



Preliminary Investigation of the Use of the Andong Plant in the Local Community

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 June 2025

Revised 30 July 2025

Accepted 5 August 2025

Available online 30 September 2025

E-ISSN: [2745-536X](https://doi.org/10.2745-536X)

How to cite:

Sihombing SPMA, Hapukh RK, Situmeang DT, Putri NA, Samosir E, Aulia F. Preliminary investigation of the use of the Andong plant in the local community. Indonesian Journal of Medical Anthropology. 2025;6(2):31-.34

ABSTRACT

This study explores the cultural and spiritual significance of *Cordyline fruticosa* (andong) as a sacred plant in North Sumatra. Fieldwork was conducted in four separate sites, involving community leaders, elders, younger generations, and individuals with direct experiences of spiritual or healing practices using andong. Data were collected through in-depth interviews to examine (1) local beliefs in the plant's spiritual power, (2) its use in warding off negative forces, (3) its role in traditional rituals and healing, and (4) changes in perception and practice over time. Findings reveal the multifaceted role of andong: beyond its aesthetic and medicinal value, it serves as a medium of spiritual protection and remains central to customary ceremonies. These insights highlight andong's enduring place in local wisdom and its relevance to ethnobotanical and medical anthropological studies.

Keywords: andong, evil spirit, negative spirit, tradition, medicine

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi makna budaya dan spiritual *Cordyline fruticosa* (andong) sebagai tanaman sakral di Sumatera Utara. Studi lapangan dilakukan di empat lokasi dengan melibatkan tokoh masyarakat, orang tua, generasi muda, serta individu yang memiliki pengalaman langsung dalam praktik spiritual atau penyembuhan menggunakan andong. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam untuk menelaah (1) keyakinan terhadap kekuatan spiritual andong, (2) penggunaannya dalam menangkal gangguan gaib, (3) perannya dalam ritual adat dan pengobatan, serta (4) perubahan persepsi dan praktik dari waktu ke waktu. Temuan menunjukkan peran andong yang multifaset: selain bernilai estetika dan obat tradisional, tanaman ini berfungsi sebagai pelindung spiritual dan tetap menjadi elemen penting dalam upacara adat. Hasil ini menegaskan posisi andong dalam kearifan lokal dan relevansinya bagi kajian etnobotani dan antropologi medis.

Kata kunci: andong, roh jahat, kekuatan negatif, tradisi, kesehatan



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<http://doi.org/10.32734/ijma.v6i2.22902>

1. Introduction

Beliefs about life events in many communities are often shaped by spiritual and cultural understandings that have been deeply rooted for generations (Geertz, 1973; Shilling, 2003). Across Indonesia, both illness and misfortune are not viewed solely from a medical or biological perspective but are frequently believed to result from the intervention of supernatural forces (Bilgiç & Çıtak Bilgin, 2021; Kahissay et al., 2020; Williams & Sternthal, 2007). Health disturbances are often linked to the presence of spirits, negative energy, or disharmony between humans and nature (Kahissay et al., 2020). This perspective illustrates how traditional societies intertwine physical and metaphysical dimensions in their concepts of health and illness (Polgar, 1962; Pool & Geissler, 2005).

Within this belief system, various forms of spiritual protection have developed and been passed down through generations. One common practice is the use of specific plants believed to possess magical or symbolic power. *Cordyline*

fruticosa, known in various parts of Indonesia as *andong* or *hanjuang*, although consist of chemistry elements (Alphianti et al., 2025; Tematio Fouedjou et al., 2023), holds a special place in these traditions. The plant is believed to ward off misfortune, protect households from malevolent influences, and maintain the balance of energy in the surrounding environment.

This paper aims to analyze the role of *andong* in community beliefs as an initial step toward understanding the significance of sacred plants in social and spiritual life. By identifying the values associated with *andong*, this study seeks to contribute to ethnobotanical and medical anthropological research, particularly in exploring how communities interpret health and protection through the medium of plants. At the same time, it underscores that traditional beliefs and the use of sacred plants such as *andong* form an essential part of local wisdom that merits preservation.

2. Methods

This current research employed a descriptive qualitative approach (Seidman, 2006; Zaluchu, 2006) to gain an in-depth understanding of the use of *Cordyline fruticosa* (known locally as *hanjuang* or *andong*) as both a medium of protection against malevolent spirits and a source of traditional medicine among the Batak Toba communities of North Sumatra. Fieldwork was conducted in four distinct sites: Humbang Hasundutan Regency; Siantar Marimbun Subdistrict, Pematang Siantar City; North Tapanuli Regency; and Medan City. These locations were selected to facilitate interviews and direct observation.

Informants included community leaders, elders, younger generations, and individuals who had personal experiences of spiritual encounters or healing practices involving *andong*. Data were collected through in-depth interviews at each site to explore: (1) community beliefs about the plant's spiritual power, (2) its use in warding off supernatural disturbances, (3) its role in traditional rituals and healing practices, and (4) changes in perception and usage over time.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, examining interview transcripts and field observations to identify key themes such as the symbolism of *andong* leaf colors, its placement as a “spiritual fence,” its medicinal applications, and beliefs regarding ancestral involvement in spiritual protection. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation—comparing narratives from informants across different locations and age groups—and through member checking to confirm meanings and interpretations.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed by obtaining informed consent, maintaining informants' confidentiality, and respecting the sacred nature of local customs. By employing this methodology, the study offers a holistic portrayal of the social and cultural meanings of the *andong* plant, while limiting the discussion specifically to the motives for its use within the selected research sites.

3. Result and Discussion

The use of the *andong* plant was found to be widespread in the areas where the informants reside. It is commonly placed in strategic spots such as house entrances, in front of bedrooms, and even at all four corners of the house (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Locations of *andong* plants in the informants' houses

One of the informants, Tongam Siburian, for instance, explained that the plant is typically planted “on the left, right, and back sides of the house—surrounding it. It already has an effect.” His narrative is striking, as it reveals that the placement of the plant is not random; it serves an important purpose—to block the entry of malevolent spirits or ill intentions from

others. Another informant, Anim, reinforced this belief: “Just plant andong in front of the house, and, God willing, you won’t be disturbed by black magic.” Such beliefs are not only inherited from parental teachings but are also strengthened by first-hand experiences passed down through generations.

As one informant recalled,

“In the old days, in the village, the plant wasn’t just for decorating the house; it carried its own meaning. For example, with andong, I clearly remember my mother saying, ‘Plant andong in front of your house since you’ve just built it. Let your house always be protected from the ill intentions of others.’ It wasn’t just my mother—neighbors would say the same thing. Whenever someone built a new house or moved into one, they were always advised to plant andong.”

In the field, informants indeed used the andong plant as a shield against evil spirits and negative energies. During an interview, Deanson Sihombing narrated:

“We believe andong has power, a sort of protective charm against misfortune. If there are evil spirits or harmful energies, the andong acts as a barrier. When I was a child, my family—my father, grandfather, and uncles—always planted andong in front of the house. They said it kept the house guarded and prevented it from being easily entered by *halak na maragat* (people with harmful intentions).”

Furthermore, the belief in andong as a form of protection is not limited to the physical presence of the plant; it is thought to possess an inherent power that works without the need for any specific rituals. As Anija Br. Lubis explained, this belief is reinforced by folktales and collective experiences within the community, which recount that “once it is planted, the house becomes peaceful, with no more strange disturbances.” In some cases, informants reported that after planting andong, children who previously experienced frequent nightmares or restlessness at night became calmer. There is even a belief that andong can create an invisible spiritual barrier, making a house imperceptible to evil spirits or malicious individuals—a belief echoed in Delavia’s story of “a wise old woman whose house was completely concealed by andong plants.”

One of the informants gave the following detailed account:

“Oh, there are many stories like that. One of the most memorable ones for me was a story from our village—though I can’t quite recall which hamlet it was. There was a female spirit who often disturbed the children. But when that family planted andong all around their house, the disturbances stopped. They said the andong has an aroma that the *halak na marsahala* (unseen spirits) dislike. So it’s not only about the plant’s physical presence; people truly believe there is a special power within it. Something similar also happened to my daughter, who is currently living away from home in the city of Medan. She told me she often had nightmares in which she was bothered by spirits—bad dreams about our family. She even said that at times she couldn’t open her eyes when waking up and experienced a dream within a dream, as if she had woken up but was actually still asleep. I advised my daughter to take a clump of andong from our yard and place it right next to the door of her room in the boarding house. Since putting the andong there, she told me she hasn’t experienced any more frightening events like that.”

Belief in the protective power of this plant is remarkably strong. Several informants maintain that the energy of the andong plant safeguards not only the individual who plants it but also every family member living in the household. This conviction is reflected in the statement of Sorta Lubis, who said, “Once there is andong, the aura feels different. The house becomes cooler and safer.” Beyond protection from unseen forces, the plant is also believed to bring good fortune and attract prosperity.

The plant’s form and color are thought to hold symbolic strength. The red hues of its leaves, for instance, are considered to represent power and courage. As Anim explained, “If it has red streaks, that symbolizes protection and strength—so that spirits will be afraid.” Placement of the plant is often accompanied by an intention or silent prayer for spiritual protection, although in practice it is not always formalized or accompanied by a specific ritual.

The plant also appears to serve other purposes. Traditional healing practices using its leaves or decoctions are common. Tongam Siburian described how “the water is boiled and used for bathing” children believed to be afflicted by spirits. Delavia reported that the leaves can be “pounded and applied to wounds, or burned for fumigation.” Siti Rahma added that the leaves are used to reduce body odor: “They are crushed, applied to the body, and rinsed off after five minutes.”

In customary Batak Toba traditions, andong is also an important element of ritual events such as *mangokal holi* (the reburial of ancestral bones) or funeral ceremonies. Delavia explained, “During ceremonies, the andong is cleaned, neatly trimmed, and placed in specific spots.” Anija Br. Lubis noted that “andong is selected based on certain criteria because it is believed to bring good fortune.” Another informant, Sorta Lubis, linked the plant’s red leaves to the symbolism of protection and strength.

Myths surrounding the plant also persist. Delavia recounted the story of “a powerful grandmother whose house was

hidden behind a barrier of andong plants, making it invisible to those with evil intentions.” Tongam Siburian and several other informants confirmed that andong is also believed to ward off lightning and repel black magic.

4. Conclusion

In the past, plants held an important symbolic meaning as a protection against evil spirits (Caneva et al., 2023; Hamed et al., 2013). For local community, the andong plant holds a complex role in Batak Toba society. Beyond protecting the household from evil spirits or negative forces, it serves medicinal and ceremonial functions. Andong is not only an aesthetic element in home gardens or a source of traditional remedies but also an integral part of ritual life. In the research locations, it is frequently included in religious or customary ceremonies or planted at strategic points around the home to ensure protection. This practice demonstrates that the use of andong is not merely practical but deeply symbolic, reinforcing the cultural identity and spiritual worldview of the community.

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