

Sup-ok

by Kristine Kawi

Back in high school, I came up with a lump on my head which appeared rather mysteriously. I guess it was one of those swollen protrusions that were ignored until it got bigger and painful. And it was painful alright. A throbbing pain that kind of gnaws on the scalp and wanted to enter my cranium and split it in two.

Well, ok, it was not enough of an emergency to see a doctor. And let's just say I have a low pain threshold. But seriously, what would a doctor have done, especially as I did not know the cause of my problem? He probably would have just prescribed me a pain tablet, or at best, a localized pain ointment. Sure, maybe that could have helped. But on a whim, I opted instead to see a faith healer in the person of *Ikit* Fakukad. She was an esteemed old woman who lived in the village and who I've heard has healed foreigners who have come to see her.

I didn't know what to expect. I had never witnessed it and I had never really known anyone healed by it. What I knew about *sup-ok* came from hearsay.

When I got to her place, she was very welcoming, a nice and warm person. I wasn't exactly a complete stranger to her because in Bontoc, especially in the village, everyone knew each other (in my time, at least).

She sat next to me, examined my head, asked questions, and started what seemed to be a ritual. She massaged my head with coconut oil, and she wept. She wept copious tears, bending forwards and then back, then repeating the process for a number of times. All that while alternatingly massaging my head. She wept, she wailed, she sneezed.

I was bemused by it all. Later, I figured that the weeping and the sneezing were actually part of the process. I guess they don't call it *sup-ok* for nothing. *Sup-ok* literally means 'to blow away', particularly the spirit that caused the illness. The medium – *Ikit* Fakukad – then 'cries out' and 'sneezes out' the disease, or she would ask the spirit to stop whatever he's doing so that the afflicted would get better. In my case, *Ikit* Fakukad said in the end of the session, that it was my late grandfather *Itait* who came to visit and told me off about something I had failed to do.

So that made sense to me. I went home, relieved and full of expectations. I had faith on the faith healer.

Night befell, but the pain worsened... more than ever! I was very disappointed and began thinking that everything I've heard about *sup-ok* was simply not true. Nothing but an age-old mindless, worthless, daft pagan witchcraft practice. My thoughts were negative and my incredulity increased as the pain on my head worsened.

But the following morning, I awoke having had little sleep, and lo and behold: the pain was almost gone! Almost...because I can still feel some numbness up there. But that's about it – just numbness, like the feeling of being given an anaesthetic.

(It's funny how faith can be tested. When you have confidence in something, but a little setback makes you lose it quickly, then when that something proves that it was more than worthy of your trust and belief in the first place, you kind of knock yourself silly for losing faith.)

After that day with *Ikit* Fakukad, the pain went almost instantaneously. And I ask myself, what was it that truly healed my discomfort? Was it simply that the old woman had a supernatural healing power? Or that, really, angry spirits had something to do with it? Or perhaps it was just the therapeutic benefit of touch, the positive effect of massaging the skin together with the coconut oil that she used?

I couldn't answer my own questions. But I could tell you that despite not being a superstitious person, I do give credibility to this particular custom. True, mine was only a minor indisposition. It could have been worse, and my decision in not seeing the doctor could have been detrimental. But still, I was glad that I went to *Ikit* Fakukad and not to a doctor. *Sometimes*, amazing science and wonderful chemicals just don't square up to centuries' old custom- faith on the unexplained and the human touch.