

## A different relationship of water: Traditional respect and ownership regimes

*Tiga-ipugaw nan danum... maanap; mawada... tumayaw nu maukos..., Et no pay mamid, intoy ken tako pay?*

(Water is like man – it can come out... it runs away when displeased. If water disappears, what do we eat?)

The IBesao people have a different relationship with their water. Embedded in cultural and religious traditions, their practices do not consider water as a simple resource that can be extracted and used. Instead they understand that their water and their own life is deeply connected as part of the same system.

In learning about their practices you can think about how maybe sensors could promote a different relationship to our own water as well. Through it you may learn what kinds of practices and measures can help keep waters healthy — identifying **catalysts**.

IBesao representations of water reflect their high regard for water: they see it as life itself. It needs sustenance in order to perpetuate itself, as well as man. This notion is embodied in the concept of *nakinbaey*, which is literally translated as ‘inhabitant’. The inhabitant refers to a supernatural being or spirit, attributed to most water sources and other sacred/ritual sites in Besao. Among the Besao people, the *nakinbaey* is believed to be responsible for producing water. To guarantee the water supply, therefore, the *nakinbaey* has to be prevented from leaving. This requires people consciously to respect the water by observing culturally prescribed practices.

Anything that has to do with death is repulsive to the *nakinbaey*. People transporting dead human and animal remains, for example, do not pass near water sources. Butchering animals, especially dogs, near an ‘inhabited’ water spring is considered disrespectful towards the water source. Community members in mourning avoid water sources for about three years. They have to request the services of other community members for their water needs. The iBesao consciously avoid spitting or using soap near water sources.

It is prohibited to graze animals near or above water sources. Fields above water sources are tilled manually, without the use of water buffalo (*carabao*) for plowing. The breath and excreta of cattle are believed to be repulsive to the *nakin-baey*.

These culturally proscribed behaviours are all part of the *inayan* or *lawa* concept that governs the day-to-day behaviour and relations of the Besao people. The people themselves have defined the *inayan* concept as the embodiment of Besao custom law: “Our customary laws are embodied in the *inayan* or *lawa*, which discourages any act that causes harm to anybody or anything, and forbids the violation of norms. It appeals to one’s conscience to judge the rightness or wrongness of what one does or plans to do and cautions the person through some form of ‘punishment’, to be carried out by *Kabunian* (god), for wrongdoings. It is

a simple ‘do not’ command that is replete with values, like respect for other people and nature, justice, morality, harmony, sharing resources and helping one another, among others...” (Besao Ancestral Domain Management Plan, 2000).

## Ownership

*Maid kenkuas nan danum. Kuan am-in ay ipugaw nan danum...*

(Nobody owns water. Water belongs to everyone.)

Water is considered as a shared resource that cannot be privatised through contemporary water rights instruments. While ownership is communal, priority rights to water systems are vested in the community or farmers who first tapped the said system for their use. Natural rights are also claimed by the community living where the water naturally flows. No one is allowed to divert water from its natural course, nor from existing irrigation systems, without consent from the community or communities depending on it. With agriculture as the mainstay of life in Besao and rice as the staple food, water is regarded as highly as land.

In cases where water sources are found within traditionally-held private lands, the landowner has all rights to the land, but not to the water. He can only have priority use of the water. He cannot divert or stop the flow of the water at his own discretion. A case in point here is the Kapusean source in Suquib, which is found within a rice field belonging to Gan-i. Gan-i and his present descendants have been blessed with a water source right in their rice field. This means he can plant rice all year round if he wants to. But the spiritual respect for water, together with community rights to own and access the water prevailed over Gan-i's rights. As Joaquin Anosan of Suquib recalled, all the farmers using the Kapusean source downstream of Gan-i's field agreed to give a part of their harvest to Gan-i, to compensate him for his lost opportunities in not farming his field. Today, Gan-i's grandchildren have been allowed to use the rice field, but are restricted by the community from using farm animals for tilling.