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Understanding the concept of Usog among the Aetas of Nabuclod, Pampanga, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

One fundamental characteristic of an indigenous community is the belief in the deep connectedness of persons. This belief is anchored on their traditional way of life and its preservation is a reflection of the how well the community maintains its belief system and cultural knowledge amidst modernity's amalgamation. The Aetas, considered as one of the earliest inhabitants of the Philippines (Waddington, 2002), is one of the indigenous group found scattered throughout the archipelago. They are often described as traditionally animist, nomadic in nature and are short in stature (Balila et al, 2014; Shimzu, 1989). Being animist and nomadic, Aetas have adopted aspects of the local neighboring culture they associate with. One such belief is the concept of "usog" which is a concept shared among Filipinos but are understood differently depending on cultural affiliation.

Among traditional Filipino families, the expression "P'wera Usog!" is commonly uttered as visitors compliment a newborn child. The visitor is then asked to smear some saliva on the baby's forehead or abdomen (De La Peña, 2012; Jocano, 1970; Rabuco, 2009; Tan, 2008). Roughly translating to "except Usog," this concept greatly varies among the different regions of the Philippines although it is similar in the aspect of causing harm on another person. For the Ati of the Visayas, 'usog' is synonymous to 'buyag' - powerful energy which overcomes that of a child; thereby causing fever or stomachache (De La Peña, 2012). On the other hand, Muslim Tausug believe that illness can be caused by human breath or spoken words, also called "pasu simud." Consequently, when a newborn is complimented they would say: "Pasu simud hi babu/kaka - may it be transferred to an aunt or elder cousin (Tan, 1982)."

In spite of the diverse understanding of *Usog*, only a few of the literature that exists explain such from the Aetas' point of view. This, coupled with the impact of *Usog* on the

health beliefs of many Filipinos, urged the researchers to explore the concept of *Usog* among the Aetas of Nabuclod Pampanga. Through this case study, the researchers aim to identify the Aetas' conceptualization of *Usog* and its implication to their sense of health and wellbeing.

Locale of the study

The present site of barangay Nabuclod in Floridablanca Pampanga is a resettlement area created after the Mt. Pinatubo eruption in 1998. It is declared as one of the ancestral domain of the Aeta in Pampanga and its population is currently composed of Aetas indigenous to the locale prior to the Mt. Pinatubo eruption, Aetas from the neighboring Zambales area and a few “lowlanders” mostly consisting of Kapampangans and Tagalogs. Majority of the population of the present day Nabuclod belongs to the indigenous population of the area prior to the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. National Statistic Office latest available data from 2010 shows that Nabuclod’s estimated population is 3,000 from its seven (7) sitios (“Municipal Profile-Official website of Municipality of Floridablanca, Province of Pampanga”, 2018). The exact population of the Aetas residing in Nabuclod cannot be ascertained since there are still families residing in the mountain of Nabuclod which is inaccessible during formal surveys coupled with the nomadic nature of the Aetas’ way of life. Nabuclod is accessible through land travel via small vehicle thru rough road and is roughly thirty (30) minutes away from the town center of Floridablanca. Nabuclod’s hilly terrain can also be accessed thru a motorcycle but the heavily roughed mountainous part can only be accessed by foot with the farthest sitio approximately two (2) hours away from the Nabuclod’s Barangay Center. The declared area of Ancestral Domain of the Aeta in Nabuclod includes the Barangay Center, the seven sitios and the surrounding mountains bordering Zambales. The local governance is a mixture of a modern and traditional system with an elected barangay captain and a council of elders. The council at times may convene to decide on things that affect the whole community. The belief systems practiced by the Aetas of Nabuclod are folk variants of major religious systems which includes Catholicism, Islam, Iglesia and varied sect of Christianity. Traditional belief and folk healing is still present in the community and is functionally integrated into the practice of their individual religion. Houses near the center of Nabuclod is mostly built

with cement and concrete materials while traditional Nipa houses are sparsely scattered around the area and are more prominent as one moves away from the center. Aetas' main source of living in Nabuclod is farming with bitter melon being the primary product of the barangay. Occasionally, charcoal making is also practiced by some Aetas to augment their meager income from farming. The locale was once one of the formally adopted communities of the researchers' institution where they were formally affiliated with.

METHODS

Prior to data gathering, consent from the Nabuclod's Barangay captain was sought and permission with the Elders of the Aetas was also gathered. This is to assure that the dignity and autonomy of the respondents will be respected throughout the duration of the study. Informed consent from the key informants and informants was gathered as well prior to the interview and confidentiality of the information and the participant's identity was upheld during the conduct of this study. Purposive criterion sampling was utilized to select the five key informants of the study. They were selected based on their extensive knowledge of the concept of "usog" and them being indigenous to the area. The key informants were three female and two male Aetas and were resident of the Nabuclod resettlement even before the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. Because of the lack of legal documents showing their birthdate and subsequently their age, it was difficult to ascertain their legal age. During the data gathering process, all of the key informants are at least 40 years old based on their oral tradition and them having at least one grandchild at the time of the interview. The key informants served as the elder of their extended family and were also seen as the cultural bearers of their community. On the other hand, family members and other individual Aetas within the community served as informants of the study during the data gathering process. The informants' personal experience and stories serve to complement and enrich the narratives gathered from the key informants. The key informants and informants provided stories and their personal experience on "Usog" reflecting their community's perspective and beliefs on the said concept. Theoretical saturation served as the grounding by which the number of participants was achieved (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). In-depth interview and story-telling were utilized to gather data from the participants in this study. Both techniques are utilized when conducting

qualitative research that involves conducting intensive individual narration with a small number of respondents. It was the research method used in this study because it facilitates a loosely structured interview; allowing freedom for both the interviewer and interviewee to explore additional points and elicit significant information, as necessary, in order to achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Conventional content analysis was utilized to elicit the patterns found within the narratives of the key informants and informants.

FINDINGS

Content analysis revealed that the Aetas of Pampanga see Usog as a transmittable mystical force unintentionally inflicted by humans through an eye or physical contact; thereby producing physical symptoms among its victims. Moreover, they believe that these symptoms may be cured through the inhalation of the smoke coming from a burnt Amyong – the seed of a certain tree.

Transmittable mystical force inflicted by humans and not spirits

Among all those interviewed, it was evident that the Aetas deem Usog as a force that humans unintentionally transmit, with one respondent saying: "*Yun nga...parang kapangyarihan [yung Usog].* (That's it... it is like some sort of "power") [R1]" Moreover, one respondent highlighted on it being an unintentional act: "*Yong ganon po (Kulam) sinasadya pong gawin. Yong sa Usog po hindi po.* (If you are bewitched, that intentional, with "Usog" it is not) [R3]" However, those interviewed had contradicting views on the sources of Usog. According to one respondent, Usog may come not only from humans but also from bad spirits and dwarfs: "*Pwede [makausog] yung tao pero pwede din dwende o anito tulad nung nangyari sa anak ko* (You can get it from dwarf too or from an ancestral spirit like what happen to my son) [R3]" On the other hand, another respondent insisted that humans are the sole sources of this force: "*tao lang naman ang nakakausog* (Only human can give you "usog") [R5]". Although an alternative source of Usog was presented beside a person, it is a common thread among the response that the most common, if not the sole source, of Usog is a human person.

Use of eye or physical contact

The Aetas believe that words need not be uttered for one to inflict Usog. Instead, a powerful look or a pat on the child's head is sufficing to impart this force: "*Kapag hinawakan ng ang bata o kaya tinitigan ka sa malayo, mauusog na po* (When someone touches a child or look at a child even from afar, that is enough to cause Usog) [R2]" Furthermore, they narrated how this can also occur when an adult, who, upon coming home from a long day's work, touches the child: "*Kapag yoong galing ka sa pagod tapos hinawakan mo yong mga bata tulad nito o kaya ngumiti ka lang sa kanila...ayon po mauusog na po* (When someone arrived tired (from work) and then touches the child or just smile at the child, it is enough for the child to have Usog) [R4]"

Physical Symptoms

Although children and adults may also get Usog, the Aetas' claimed that infants and toddlers were its usual victims; with crying fits as its most common symptom. Another usual symptom was a pain, such as a stomachache or a headache. Although these are rarely life-threatening from a Western medical perspective, the Aetas see this as an urgent condition which ought to be treated immediately: "*Minsan po dinadala sa albolaryo kapag hindi gumaling [...]. Kapag hindi po agad madala sa albolaryo, pwede pong mamatay yong bata po. Nanginginig at nakapikit nalang basta ang mata* (Sometimes we get the herbalist help when the symptoms do not subsides, else the child might die. They shiver and just closes their eyes)[R3]"

'Amyong' or saliva as a cure for Usog When asked on their standard regimen for the symptoms of Usog, the Aetas had a consistent answer: 'Amyong.' Made out of the bark of certain trees, the Aetas regularly wear the Amyong as a necklace or bracelet. Most of these seeds are aromatic with a hint of mint in its odor. According to them, burning the seed and inhaling its smoke may ward-off Usog and its accompanying symptoms. Some Aetas also boil the Amyong in water and drink the solution. Moreover, many of them explained that these were taken from special trees that are not easily found: "*Hindi Basta-basta yung kahoy na yun. [...] Hindi naman Basta basta laging namumunga* (The tree is not just ordinary... it rare for it to bear seeds) [R1]" The more aromatic version of Amyong is called 'Dalaw.' Unlike the Amyong, Dalaw has a sweeter odor. When boiled in water, some Aetas

also use this as a treatment for cough: “*Yong mas mabango po sa amyong. Yong parang galing po sa puno ng kahoy iyan. Papakuluan yong tubig tapos ilalagay ko po yan sa tubig tapos po ipapainom ko po sakanila yan kapag nausog po o kaya may ubo* (The one more aromatic than Amyong is the Dalaw. It came from a certain tree. We boil water, place it in the boiling water they use the concoction for those who have Usog or cough) [R4]” Aside from the use of Amyong or Dalaw, other Aetas mentioned the use of saliva to cure the child with Usog. Others mentioned that when the person who unconsciously sends the Usog to the child wipes his/her saliva on the child’s abdomen or forehead, the symptoms of Usog will be released. If all of these fail to relieve the symptoms of Usog, the Aetas turn to the Albolaryo, a herbalist-soothsayer-healer of the community.

ANALYSIS

The Aetas' view of Usog as a transmittable mystical force is parallel to the Christian Tagalog's 'bisa' - an internal force of high potency (Jocano, 1970). It is also similar to the concept of 'buyag' - energy said to be emanated together with words of admiration (De La Peña, 2012; Rabuco, 2009) According to Tan (2008), the indigenous' belief in these vital forces is linked to illness causation. Specifically, it is understood that humans with a potent life-force may unintentionally cause illness to another, thereby explaining the concept of Usog. Among Ilonggo's, this is attributed to the concept of 'dungan' or completeness. The Ilonggo's believe that individuals with a strong dungan may overpower those with a weaker dungan, such as infants, thereby causing illness (Rabuco, 2009; Jocano, 1970). Although the Aetas believe that humans are the primary sources of Usog, literature claims that this vital or mystical force is likewise present in inanimate objects such as plants (Fox, 1952; Tan, 2008).

It must be highlighted that the Aetas view of Usog as being transmitted through powerful eye contact is different from the popular notion that Usog is imparted through words of praise; as is the belief of the Muslim Tausug, Ilonggos, and Cebuanos (Jocano, 1970; Rabuco, 2009; Tan, 2008). However, Tan (2008) relates this view of the Aetas to the Mediterranean and Latin American belief in the 'mal de ojo' or evil eye, which is evoked by simply looking at or admiring a child. Moreover, the Aetas belief of fatigued individuals transmitting Usog was explained by the literature which claimed that exhausted

individuals severely desire for energy and unconsciously take such from others, usually through touch (Fadul, 2014; Tan, 2008).

Additionally, the physical symptoms identified by the Aetas are parallel to those highlighted in the literature, which includes crying fits, vomiting, and abdominal pain (Fadul, 2014; Tan, 2008). Researchers have tried to explain this phenomenon scientifically, claiming that these are manifestations of a disruption in the child's homeostasis. Simply put, the child's physical symptoms are attributed to the distress he/she feels upon meeting a stranger who is deemed as overpowering him/her. Specifically, the stranger may serve as a stressful stimulus for the child on the physical (e.g., having heavy hands), mental (e.g., having a high-pitched voice), or physiological (e.g., having a strong irritating smell) level. Consequently, there is a perceived discrepancy between the demands of the situation and the child's perceived or actual physiological or social resources. As the child fails to adapt to the change in environment and is distressed, he/she easily succumbs to illness and may manifest the physical symptoms of Usog (Abad et al., 2014; Fadul, 2014, Tan, 2008).

On the other hand, the Aetas use of the stranger's saliva as a cure for the symptoms of Usog is parallel to the common practice among other Filipinos, indigenous or non-indigenous alike. Traditionally, the visitor is asked to rub the infant's forehead or abdomen with his/her saliva using his/her thumb (Tan, 2008; Fadul, 2014; Jocano, 1970). According to researchers, this act may reduce the child's stress as it helps the visitor become more familiar for the child. Moreover, the visitor's utterance of the words: "pwera usog" serve to be reassuring for the child, thereby alleviating his/her discomfort.

The findings in this study regarding the Aetas' use of the Amyong as a cure for Usog is also similar to other literature which explores the traditional practices of indigenous groups. For one, it was found that the Ati from Visayas also prevent Usog through bracelets and necklaces made of hand-shaped twigs and vines, with some calling it 'Banawug.' Collectively, the materials used to prevent Usog are called 'Panagang' (De La Peña, 2012). Similarly, Jocano (1970) claims that one of the items used by the Tagalogs of Laguna to counter Usog is 'puasong kahoy,' a rainforest tree of the genus *Harpullia*. Furthermore, in

a study conducted among the Aetas of Porac, Pampanga, it was found that herbs and shrubs were commonly used as medicinal plants, with Bayabas and the roots of a coconut tree being the most common treatment for sore throat, stomachaches, headaches, and skin diseases. If the Aetas of Nabuclod usually burn the plants as incense, the Aetas of Porac usually boil the plants or its roots to be used as a decoction. Similar to the Aetas of Nabuclod, they also use the bark of a mango tree as a medicinal plant, usually for the treatment of 'pasma' or joint pains and fever (Ragragio, Zayas, & Obico, 2013).

IMPLICATIONS

In this study, identifying and understanding the culture and practices of the Aeta community regarding the concept of Usog allows nurses, particularly community health nurses, to become adept with the knowledge on how to make adjustments with the new culture or environment they are being immersed into.

It must be noted that the findings of the study suggest that the Aeta's health-seeking behavior is still grounded in their unique cultural belief system although they are already exposed to the realities of Western medical practices. The values and beliefs of the Aeta community regarding the concept of Usog is a reflection that they still cling to their indigenous beliefs and practices. As nurses, especially those working in the community setting, the findings suggest that there is a need to be more observant and flexible to the beliefs and practices present in the community for an inclusive approach to care be developed. Integrating, rather than secluding the seemingly harmless practices of the members of the community may encourage the formation of trust and build confidence between the nurse and the community members.

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