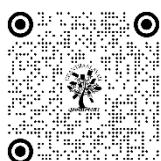


# EXPLORING THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL BONE SETTERS: A CULTURAL STUDY AMONG THE SUMI TRIBE OF NAGALAND

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional bone setting is one of the most common forms of traditional medicine practiced among the Sumi Nagas. This study explores the traditional bone-setting practice, cultural significance, and efficacy in the local healthcare landscape. This study was conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule. Traditional bone setters, local citizens and medical professionals were interviewed for this study. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed to recruit the participants. Field notes and audio recordings were transcribed, and the data was analysed using thematic analysis. We have examined the skills of traditional bone setters, the type of injuries they treat, and the sociocultural factors that influence the choices of people in seeking the best kind of treatment required for the injury. The findings reveal that despite the rise of modern medical practices, traditional bone setters still play a crucial role in providing affordable and accessible care.

**Keywords:** Traditional, Bone Setting, Sumi Tribe, Practitioners, Health, Nagaland

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most widely recognized forms of traditional medical practice among an estimated 10-40% of people is the traditional care of musculoskeletal injuries, which is dealt with by traditional bone setters (Abia and Eyoma, 2017). Traditional bone setting is a part of traditional medicine, which is usually passed down from one generation to the next, but many people have attained training (Assefa et al, 2024). Traditional bone setting was practiced by traditional bone setters long before orthopedics was introduced in the developing countries (Hoff, 1997). In many cultures, a traditional practitioner known as a "traditional bone setter" (TBA) manipulates joints and trains themselves to become healers without receiving any official training (Singh et al, 2013). Irrespective of modern medicine, the traditional bone setting method is extensively used throughout the world, and it is a source of primary fracture care for many people (Mekonnen et al, 2024). Traditional bone setters are preferred by people for various reasons, like easy accessibility, affordability, and faster results. Despite the fast pace of urbanization, bone setters, who are found all over the world, are one of the

largest groups of specialists practicing traditional medicine. People who are engaged in physically demanding tasks such as farming, mining, construction, manual labour-intensive jobs, forestry, and sports like football, volleyball, basketball, and other physically demanding outdoor games are likely to have a higher risk of suffering dislocations, muscle strains, and fractured bones. New agricultural technologies adapted by the farming communities, from settled to shifting agriculture, have also contributed to fractures and dislocations (Sharma and Singh, 2011). Orthopaedic care differs in developed and developing countries (Jain, 2007). The healers are primarily located in rural areas where underserved communities are given proper care, as these communities feel that traditional bone setters fill a void that is created due to a lack of surgeons and orthopaedics (Nwachukwu et al, 2011). Traditional bone setters may increase access to musculoskeletal care and enhance outcomes (Card et al, 2020). Throughout the community, traditional bone setters have been strategically positioned, and therefore people who need fracture management can approach them (Mekonen et al, 2024). The practice of traditional bone setting is recommended for amalgamation of both modern Orthopaedics and traditional bone setter (Owumi et al, 2013). The availability of health services in India varies greatly; while some areas lack orthopaedic care facilities at the taluka and tehsil levels, there are also well-equipped hospitals in major cities where operations are performed (Singh et al, 2013). Over 3,000 years have passed since the creation of traditional bone setting, largely due to urbanization, lack of public interest, and lack of modern technology (Agarwal and Agarwal, 2010). Though, biochemical, and biological interventions have influenced the modern orthopaedic healing (Victoria et al, 2009), the traditional bone setting practise is very well recognised among rural people (Debbarma et al, 2016). Traditional bone setting is a practice that is found in many countries and is widely accepted by people all around the world. In parts of Nigeria, 90% of primary healthcare for rural people is attended by traditional healers and traditional bone setters (Omolulu et al, 2008). Though, traditional bone setting is a highly specialised form of traditional medicine (Ogunlusi et al, 2007), there are high chances of failure and complications in traditional bone setting treatment as most of the bone setters may not have knowledge of physiology, anatomy and preventing infections (Ndubuisi et al, 2014). One of the leading causes of mortality and disability worldwide is injury (Krug et al, 2000).

## 2. PURPOSE AND STATEMENT OF THE STUDY

Exploring the practice of traditional bone setting, which has been common among the Sumi Nagas, was the primary goal of this study. Traditional bone setters in Nagaland have been included in the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) to overcome the acute shortage of orthopedic doctors. The government of Nagaland encourages traditional systems of medicine to provide alternative healthcare to the Nagas. Every Naga tribe has widely adopted the ancient bone setting technique, which has been handed down through the generations. In this present study, we shall explore the importance of traditional bone settings and the role of traditional bone setters among the Sumi community.

## 3. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate the prevalence and practice of traditional bone setting. Traditional bone setters were recruited using snowball sampling. local citizens were approached to assess their level of trust, preference, perspectives, and first-hand experiences with traditional bone setters. Medical professionals were also consulted to provide insights into the current healthcare system. All the participants were purposively selected to ensure a diverse representation of perspectives. The research was conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule that was conducted by the first author. The interview schedule was divided into two categories: closed-ended questions containing their biographic profile and open-ended questions, which consisted of questions related to traditional bone-setting practice among the Sumi tribe. The interview was conducted in the official. Before starting the interview, we asked the participants to voluntarily sign the informed consent form to ensure confidentiality and make their participation voluntary. The data was manually coded and analysed using thematic analysis.

## 4. RESULTS

With the arrival of Christianity, introduced by the American Baptist missionaries, the gospel of Christ spread to nearly all the villages of the Sumi Nagas. As these changes began to impact the social institutions, the Sumi Nagas faced challenges in adapting to the new ways of life. The transition was abrupt, as they moved directly from a traditional hunter-gatherer society to the one that was influenced by modern technology. This left less time for gradual adjustment. Hence, the belief in shamanism gradually faded as the Sumi Nagas transitioned from animism to Christianity. However, despite this shift, traditional healing practices such as bone setting, massage therapy, midwifery, and herbal medicine have persisted and continue to be integral to the Sumi community to this day.

### **1) Cultural Significance of Traditional bone setting**

The choices of treatment among the Sumi Nagas are influenced by cultural beliefs and spiritual practices which are often intertwined with healing process.

#### **Community trust in traditional bone setters**

Among the Sumi Nagas, traditional bone-setting practice often relies on ancient knowledge, spiritual beliefs and local customs. This practice is still prevalent in Sumi society, but it still lacks scientific evidence. Traditional bone setters have developed a long-standing trust with the people, who place their faith in them. These traditional bone setters are believed to possess a "healing touch." Some healers claim that their ability to treat bones is a gift bestowed by the Almighty. While others believe that their knowledge of the practice was acquired through apprenticeship or by observing other bone setters. After the introduction of modern medicine, the Nagaland government has encouraged people to seek treatment in medical institutions. However, due to past positive experiences with traditional healers, many people still prefer to consult traditional bone setters. As a result, traditional bone setters remain one of the most common types of healers in the region.

#### **Incorporating spiritual elements in bone setting**

The participants expressed that traditional healers incorporate spiritual elements along with physical treatment to promote healing. Majority of the traditional bone setters use prayer and herbal treatments which indicates that healing is both physical and spiritual. Therefore, this approach resonates with the broader cultural worldview of the Sumi Nagas and depicts that healing incorporates body, mind and spirit.

### **2) Factors influencing the choices of treatment**

Traditional bone setting among the Sumi Nagas is a widely practiced form of healing that has been passed down through generations. The choice of treatment is influenced by a variety of factors.

#### **Lack of understanding**

While every individual of the Sumi community is aware of modern medicine and its effectiveness, there is often a lack of understanding regarding the scientific basis of bone setting. Some people continue to trust traditional bone setting due to their belief in its efficacy despite the proven success of modern treatments.

#### **Influence of family and friends**

Due to cultural beliefs and personal experiences, people influence and encourage each other to approach traditional bone setters for treatment. The majority of the people among the Sumi community have been influenced by family and friends to seek the help of bone setters. Some people also have close relationships with traditional healers, and they often share stories with others about their experiences. They describe how gifted these traditional bone setters are and how they themselves were healed by their methods.

#### **Rapid and affordable services**

Traditional healing is more cost-effective and accessible compared to modern medicine. Traditional healers typically accept payment in cash or kind based on what is more convenient. People turn to traditional healing not only due to cultural beliefs but also because healers are easily available in emergencies. It becomes a viable choice for those with low financial means because treatment options are more reasonably priced.

#### **Limited access to medical professionals in rural areas**

Unlike the urban areas of Nagaland, people living in rural areas have limited access to medical doctors. In small villages, only primary healthcare centers (PHCs) are available. In order to receive treatment from medical professionals, they travel from villages to hospitals, which is very costly. As a result, many people prefer consulting traditional bone setters instead of seeking care from medical doctors.

### **Apprehension about amputation**

Some people experience anxiety and fear of amputation. They fear the use of knives and scissors on their bodies. This is also one of the reasons why they prefer healing methods that involve oils and hands-on treatments.

### **3) Perspectives of Medical professionals on traditional bone setting**

#### **Acknowledgement and perspectives of traditional bone setting**

The medical professionals acknowledge the cultural value of traditional healing procedures. They believe that certain injuries call for massages. Infact some traditional bone setters have also shared that they have been contacted by medical professionals for collaborations. However, medical professionals maintain that traditional healing cannot be considered safe and reliable unless its practices are quantified and scientifically validated.

#### **Potential for collaboration**

There are some medical professionals who occasionally advises their patients to seek help from a traditional bone setter. But it only happens in very rare cases when injuries call for massages rather than medical examination. There have been many instances where the patients approach traditional healers with the doctor's prescribed bone relief ointments or medicines and take them to traditional bone setters who use them for massages. However, Medical professionals shared that the formal collaboration between medical professionals and traditional bone setters can only happen if traditional bone setters undergo formal training and acquire legal practising certifications.

#### **Medical Professionals' concerns over Misdiagnosis and complications during healing procedures**

During a face-to-face interview, one of the medical professionals mentioned a case where one of his patient's knee damages worsened because the patient was misdiagnosed by the traditional bone setter. They also believe that bone setters do not have the basic knowledge of anatomy and physiology, and it can lead to complications.

#### **Concerns Over lack of professional training:**

According to Medical professionals, while traditional bone setting is still widely practiced, there is a lack of formal training among many bone setters. Therefore, they believe that formal training is necessary for traditional bone setters. Traditional bone setters lack waiting rooms, phones, visiting cards, in-patient treatment, and signboards advertising their services, in contrast to other healers from different regions of India. It is clear that even with great treatment outcomes, traditional bone setting still has to be legalized in order to safeguard patients and allow them to choose the most skilled bone setters.

### **4) Healing techniques employed by traditional bone setters**

Musculoskeletal injuries and bone fractures are believed to be treated not only through physical manipulation but also through spiritual and herbal beliefs. The majority of the traditional bone setters combine both physical and spiritual techniques to provide care to their patients. While traditional bone setters remain cautious and hesitant to share their spiritual healing techniques, they are quite open about discussing their physical healing methods. Traditional bone setters among the Sumi Nagas are known as "Aghi Shikipiviw." There are Some traditional bone setters are more preferred as compared to others because of their unique healing methods. Some traditional bone setters are said to have soft hands, while others have harder hands. Bone setters with harder hands typically avoid treating younger individuals, as their touch is believed to be more painful. According to traditional bone setters, excessive salt consumption is causing bones to become weak and fragile, especially among the younger generation. As a result, young people are experiencing bone fractures at a faster rate. Traditional bone setters claim that minor bone injuries typically take about a week and a half to heal completely. While serious fractures may take 2 to 3 months for full recovery. In serious cases, patients are advised to visit the traditional healers at least 2-3 times in a month. During treatment, patients are advised to avoid consuming red meat for at least 3 weeks to promote faster healing of the injured bone. However, soups made from pig head "Awo kutsu" and pig knees "Awo pukhu" are considered beneficial for bone health. They also use medicinal plants to treat the bones. Medicinal plants are mashed and applied to the injured area. After applying, it is tightly wrapped in clothes for three days to promote quicker relief. In order to aid in the healing process and protect the injured bone from further injury, various types of medicinal plants, bandages, ointments, and bamboos are typically utilized. The majority of the traditional bone setters have claimed that they do not own any modern equipment that is required for treatment purposes. Their healing techniques are still traditional. Therefore, the majority of them advise their patients to seek help

from medical doctors first. Some of the healers believe that traditional bone setting is a practice that cannot be passed down through practice, as the ability to treat bones is a gift from God. However, some of them disagree with this statement. Some healers believe that this practice can be passed down through apprenticeship and observation. While some of the bone setters have claimed they only practice bone setting for social service, a few others have said that they practice bone setting as a part of social service as well as for economic benefits.

## 5. CONCLUSION

While traditional bone setters in other parts of India are adapting new technology and are using vibrating machines for massages (Sharma and Singh, 2011), the majority of the traditional bone setters among the Sumi Nagas are still following local techniques to treat their patients. The data for this present study was collected solely from the targeted population. Therefore, it does not represent the entire Sumi tribe of Nagaland. The opinions of the Sumi Nagas living in more urbanized areas may differ from those residing in less urbanised areas. This is primarily due to varying access to proper healthcare facilities. While traditional bone setting is still widely practiced, there is a lack of formal training among many bone setters. In this era of globalisation, many social changes are taking place. Many new ideas have been introduced in the field of medical practices. As we progress towards the new era of globalisation, traditional medicine is now being collaborated with modern medicine, and the effort to integrate these two systems of medicine is being initiated even among the different tribes of Nagaland. Due to the introduction of modern medical practices all over Nagaland, the perception and expectations of the Nagas towards health care are changing. and therefore, the health sector in Nagaland is undergoing many modifications. Therefore, there is a complex intermixing of two systems of medicine, i.e., traditional and modern medicine, and neither one of the systems has replaced the other. It is important to conduct awareness programs for safer and more reliable traditional healing practices among the people. Though the traditional bone setters believe that their ability to heal is a gift from God and training is not required, it is important to give them access to professional training and help them in modernising their healing techniques to become more recognizable and acceptable to fit in the new era of modern medicine. Through this study, we found that traditional bone setting is a practice that is still relevant among the Sumi Nagas, and traditional bone setters enjoy community acceptance. Not only the people, but the medical doctors also show their faith in traditional bone setting in some cases. However, there is still a need for further study in order to fully understand the traditional bone-setting practices among the Sumi Nagas.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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