



## Traditional Practice of Dompol Tongosan in Bone Fracture Treatment

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore a traditional healing practice known as *dompol tongosan*. The research was conducted in Humbang Hasundutan Regency, North Sumatra Province, and involved traditional healers (*pandampol*), patients who had undergone treatment, and community leaders as key participants. The findings reveal that the *dompol tongosan* practice carries strong sociocultural significance, not only as a form of physical therapy but also because of the spiritual power embedded within it. The intermediary media—such as leaves or oil—can provide healing only when blessed by the healer (*pendampol*). The community's trust in this healing practice stems from their belief in its benevolent, effective, and affordable curative power.

**Keywords:** traditional medicine, bone fracture, *dompol tongosan*, spiritual

### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendalami praktik pengobatan yang dikenal sebagai *dompol tongosan*. Penelitian ini dilakukan di Kabupaten Humbang Hasundutan, Provinsi Sumatera Utara. Penelitian ini melibatkan para praktisi pengobatan tradisional (*pandampol*), pasien yang pernah menjalani pengobatan, serta tokoh masyarakat sebagai subjek utama. Hasil penelitian memperlihatkan bahwa praktik *dompol tongosan* memiliki kekuatan sosio kultural bukan hanya karena merupakan pengobatan fisik, tetapi juga karena kekuatan spiritual yang terkandung di dalamnya. Medium perantara berupa daun dan atau minyak hanya mampu mengobati jika didoakan oleh dukun (*pendampol*). Kepercayaan terhadap praktik pengobatan ini bersumber pada pandangan masyarakat mengenai kekuatan penyembuhan yang baik, efektif dan terjangkau.

**Kata kunci:** pengobatan, patah tulang, *dompol tongosan*, spiritual

## 1. Introduction

Traditional medicine is an inseparable component of public health practices across many parts of the world (Pool & Geissler, 2005). Rooted in local knowledge passed down through generations, it encompasses herbal remedies, healing rituals, and spiritual practices deeply embedded in local cultures (Akawire et al., 2015; Kyaw et al., 2021; Rajan et al., 2014). From a medical anthropology perspective, traditional medicine is not merely regarded as an alternative form of therapy but also as a social and cultural phenomenon that reflects how communities understand health, illness, and the human body (Bazzano et al., 2020; Fadzil et al., 2016).

In this sense, traditional medicine represents the complex interaction between communal belief systems, social structures, and people's lived experiences of illness and suffering. In many developing countries, including Indonesia, such practices remain resilient and play an important role in certain regions, even as modern biomedical healthcare systems have become increasingly dominant. Local wisdom, accessibility, and cultural acceptance are key factors that sustain the relevance of traditional medicine and often position it as a complement to biomedical care (Kleinman, 1978).

Research on the *dompol tongosan* traditional healing practice remains extremely limited, despite its continued acceptance in rural areas of North Sumatra. This paper offers a concise explanation, framed within medical anthropology,

to understand how local communities conceptualize health and disease and how this healing practice is socially and culturally embraced.

## 2. Methods

This study is a descriptive research (Zaluchu, 2006) conducted in a rural area of Indonesia, specifically in Humbang Hasundutan Regency, located 228 km from the capital city of North Sumatra Province. The research site, Parsingguran II Village, lies within Pollung Subdistrict, about 16 km from the subdistrict's administrative center. The village is situated in a hilly area, and the entire population works as farmers, with the majority belonging to the Batak Toba ethnic group. Although most residents identify as Christians, they continue to uphold a belief in traditional rituals. A community health center (puskesmas) with non-inpatient facilities is available, though its distance from villagers' homes varies.

The study involved traditional healers (pandampol), patients who had previously undergone treatment, and community leaders as the main participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews to explore the healing process, the natural materials used—such as oppu-oppu leaves (lily leaves) and special oils—as well as the spiritual and ritual meanings accompanying the practice. In addition, the researcher carried out participant observation, directly witnessing every stage of the healing process: from the preparation of materials, application of the herbal ointment, and bandaging, to the recitation of prayers or mantras, in order to capture the broader social and cultural context surrounding the practice. Documentary research was also conducted by collecting photographs, field notes, and oral narratives related to the history and development of this tradition.

## 3. Result and Discussion

Traditional communities, particularly in Indonesia, continue to practice traditional medicine for a variety of purposes. The literature records traditional treatments for pregnant women (Lubis et al., 2024), for children (Siahaan et al., 2021) and for other health-related aims (Abdallah et al., 2022; Rahmat et al., 2021). Each technique is often closely tied to the cultural traditions of a specific ethnic group. Dompol tongosan is one such traditional healing practice, specifically used to treat bone fractures, sprains, and similar injuries. This treatment relies primarily on prayers, mantras, and herbal preparations, which can even be sent to patients who live far away from the healer.

The term “dompol” refers to the part of the body experiencing problems—such as a broken bone, sprain, or other injury—highlighting the focus on the affected area requiring healing. Meanwhile, “tongosan” describes a method of distance healing, where treatment is performed not through direct physical contact but through spiritual power, mantras, or prayers.

The healers, known locally as pandampol, are individuals recognized for their ability to treat bone-related conditions (Alghamdi et al., 2025; Japhari et al., 2025; Mahanta & Saikia, 2025). Uniquely, as with many other traditional practices (Kibret et al., 2025), becoming a pandampol requires a special innate talent. Barita Tamba, one of the healers, explained: “I have had this talent since childhood; for this dompol tongosan, it has always been a natural gift.” He added that while the technique can theoretically be learned, it differs significantly from the abilities of those who possess a natural gift.

A different perspective came from Parlin Banjarnahor, who emphasized that his skill was learned from within the family rather than acquired spontaneously: “I learned dompol tongosan from my father; you could say it has been passed down from generation to generation.” The dompol tongosan healing method is used to treat fractures, sprains, and dislocations. An informant who had undergone this treatment, Elvan, described the process:

“First, the healer—whom we usually call the massage practitioner—asked my mother to find some oppu-oppu leaves (lily leaves). She collected several leaves, enough to be used repeatedly. First, my leg was cleaned. Then the leaves were sliced and heated until they burned slightly and released oil. After that, the oil was applied to the affected leg or bone and wrapped with a cloth. Finally, a prayer was recited, as people usually pray in their faith. This was not done just once, but repeatedly. In a single healing session, my leg was wrapped with the leaves five to eight times.”

Based on this testimony, the dompol tongosan healing practice relies on simple, easily obtainable materials, particularly lily leaves (oppu-oppu) (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Lily leaves

The lily leaves (bulung oppu-oppu) used in dompol tongosan healing are commonly planted by local villagers in the study area and are easy to find. The reason for using these leaves was explained by a healer (pandampol):

“These bulung oppu-oppu, or lily leaves, have been my main healing tool for a long time. They are not just ordinary leaves—although they grow wild, their benefits are extraordinary. They usually grow beside houses, in the fields, and often even on old graves, so they are very easy to find. But even though they are easy to get, they are not to be underestimated. For us healers, these leaves are like an ‘old friend’—a tool I constantly rely on when treating people, especially those with broken bones, severe sprains, or muscle injuries.”

This statement underscores that the lily leaves are an integral part of the healing ritual. The healer elaborated further,

“Why those leaves? Because from the moment I received this healing gift, those were the ones that fit. When heated, they release oil—and that oil is what matters. When applied to the injured body part, it creates warmth, penetrates the skin, and helps relieve pain. But it’s not just about the oil. I also use the leaf as a substitute for my hands. If the patient cannot bear to be massaged because of the pain, I take the leaf, heat it, speak prayers over it, and then apply it to the injured area. I wrap it with cloth to keep it warm, and in my prayer I say, ‘let this leaf work, not my hands.’ For me, healing is not only physical; it is also about the soul, about faith, about the relationship with God.”

The narrative clearly shows that the leaves, the oil, and the cloth are only mediums. The true essence of healing lies in the spiritual dimension—prayers and mantras recited by the healer. This is further illustrated in the following words,

“That’s why I have always used bulung oppu-oppu. Because they work. Because they have been proven. And because these leaves are not just ordinary plants. God has provided them for us to use. We only need to use them properly and believe that healing comes not only from human hands, but also from prayer and the forces of nature working together.”

Thus, the practice of dompol tongosan transcends the purely physical. Even when the leaves are not available, healers can perform the treatment using oil. The story of D. Sinaga illustrates this. When his child suffered a thigh fracture, he brought the child for dompol tongosan therapy. According to him, the healer did not use leaves at all,

“It was simple, just using oil—like eucalyptus oil, nothing complicated, and we ourselves felt it was clean. Other bone healers sometimes use herbal poultices, but this healer just used eucalyptus-type oil and a kind of balm that was applied again.”

One of the key ingredients in dompol tongosan is oil, which is easy to obtain. The oil can be purchased from a local shop, with no specific brand required. After purchasing the oil, patients bring it to the healer, who then prays over it so it can be used for treatment.

Another option is horse oil (*minyak kuda*), as described by another informant,

“Besides bulung oppu-oppu, I often use horse oil. If the injury is mild, regular oil is enough. But if the bone is badly fractured, we must use horse oil. It is made from horse meat and is usually quite expensive. Sometimes the patient must buy it themselves because it can cost hundreds of thousands of rupiah. But the result is different. I heat the horse oil, apply it to the lily leaf, and then place it on the injured area.”



Figure 2. Horse Oil

Again, the most important element of this practice is the prayer or mantra of the healer. Whether using leaves or oil, healing is believed to occur because the healer's prayer activates these mediums. A unique aspect of dompol tongosan is that therapy can be performed remotely. For example, a patient only needs to use oil that has been prayed over by the healer, without having to meet the healer in person.

#### *Patients' Perspectives*

Interviews with informants reveal that dompol tongosan is often viewed as a last-resort solution for serious injuries. Banjarnahor, for instance, recounted an accident about eight years ago,

"After the accident I was taken to the hospital, but the doctors recommended amputation. My family disagreed, so local residents suggested mardampol tongosan instead. My parents took me to a pandampol. First, the healer massaged my leg a bit, then applied the medicine every day."

Today, he is healthy and able to move freely without pain. Similarly, Elvan shared his experience,

"When I was hit by a car, I initially planned to go to the hospital. But in Batak tradition, people often choose traditional healing over hospital care. Hospital treatment is expensive and requires intensive procedures. Fortunately, my mother's brother knew a well-known traditional bone healer, so we decided to go there."

Dompol tongosan is therefore typically sought by those with serious bone injuries. Both Banjarnahor and Elvan emphasized that their conditions were severe enough to warrant this traditional treatment. Another informant, Wiski, suffered a wrist fracture. Through dompol tongosan therapy, he reported that he recovered within just one month.

Knowledge about the sources of this traditional treatment is typically acquired because those who practice dompol tongosan are already well known in the local community. This is because the healers (pandampol) generally live among the people themselves (Jeitler et al., 2025; Raj et al., 2025). Elvan, for example, explained that he first learned about this healing technique through his own family, who had previously experienced a similar accident. Not only family members but also friends informed him that, following a serious accident, they had sought treatment using dompol tongosan.

People in the study area believe that these pandampol possess special skills, which is why they are often referred to as "orang pintar" (literally "wise persons" or "knowledgeable ones"). According to one resident, dompol tongosan is closely tied to the community's traditional belief system, which continues to recognize a spiritual relationship between humans and ancestral spirits as well as the importance of maintaining harmony between body and nature. This is acknowledged as part of the local customary belief system. Another informant, Daniel, expressed this view,

"I see that usually these pandampol or healers seem to have a special oil for treating their patients, and before they begin the treatment, they recite a prayer—at least that's what I think—over the oil before applying it to the person who is ill. So in my opinion, there must be spiritual values involved in that process."

Preferences for seeking help from pandampol were also revealed in Elvan's explanation,

"If we talk about advantages, the first thing is definitely the budget. At the hospital, it's expensive and the treatment is complicated and has to be repeated many times—it's a hassle. The downside [of traditional treatment] is that in modern medicine you can immediately see where the problem is because it can be examined by X-ray. But the advantages are clear: first, it's definitely cheaper; the ingredients are easy to find. And you don't need to go to the hospital or get referrals here and there. In fact, if you compare the treatment with the hospital, it's basically the same, but hospital care is expensive and requires inpatient admission. In traditional healing, everyone knows the healer has certain knowledge, so the recovery is much faster."

Elvan emphasized that he actually had the option to seek hospital care, but he found that using modern facilities would be inconvenient—not only in terms of cost, but also because of the need for multiple visits. He compared the two options and found that dompol tongosan treatment offered advantages because it was much faster and less complicated. He added that this traditional technique carried an “additional value,” a phrase indicating his belief that dompol tongosan contained a certain magical or spiritual element that played an important role in his recovery.

The perception that pandampol provide faster treatment was echoed by Wiski, who explained his decision to seek traditional healing,

“Surely, from the perspective of affordability, dompol tongosan is much better than going to the doctor and paying all those administrative fees. Especially for bone fractures—if you go to a doctor they will put on a cast, whereas with pandampol tongosan it’s simpler; they just give you the herbal preparation and regularly apply it to the affected area.”

The construction of this traditional healing practice is deeply rooted in geography, local setting, and belief systems. This aligns with previous studies showing that traditional medicine cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context of a community (Meher & Zaluchu, 2024). For this reason, traditional healing becomes a powerful and inherent marker of ethnic identity itself (Kacholi, 2025). Human beings are seen as inseparable from the belief systems of their own ethnic groups (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987; Seelamantula et al., 2025). In this context, the present paper contributes to enriching the concept of medical anthropology (Rapport & Overing, 2000).

#### 4. Conclusion

The study concludes that the dompol tongosan traditional practice is deeply embedded in the community’s socio-cultural and spiritual life. The presence of traditional healers reflects the local community’s enduring belief systems and serves as an expression of their collective faith and cultural values.

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