

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

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Abstract

AIMS: In spite of the popular belief that *Usog* produces physical symptoms, the definition of this concept serves to be complex, varying among the different regions in the Philippines. The apparent lack of literature regarding the Aetas' view on *Usog* and the health implications of this phenomenon prompted the researchers to explore the concept of *Usog* among the Aetas of Nabuclod, Pampanga.

METHODS: In this qualitative study, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather data from the respondents. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of subjects and informed consent was sought. Following the individual interviews with five different Aeta families, thematic analysis was done so as to identify the common emerging concept of *Usog*.

FINDINGS: It was found that the Aetas of Nabuclod see *Usog* as a transmittable mystical force primarily inflicted by humans and not by spirits. This force is said to be transferred unintentionally through eye or physical contact. Similarly, this usually affects infants, with crying fits as the most common symptom. The Aetas' primary treatment for *Usog* was the use of Amyong as incense or decoction. The saliva of the inflictor of *Usog*, when applied on the abdomen or forehead of the afflicted infant was also seen as an effective remedy.

IMPLICATION: The Aetas of Nabuclod, Pampanga see *Usog* as a transmittable mystical force unintentionally inflicted by humans through eye or physical contact, thereby producing physical symptoms among its victims. Consequently, community health nurses must be aware of this health belief so as to fully understand its implications to the Aetas' health-seeking behaviors.

Introduction

P'wera Usog! Among traditional Filipino families, this expression 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 others. For the Ati of the Visayas, '*usog*' is synonymous to '*buyag*' - a powerful energy which overcomes that of a child; thereby causing fever or stomachache (De La Peña, 2012). On the other hand, the 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 versions 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 Pampanga. Through this case study, the researchers aim to identify the Aetas' conceptualization of *Usog*

Methodology

In-depth interview, a qualitative research method that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents (Boyce & Neale, 2006), was utilized to gather data from the 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 holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Purposive sampling was the method used in the selection of study subjects. Five different Aeta families provided information regarding the concept of *Usog*, including their perspective and beliefs on such. The number of respondents utilized in this study was enough to generate data necessary to answer the research questions raised in this undertaking as the researchers ensured that the theoretical saturation has been reached. Theoretical saturation is the

endpoint of theoretical sampling wherein researchers had reached a point in the analysis of data as the respondents already generate the same, repeated information (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Informed consent was gathered beforehand and confidentiality of the information gathered was upheld. Thematic analysis of the responses was utilized to identify and categorize key concepts from the data gathered.

Findings

Thematic analysis revealed that the Aetas of Pampanga see *Usog* as a transmittable mystical force unintentionally inflicted by humans through 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 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 besides 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 suffice to impart this force: *"Kapag hinawakan ng ang bata o kaya tinitigan ka sa malayo, mauusog na po. (When someone touch a child or look at a child even from afar, that is enough to cause Usog) [R2]"* Furthermore, they narrated how this can also occurs 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 pain, such as stomachache or 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 does not subsides, else the child might die. They swiver and just closes their eyes)[R3]"*

'Amyong' or saliva as 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 send 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 hearbalist-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*' - an 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 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 stimuli 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 behaviour 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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