

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Health Ritual of “Pag-aanito” among the Aetas of Nabuclod, Pampanga, Philippines

RUDOLF CYMORR KIRBY P.
MARTINEZ,
PhD, MA, RN

San Beda University,
Manila, Philippines

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5323-5108>

Abstract

A defining characteristic of an indigenous group is that it has preserved its unique traditional ways of living, belief system or pertinent rituals amidst the presence of modernity. One of the indigenous group residing in the Philippines are the Aeta people, found scattered in the archipelago. One of the unique cultural health beliefs of this indigenous group revolves around the spirit called "anito" and the ritual for appeasing this spirit termed as "pag-aanito." This paper explores the contemporary understanding of a select group of Aeta from Pampanga, Philippines on these unique cultural health beliefs and how their understanding and appreciation of their traditional customs affects their perception of the world, themselves, and their health.

Keywords: *Focused ethnography, health knowledge, indigenous medicine*

Context of the Study

A defining characteristic of an indigenous group is that it has preserved its unique traditional ways of living, belief system or pertinent rituals amidst the presence of modernity. One of the indigenous group residing in the Philippines are the Aeta people, found scattered in the archipelago and is often described as its earliest inhabitants. Aetas are pygmy people, nomadic in nature and are traditionally animist (Balila et al., 2014; Shimzu, 1989, Waddington, 2002). One of the unique beliefs of the Aeta people is the anito, a benevolent, environmental spirit believed to inhabit the river, sea, hills and

Corresponding author's email:
rmartinez@sanbeda.edu.ph

various other places. They believed that the anitos are the original dweller of the earth and living in harmony with them is an essential part of maintaining their people's health and well-being. For the Aetas, a break in this balance will bring about illness to the individual (Balila et al., 2014; Catseye, 2004; Torres, 2012).

In time of illness, therefore, a healer, the mang-aanito, is often called to help in restoring the harmony with the anito and return the individual back to health. Brosius (1990) describe this curing séance, the anituan, as a dramatic performance which involves trance, dances and dialogues between the healer, the anito and the audience. Because of the nomadic nature of the Aeta people and the changing modern culture they are in, this study aims to understand the contemporary conceptualization of the pag-aanito among a select group of Aeta people residing in Nabuclod, Floridablanca Pampanga as its relates to their identity and sense of well-being.

Locale of the Study

Nabuclod is one of the declared Ancestral Domains of the Aetas of Pampanga. The current population of the area is composed of Aetas from Pampanga and the neighboring towns of Zambales; and few "lowlanders," which mainly consist of Kapampangans. The present site of barangay Nabuclod is a resettlement area created after the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1998. It must be noted however that majority of the populations residing in Nabuclod are the old residents of the area prior to the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. According to the 2010 survey of the National Statistical Office, barangay Nabuclod is composed of seven (7) sitios with a rough estimated population of 3,000 ("Municipal Profile-Official website of Municipality of Floridablanca, Province of Pampanga," 2018) largely attributed to their nomadic existence and inaccessibility of some Aetas still living in the mountains surrounding the area (Early & Headland, 1998). The place is accessible through land travel via small vehicle through a mixture of dirt road and pavement and is 30 minutes away from the town center of Floridablanca. The hilly terrain of Nabuclod is mostly accessible by motorcycle and the total area of the declared Ancestral Domain includes the barangay center, the sitios and the surrounding mountains with the farthest sitio being two hours away from the barangay center accessible only by foot through hiking along the mountainous terrain. Local governance is patterned from the existing local political system while the "council of elders" may at times be convened to decide to things related to the welfare of the community. Catholicism, Islam, Iglesia ni Cristo, and varied sect of Christianity is also present in the community although folk and traditional belief are inculcated and practiced within these denominations. Majority of the houses are made of cement and wood although there are still traditional houses made of Nipa scattered around the area and is mostly present as one move away from the barangay center. The source of living of the Aetas of Nabuclod is primarily farming with ampalaya (bitter gourd) being the major produce of the barangay. Besides farming, charcoal making is also practiced by few Aetas to augment the meager income of their family. The study locale was one of the formally adopted communities of the researcher's prior institution where he was formerly affiliated with. As part of understanding the community dynamics in terms of specific culture and how

it relates to identity and health, this research was conceptualized.

Methods

This study was anchored on the interpretative philosophy, specifically qualitative approach, to present a comprehensive summary of experiences of a select groups of individuals (Bernard, 2017; Lambert, V. & Lambert, C., 2012; Lewis, 2015). After securing consent from the leaders of the community, its members and the participating individuals, three key informants were chosen based on the extensiveness of their traditional knowledge on pag-aanito. Other members of the community were also interviewed to provide context of the community member's contemporary understanding of the pag-aanito. Narratives from the key informants and other informants serve as the basis for the analysis of their stories. Unstructured free-flowing multiple interviews were done on the homes of the informants from the different sitios of barangay Nabuclod. Prior to the interviews, the researcher already did an immersion in the community for a period of two years, thus the informants were well aware of the positionality of the researcher and the objective of the study. The key informants were specifically from sitio Inararo and Dargas, the farthest sitios from the barangay center. Interviews lasted for at least 30 minutes focusing on stories, personal experiences, and knowledge on pag-aanito. All interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the informants.

Findings

The following findings were culled out based on the analysis of the informants' narratives. For the informants, the anito represent nature spirits residing in specific places within the community and outside the boundaries of human settlement, specifically, the mountains. The physical attributes of the anito cannot be described since the sight of the anito would cost one's life. Although the anito seems to exist in another metaphysical plane, the informants believed that disharmony with these spirits could cause illness by two means, one thru possession (naanito) and the other by being "greeted/ touched" (nabati) by these spirits. It should be noted however that another concept, nausog, is similar to the notion of nabati. Nabati is literally translated to "being greeted," nausog colloquially denotes "being touched" by the spirits. The relationship of the anito to the person seems to delineate being naanito, to just being nausog/nabati, where in naanito, the person and the anito is in the same body while in nausog/nabati no possession is involved. According to the informants, the pag-aanito is the "highest" form of ritual that a human person could perform.

Specific rituals and healing modalities are traditionally assigned based on the gravity of the anitos effect on the person. For nausog/nabati, the ritual of pagtatawas is enough to appease the spirit while for those naanito, the ritual of pag-aanito is deemed necessary. According to the informants, anybody can learn the ritual of pagtatawas but the ritual of pag-aanito is reserved only to those who belong to the lineage of mang-aanito. During the ritual, specific shamanic objects, like a

red cloth and beads and a knife, are essential. The red cloth is adorned with beads and must be “activated” by a village elder prior to use while the knife is an heirloom piece passed down from one generation to another. Beside the ritual object, another essential feature of the pag-aanito is the dance called talipe, and the chanting of the mang-aanito in the Aeta language. During the dance, the members of the community participating in the ritual will provide the tempo and music by tapping or clapping while the mang-aanito dances in circle around the person, constantly waving and swaying the red cloth on the person as if to drive away the anito from within. Chanting by the mang-aanito was done while the dance is being performed. It is worth noting that during the ritual, the mang-aanito is believed to be possessed by another anito which either persuade or drive away the spirit residing in the person being healed. According to the informants, during the ritual, the mang-aanito and the naanito (sick person) are unaware of what is happening and it is only after the séance that their consciousness returns back to them. The ritual also involves the family and relative of both the mang-aanito and the naanito where the mang-aanito’s family helps in preparing the ritual space and in providing melody through guitar while the naanito’s family and the other members of the community surround in circle the mang-aanito and the naanito to create the boundary of the ritual space.

The ritual of pang-aanito it seems is a communal séance where the members of the community actively participate and the mang-aanito is the medium through which the anitos or spirits communicates with each other.

According to the informants, the ritual of pag-aanito in its purest and traditional form is currently rarely performed because of the limited access to the mang-aanito. Further, what the “lowland” people often see in performances is merely an imitation of the original ritual. Also, the informants further claimed that the ritual of pag-aanito can also be done to non-Aeta people and always yields positive results.

One limitation of this study was that no actual performance of the pag-aanito was observed since the ritual cannot be recreated without an actual naanito person involved. At the moment, there are only two persons identified by the community as capable of doing the ritual. During the time of data gathering, the identified mang-aanitos was not within the vicinity of the research locale. However it is also interesting to note that according to the informants, there are other practitioners of pag-aanito in other Aeta community.

Discussion and Implication

The traditional belief of the Aeta in the concept of anito is still prevalent in the community so much so that specific rules are followed to avoid the wrath of the anito, like avoiding places believed to be the dwelling place of the anito such as specific trees, or mountains (Brosius, 1990; Minoritized & Dehumanized, 1983). Contact with the anito is believed to be deadly so specific rules on when not to go out is also observed by members of the community. It seems that the community believes that

although they co-exist with the anito, unintentional crossing path with an anito causes disharmony in the individual as evidence by the illness and in the community by disrupting the social processes within. The belief in the concept of the anito is a remnant of their traditional belief in a pantheon of gods rule by Apo Namalyari (Dizon, 2015.), where the anito belongs to the lower class of mythical creatures yet seems to affect more the everyday lives of the community members. It seems that since the upper classes of gods reside in secluded places such as the top of mountains, inherently inaccessible to humans, the chance of “meeting” them is close to non-existent whereas the anitos habitation is closer to human settlement thus there is a higher probability of antagonizing them consciously or unconsciously. This encounter with the anitos is seen as the cause of an individual illness (Griffin & Estioko-Griffin, 1985; Shimizu, 1989). Further, this belief in the anitos instill among the Aetas a sense of environmental stewardship (Brosius, 1990; Nyaga & Torres, 2015) since the dwelling places of the anitos must be respected and protected. The belief in the anito is the essence of the practice of pag-aanito, a séance involving chanting, dancing, mediumship and ritual objects aimed at healing the sick person (naanito) by removing the anito causing the illness from the person (Dizon, 2015; Torres, 2012). The dance involves in the pag-aanito is believed to entice the spirit by bribing them with food or gifts or by threatening them with harm using the heirloom knife (Samarena, 2007). The elements of traditional pag-aanito described in literatures is parallel to what the community practices except the ending of the ritual described by Samarena (2007) which involves the mang-aanito falling unconscious as she “absorb” the sickness from the individual. The ritual is a communal affair, where each members of the community performs a specific task (as the audience, as the sick person, as the healer or as a helper) and provides the boundaries of the ritual space where the pag-aanito will be performed such that, without the support of the community, the pag-aanito will not materialize.

Moreover, the decrease in the number séance performed at present times could largely be attributed to the limited number and availability of mang-aanito and the high regards the people of the community place on this specific ritual. The sense of exclusivity of the ritual, that it should be only among Aetas, seems to be dissolving as the community integrates itself to the larger society for which they come in contact with.

It is also interesting to note that all identified practitioner of pag-aanito are women. Although equality among sexes is practiced in the Aeta community as evident by the active participation of women in decision making within their family and among the community (Nyaga & Torres, 2015; Shimizu, 1989), women were seen as more nurturing than men thus the practice of pag-aanito, which in itself is a healing ritual, may have been linked with this idea of nurturing the sick. It must be noted however that the mang-aanito is not given a special status within the community (Torres, 2012) but rather an acknowledgement by its members of the unique ability inherent in that individual. This is again another way by which the Aeta’s notion of equality is expressed.

Insight

The ritual of pag-aanito is a cultural heritage of the Aeta people of Nabuclod, Floridablanca Pampanga that embodies the community's sense of oneness, equality, and spirit. It is a unique cultural identifier of their community and has stood the test of modernity. Although it is not as widely practiced as it was before, the concepts and beliefs inherent in it are still being lived by members of the community. This study provides a glimpse on how the concept of pag-aanito, as understood by select members of a cultural community, reflects their inherent values and identities as a people. Further research is indeed needed to fully understand how the other aspect of their culture is currently practiced and understood by them.

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About the Author

Rudolf Cymorr Kirby P. Martinez, PhD, MA, RN, is currently a full time Assistant-Professor at San Beda College of Nursing and a part-time Professorial-Lecturer at Arellano University, Florentino Cayco Memorial School Graduate School of Nursing. Dr. Martinez finished his BS in Nursing from UST College of Nursing, MA in Nursing from Trinity University of Asia and his PhD in Applied Cosmic Anthropology from Asian Social Institute. At the moment, he is currently finishing up his second PhD in Nursing Science from St. Paul University of the Philippines, Tuguegarao City. His research interests include nursing science, theory and philosophy; nature, realities and phenomenon of caring; death, dying and palliative care; and medical anthropology.