeking [9].

## Methodology

### Study Area

The study was conducted in Assosa town. The city is the capital of Benishangul Gumuz Regional State (BGRS) which is located at 670 km in the West of Addis Ababa. The Berta community is one of indigenous societies in Asossa Zone. The community is well known in traditional practices to prevent, to diagnose, and to treat health problems including mental illness.

## Participants

Traditional healers from the Berta community were selected using snowball sampling technique. After conducting initial interview with a well-known traditional healer in the community, he was asked to point another traditional healer whom he knows. In every successive interview, the participants were asked to refer another traditional healer whom they know. Accessing indigenous healers was continued in this way until the required interviewee number reached. The information collected from seven indigenous healers was found to be adequate enough to assess perceived causes, symptoms and treatment practices of mental illnesses by traditional healers of the Berta Community.

## **Data collection tools**

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth semi-structured one-to-one interview. A one to one interview is more flexibility and gives freedom to express personal issues [11]. Probing was used when there is a need for clarity before closing the question. The interviews took place at the participants' homes and places of work. They took about two hours, and they were conducted in the language that the participants most comfortably speak either Amharic or Afan Oromo.

## **Method of data analysis**

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English, and then back-translated into the local language by a linguist to ensure accuracy and consistency. Content analysis was applied to analyse the data. The main ideas raised by the participants were clustered thematically. The main themes that emerged from the study include: (1) Traditional healers understanding about mental illness, (2) Perceived causes of mental illness (3) Known symptoms of mental illness (4) Diagnostic methods used by traditional healers and (5) traditional healers mental illness healing practices.

## **Ethical considerations**

All interviews were audio-recorded during receiving consent from each participant. The participants were orally asked about their willingness to give responses to interview questions. The data collectors also verbally described the purpose of the study, the procedure to be used, the reasonable risks and benefits associated to the study. After they agreed to participate, they signed on a consent form before proceeding to the interview.

## **Results**

### **Socio demographic information**

**Table 1. Socio demographic information of participants of the study**

SN	Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Educational status	Experience
1	MM	40	Male	Grade 2 education and religious education	25
2	AK	45	Male	High school education and religious education	32
3	AI	38	Male	Religious education	25
4	JM	40	Male	Religious education	27
5	AM	38	Male	Elementary school education and religious education	29
6	MI	50	Male	Religious education	36
7	KM	44	Male	Illiterate	28

The socio-demographic information of the participants include: pseudo names of participants, age, gender, educational status, experience year. As shown in Table 1, all the traditional healers were males whose work experience ranged from 25 to 36 years. Except one, all the traditional healers have religious education while some of them have lower level of modern education.

## Traditional healers understanding about mental illnesses

Most of them have a good understanding about mental illnesses, and they define mental illness by closely observing a person's behaviors/action, and his/her daily life activities. Besides, their understanding of mental illness was similar, and it seems to be culturally defined. They closely associated their understanding about mental illnesses with their own experience and knowledge. The participants said that mental illness in Berta community is called *SulMajinun* (madness) or *Yeamiro-Ebdet* in Amharic and *Maraata* in Afan Oromo. The traditional healers understood mental illness as a deviated and unusual behavior/action that an individual shows in the community. One of the traditional healers expressed his understanding of mental illness as follows:

*I understand mentally ill people through his/her action and thought that they show. For example, they always insult people and takes off the clothes in public, play as a child on the road, and in front of some people, eat and drink whatever on the place, move here and there continuously through collecting dirty things, talk none senseless words.” (Participant AM)*

In a similarly way, another participant explained his understanding about mental illness as:

*I understand mentally ill people through his/her behavior and personal hygiene. That means the behavior/action that mentally ill people show differs from a normal person in society and their hygiene is not good as a normal person. As an example, they do not keep their hygiene, they are easily tempered, unreasonably crying, laughing alone and generally their behavior is not constant especially those who have experienced mental illness for many years. For these reasons the social, psychological well-being of an individual is affected.” (Participant AI)*

The above narratives indicated that the participants understood mental illnesses through an individual's behavior/ action. They understood mental illness as a condition that has some behavioral manifestations that are not considered normal within their social context such as insulting community, laughing and crying without any reason, wondering here and there, sleeping everywhere, eating and collecting dirty things, play as a child on the road and in front of the public, drink whatever on the place, speaksenseless words, and change his/her personal hygiene. Therefore, they understood mental illness as the behavior/action of the person different from the social contexts in society. Besides, the traditional healers understood mental illness with a person's physical and emotional conditions such as they cannot manage their physical in a good way when doing something and go, they do not want to eat and talk with their collagenous, aggressiveness, their hygiene is not good.

## **Perceived causes of mental illness by traditional healers**

Based on their own experience and knowledge, traditional healers who were participated in this study attributed mental illnesses to several factors. They listed different causes of mental illnesses including: curse/ Witchcrafts, harsh social conditions, jealousy, hereditary, substance use, and food poisoning. They described the causes of mental illness as follows :

*There are different causes of mental illness. For example, if there is conflict between people, insult, and jealousy. Then, they are bewitched you by their ability and bewitched on you by money for this case. These people who are affecting the mental health of individuals in our community are called Arama by the local language of our community. Therefore, if an individual developed such a severe mental illness, we treat them based on our knowledge and experiences, and according to the causes of illness.*

**(Participant AK)**

Another participant added:

*Some people are harming the mental health of others by using their malicious power gained from evil spirits and religious education or training. These people do these evil practices for money or to revenge by their ability to harm the mental health of individuals in society. To treat these mentally ill people as a traditional healer, I use different mechanisms and these are well known to me. In the past times, people*



*who developed severe mental illness were treated only by traditional healers because there was no modern medicine, but traditional healers know its causes of illness.” (Participant AJ)*

Participants of the study also believed that mental illness is caused by a supernatural power. They said that individuals can develop severe mental health problems because of punishments of God/Allah if they do wrong acts such as not praying/ Dua. For instance, one participant (AJ) described that when individual violates the religious principles especially one who violates the Allah commandments, a person can develop a mental illness.

Thus, the traditional healers perceived the causes of mental illness related to supernatural powers. That means, supernatural powers can cause misfortunes and illness if an individual committed wrong acts, and if a person is not praying.

In addition, most of the traditional healers perceived that mental illness can result from stressful life events such as family problems/conflict, stressed about general life, bereavement, divorce, and academic failure may cause of mental illness. For instance, two of the participants perceived harsh social conditions as a cause for mental illness in the following way:

*Mental illness may cause by the conflict between his/her parents, neighbors, relationships with of HIV/AIDS victims, and divorce. After all, because of factors individual begin to isolate from his/her parents, relationships, think too much, and his/her mental health is disturbed.” (Participant AI)*

*Unexpected death close relatives, family, loss of loved one, and loss of God lead to serious mental illness. For example, if one was too attached to his mother and suddenly the mother passes away, he/she can have difficulty adjusting himself normally which leads to mental disturbances. I have seen more patients who come to me to get treatment for these cases after they developed serious mental illness.” (Participant JM)*

Participants also believed that mental illness can be caused by heredity factors that pass from one person to another person hereditary. *One participant said:*

*Mental illness can be transmitted through biological descents. Suppose if there is any kind of mental illness case presented among family or back generation, the probability to transmit to others is high. As a result, a person can easily develop mental illness in the future. This mental illness is transmitted genetically.” (Participant MM)*

Some of the traditional healers perceived poison as a cause that leads to a mental illness. For example, one traditional healer mentioned that mental illness can be caused when people intentionally put the poisonous material or substance in the food or drink to harm a person. One participant said that *cruel people can put poison in somebody's food, beer, and around his/her environment to make them ill. You can call the mental illness by poisoning in society.*” (Participant AJ)

Finally, participants of the study also indicated that excessive use of a substance is another cause of the mental illness.

## Perceived signs and symptoms of mental illness

Participants described that mentally ill persons showed different signs and symptoms that differ from a normal person in the community. The symptoms may include talking about things that don't make sense or they tend to talk and laugh alone, taking off the clothes in public places, collect and carry dirty things, crying and laughing alone, talking nonsense, laughing at inappropriate times, eating dirty food, and being aggressive.

*Most people who have mental illness are talking about things that do not make sense or they tend to talk and laugh alone, and they become easily tempered.*” (Participant MM).

*Some of the mentally ill people are always taking off the clothes in community, in the market, collect and carry dirty things. More patients who have severe mental illness have this sign and symptoms.*”(Participant AI).

*Some mental ill people mostly find them talking about things that don't make sense or they tend to talk and laugh alone, crying alone. This inconsistent behavior is a symptom among mentally ill persons especially on people who have severe mental illness for many years.*” (Participant MI).

*Most of the time people with mental illness have shown signs and symptoms such as talking by himself and nonsense, laughing at inappropriate times, eating dirty food, and aggression.* (Participant AK)

# Diagnosis methods of identifying persons with mental illness

Traditional mental illness healers have used several procedures and methods to diagnose persons with mental illness and other illnesses. These methods are physical observation of the patients, asking the patients' relatives or families, use of religious books (e.g., Kitab), and herbal medicines. The religious books are called (KitabUruk (book of traditional healers), *KitabAbumeshar*, *KitabAlusul*, *KitabObsubuhan*, and *KitabAlherar*). These books (Kitab) have different purposes in order to diagnose, to identify the causes, and also treat the patient's problems. The following extracts show how traditional healers identify a mentally ill person:

*As a traditional healer, I use different herbal medicines that a person can use in different ways such as mixed with water for washing, cream, mixed with water for washing drinking and eating. In addition to herbal medicinal, sometimes I use KitabAlherar to diagnose, to now and treat the patient's problem.*  
**(Participant AM)**

*When the patient comes to me, first of all, I look at him/her behavior carefully before diagnosis as a mental illness. At this time, the patient shows signs and symptoms of mental illnesses such as laughing and crying without any reason, smell very bad, he/she cannot manage his/her body, he/she talk alone and sometimes he/she doesn't know what we talk about and his/her talk. When I see all these signs on the patient, then, I know it is sulmajinun or maarata (madness). Furthermore, I interview the patient's relatives and parents about the illness, its cause, when, and where the illness was started before concluding on the specific nature of the mental illness. In addition to this, I use traditional and religious books (kitab) specifically kitabAlhusul to clearly diagnose and treat the patient."* **(Participant MI)**

*As a traditional healer, first I ask his/her family to check if the patient is able to talk with me and his/her with his/her relative's. In this case, his/her relative's or parents speak about patient's feelings and pains. I also use visually examining of the patient's appearance and its probable cause to determine the problem. Then, I check it in front of the patient using a book(Kitab) or different techniques in order to determine whether his/her family has mental illness issues or not. Sometimes the information that gathered from patients are not true, and they do not helps to diagnosis his/her illness because sometimes mentally ill patients are talking and give unrelated information. But this kitabcan tell me the real causes and treatment methods of the patient's problems. Therefore, I observe the patient's behavior and ask the patient's relatives and family for additional information about the illness before I conclude about the causes of the mental illness (kitab)." **(Participant JM)***

*I ask the family members who brought him to describe the symptoms so that I can rule things out. Then, based on the information, I can determine what is worrying the person, and what are its treatments. Mostly, there will be one or two key symptoms that the patients tell me exactly about what the illness is and about whether or not its causes is by poisoning and ashes. Therefore, if the patient has relatives or parents, I ask them about the patient's illness. Otherwise, I use traditional herbs and other methods like religious books to diagnose as well as treat the patient's problems." (Participant AK)*

*There are different kinds of diagnostic methods that are used to diagnose patient's problems such as traditional books (Kitab), dream, and other herbs. Sometimes if Allah tells me in the dream about the patient's causes of illness and its treatments (herbs), directly I apply that herbs to diagnoses and treat the patient's problems. Sometimes, I use traditional bones together with the dreams because sometimes the dream will tell me about the person who is sick even before he/she arrived and also the dream can tell me what kind of sickness the person is suffering from."(Participant MM)*

*Sometimes I used my knowledge and experience to diagnosis the patient's problems. Because, I know what kind of illness it is when I observe the patient's behavior, and I also used herbal medicine that is used to now the problem of the patent. Different types of medicines are used some of which I prepare for the patient to eat depending on the state of the individual. First, I ask the patient's name and his/her mother's name to diagnosis his/her illness."(Participant MI)*

Generally, the data obtained from the traditional healers in-depth interview revealed that patient observation especially physical examination of the patient and asking patient's family to get full description about the current condition and history of the illness. Besides, some traditional healers first ask the patient's name and his/her mother's name. Then, the healer determines if it is related to mental illness.

## **Traditional healing practices to treat mental illness**

Traditional healers get the patients through either referral from modern health institutions or some traditional healers have their own drug shops where they sell herbs and other remedies in Assosacity and around it. One of the traditional methods used to treat patients with mental illness is indigenous herbs. This involves giving different herbal preparations taken from different plants' root, bark, and

leaves. According to participants, most individual with mental illness are treated by traditional ways. Herbs are used with mixed soft porridge and others drinks. The following narratives illustrate how indigenous healers treat mentally ill persons.

*Firstly, when the patients who have severe mental illness come to me to get treatment, the patient takes shower, and then I make herbal medicine for drinking by mixing with soft porridge. I also make herbal medicine mixed with water and used for bathing and steaming. However, this treatment is given rarely. Most of the time, I give herbal medicine mixed with soft porridge which should be eaten in the morning, afternoon and evening and I even prepare herbal medicine for use during steaming.” (Participant JM)*

*“When the patient comes to me to get treatment, the first thing that I do is to give for the patient an order to take a wash and eat. After I gave this wash and eat orders of herbs, then I have to give for the patient some herbs that I have boiled to inhale, and I give a mixture that he/she has to take (orally) again. Following those procedures, I give him some special creams to paint all over his body as well on his/her brain because the mental illness distributed in all body parts are connected to the brain function. For example, I have seen patients who developed severe mental illness beat on their legs. Therefore, as traditional healer, I used and I follow the above steps to treat the patients in our community. However, these steps differed according to the patients' problems and their diagnosis.” (Participant MI)*

*Sometimes, I give herbal mixtures which the patients will drink and others times which they will use to wash before they eat the medicine. For instance, sometimes, there is a special kind of herbs that we can burn and the person who have eye evil/Buda will have to breathe the smoke to treat the patient's illness. However, the herbs that I used to treat the patient's illness depend on the causes and severity of illness. (Participant MM)*

*Allah also reveals some treatments to me in different ways.. Sometimes I will get it as a vision, or sometimes I can immediately fall asleep and then I will dream about the patient's problem . . . or through other people whom he sends to me. He could use other people to show me what specific treatments to use to treat specific diseases. In addition, burning herbs which is traditionally known in the community is used to treat the patients with mental illness. The patients have to sniff these herbs through his/her nose, then it goes straight to the brain awaking brain sense of the patients and they also used to peace and harmony, purifying and banishments of evil intrusions.” (Participant AI)*

*Some wild animals are used to treat patient's problems in a different way in our community. For instance, to treat severely mentally ill people, I use medicine prepared from the brain of hyena because it's very important to treat mentally ill patients. This can take according to the causes and severity of the patient's illness with other medicine. During this time, when I treat the patients, I don't use these things only. In our community, Dua is the most important and common treatment of any illness in our community, especially if the illness is caused by evil spirits." (Participant AK)*

*I can use different types of medicines, some of which I prepare for the patient to eat, some I make it for the person to be steamed depending on the individual age, illness, cause of illness symptoms of illness that patients show." (Participant AM)*

In addition to traditional herbs, divination bones which are made from different wild animals such as hyena, snake, leopard, tiger, and hinging dog are used to treat mentally ill persons.

## Discussion

The finding of the present study revealed that most of the participants of the study (traditional healers) detected mental illness through a person's behaviors/action, daily life activities of the individual. In addition, few of the participants of the study called the term mental illness by their own words in our community they called that *SulMajinun* (madness for Berta community) in Arabic, *YeamiroEbdet* in Amharic and *Maraatain* Afan Oromo. Most of the traditional healers who participated in this study were familiar with these terms (*Sulmajinun*, *Ebdet*, and *Maraata*) that are given as calling name for people who developed mental illness. This is consistent with how mental illness is conceptualized in the academic literature. The American Psychiatric Association (2013), conceptualizes mental illness as being a manifestation of behavioral, psychological, or biological dysfunction in the individual. However, the way traditional healers diagnose and treat the patients differ from the western treatment methods of patients who are with mental illness. Traditional healers treat mental illness based on culturally specific methods and using traditional healing methods.

These findings of the present study are consistent with the earlier finding conducted by [ 26 ] that shows mental illnesses as something that is displayed through a person's behavior and its condition that has some behavioral manifestations that are not considered normal within their social context. The findings of the present study are also similar with previous studies that considered mental illness as a distortion in thought patterns and behavior whereby an individual losses contact with reality [ 5,8].

The results of the present study revealed that the behavior/actions among people with mental illness are playing with their fingers, insult community, laughter and crying without any reason, moving here and there, sleeping where people are not sleeping, eating and collecting dirty things, self-injuries, getting easily

tempered, self-mutilation, talking alone, try to harm others, singing, laughing, and shouting uncontrollable, takes off the clothes in public, play as a child on the road and in front of some people, collecting dirty things, talk none senseless words, eating his/her finger, and walk without appropriate time and place. They understood mental illness as the behavior/action of the patients' shows in the community is different from social contexts in society. The results of the present study are supported by various previous indicating the aforementioned behaviors as signs and symptoms of mental illness[8,20,22,26 ].

The findings of the current study also revealed that a curse/ witchcrafts, harsh social condition, jealousy, hereditary, substance use, and food poisoning as major causes of mental illness by Berta community. In this study, participants explained that excessive substance use, God's punishment, curse/witchcraft, and social problems as causes that lead to mental illness. This corresponds with previous studies [22, 26, and 29]. Similarly, stress in daily life, punishment from God and Evil sprite can cause mental illnesses or it can be genetically inherited [2 ].

The present study was supported by a study in Zimbabwe which indicated the role of witchcraft causing mental health problems. According to this study, those who are bewitched and may become depressed, patients presenting with psychosis and confusion through witchcraft, some have become unconscious, some patients have inserted witchcraft objects in their bodies which would make them suffer from untold pain, and many similar issues [ 16 ]. In addition, when people had stopped following their cultural prescriptions which descend from their ancestors withdrawing their protection from them is another cause to prone illness. The finding of present study received support from another study which indicates that mental illness to be a direct result of witchcraft or evil spirits [26]. The reasons for witchcraft included envy, jealousy, or being motivated by other evil intentions like having to hurt the victim's parents [26].

The finding of the present study indicated that individuals can develop severe mental health problems by the punishments of God/Allah for instance if the people do wrongful acts, not praying/ Dua. Similarly, [21] indicated that people were born mentally ill because God predestined them to live like that and it considered the will of God.

The current study also showed that stressful life events such as; family problems/conflict, stressed about his/her general life, bereavement, divorce, failing on education are perceived as a cause of mental illness. Similarly,[26] indicated that the cause of mental illness includes stressful-life events or problems. Likewise, [22] indicated that social stressors such as poverty, lack of employment, and family disruptions can lead to the development of mental illness. Besides, the finding of the present study has consistency

with in which identified poverty, financial challenges, and stressful life events as common causes of mental illness[21].The finding of the present study was further supported by different studies which revealed stress in daily life and many socioeconomic factors such as disease, political unrest, violence, and any kind of addictions are all play a role in the incidence of mental illness[2,10, 25] .

Coming to methods of diagnosis, the finding of the present study revealed that observation of the patients, asking the patients relative's and family, use different traditional and religious books (*Kitab*), divination bones, and other herbal medicines have been used to diagnosis the patient's problems among the study area. In particular, the finding of the study pointed that in order to identify a patient's problems various diagnostic methods which are culturally appropriate methods were used by the traditional healers to identify the patient's problems. These includes: different kinds of tradition and religious books that are called *Kitab* such as *Kitab Uruk (book of traditional healers)*, *Kitab Abumeshar*, *Kitab Alusul*, *kitab Obsubuhan*, *Kitab Alherar*. These books (*Kitab*) have their own different purposes. For instance, *Kitab Abumeshar* is used to identify the illness itself and to know whether the illness will be a cure or not. *Kitab Alherar* is telling you the illness and why you get the illness. In addition, to identify the patient's problems, these books (*Kitab*) are also used to diagnose patients who have developed mental illness and other illnesses, to identify their cause of illness.

The findings of the present study further indicated that most of the traditional healers also used other methods like herbs and divination in addition to traditional and religious books (*Kitab*) and their own experience and knowledge to treat patients with mental illnesses. These findings are similar with study finding in Ghana the herbalists used observation, patient interviews, third-party informants, and, undertook a physical examination of the patient, divine revelation as a means of diagnosing the patient's illness [18]. In addition, in the study by [26] who indicted that traditional healers can see if someone has a mental illness through their behaviors and the divination bones.

One of the methods that are used by traditional healers of Berta community to treat patient with mental illness is traditional herbs. This involves giving different herbal preparations taken from roots, different plants, barks, and leaves of a plant to a mentally ill person. In addition to traditional herbs, divination bones which are made from different wild animals such as hyena, snake, leopard, tiger, and hinging dog are also used to treat and diagnose patient problems. The methods of treating mental illness described are similar to what has been found in other studies [18, 22, and 26]. In addition, traditional bones are used in the diagnostic process of mental illness in the traditional healing process in Uganda [23].

## Conclusions



Traditional healers in the Berta community understood mental illness through a person's behaviors/actions, daily life activities. The traditional healers of the community perceived curse/Witchcrafts, harsh social conditions, hereditary, substance use, and food poisoning as the major causes of mental illness. Mental illness is manifested through different symptoms or signs such as talking about things that don't make sense, talk and laugh alone, takes off clothes in public areas, collect and carry dirty things, crying and laughing alone, laughing at inappropriate times, eating dirty food, and aggression. Traditional healers diagnosis and identify persons with mental illness through observation of their behaviors and activities, asking their relatives and family members. They mainly use different traditional and religious books such as *KitabUruk* (book of traditional healers), *KitabAbumeshar*, *KitabAlusul*, *KitabObsubuhan*, and *KitabAlherar* as a diagnostic tool. Herbal medicine and divination bones are mainly used to treat mentally ill persons.

## Recommendations

Traditional healers understanding about mental illness is linked to the academic conceptualization of mental illness and they have played an important role in providing mental health services to the communities. So, it can be suggested that traditional healers need to be recognized as mental health providers since they provide culturally appropriate treatments to people in their communities. The regional health office should encourage the traditional healers to increase the use of indigenous medicine and licensing the works of the healers. The findings of the study were shown that herbal medicine, divination bones, traditional and religious books are used to diagnose and treat persons with mental illness in the Berta community. Thus, concerned bodies (Ministry of Health and Regional Health Sectors) should design and implement initiatives to collaborate with indigenous healers in treating mental illness. The Ministry of Health and Ethiopian Food and Drug Administration and Control Authority (EFDACA) should work to integrate indigenous healers to improve the general health care services.

## Declarations

**Ethics approval and consent to participate:** We received approval and clearance from Psychology Department at University of Gondar. Informed consent was prepared and signed by each participant.

**Consent for publication:** All the participants of the study allowed to publish this study in scientific journals.

**Competing interests:** We declare no conflict of interest.

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**Authors' contributions:** Boki Tolosa Gutema worked in the introduction, methodology, data collection and analysis. Missaye Mulatie Mengstie worked on the introduction, methodology and data analysis.

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**Availability of data and materials:** All the recorded interview data will be available in repositories recommended by the publisher.

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