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**Exploring the Water Practices of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe: Cultural and Ecological Significance through an Ecocentric Lens**

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**Abstract**

This paper narrates the tradition of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe in Sta. Cruz, Davao del Sur, Mindanao, Philippines. It draws attention to water's place in culture and the environment in terms of ecocentrism. By contrasting these narratives with stories Indigenous communities around the globe have shared about the importance of water, we can begin to appreciate water for the value that it holds in itself. In their water practices, the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe situates sustainability and displays environmental respect in the context of nature as interconnectedness and environmental harmony. Through qualitative research methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with the tribal elders and community leaders, this article explores the tribe's water rituals, beliefs, and water management practices. The decision-making process behind the tribe's water practices, the analysis shows, not only relates water practices to culture in direct ways but is supported by appeals to ecosystem services and is an expression of environmental stewardship along ecocentric lines that finds intrinsic value in ecosystems. This global treasure is, however, in serious danger: urbanization, industrialization, and climate change in the present day can easily erode many traditional practices, upset the delicate natural balance of systems, and make existing ecological and spiritual symbiosis impossible. This study reinforces the need for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and ecocentric values within planning frameworks for water security and restoration. This research adds to an ongoing debate about the fundamental links between cultural identity, ecology, and sustainability by emphasizing the role of adaptive management in supplying necessary mechanisms to safeguard both cultural landscapes and natural resources.

**Keywords:** Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe, Water practices, Indigenous knowledge, Ecocentrism, Environmental sustainability, Environmental stewardship, Davao City

**Introduction:**

**Rationale**

Water, as one of the elements that make up life, has long been a critical part of Indigenous culture and tradition across the global landscape (Gleick, 1993). Ancient wisdom in traditional water practices has survived generations and become a fundamental aspect of

collaboration between these indigenous communities and their surrounding environments, and in the processes, maintain cultural norms by promoting sustainable resources of water with the long-term implications of water security (Berkes, 1999). Emerging out of traditions such as the sacred rituals of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe in the Philippines or the sophisticated irrigation systems of indigenous communities of the Amazon rainforest water harvesting practices bear witness to respect for water as both a source of life and spiritual connection (Johnson, 2003; DeVries & Fernández, 2021).

However, the increasingly encroaching modern world is now putting traditional water practices in jeopardy. Urbanization, industrialization, and climate change are putting new pressures on water resources faster than we can respond, resulting in the pollution, depletion, and degradation of ecosystems that adversely affect human well-being (UN-Water, 2020). The former directly challenges traditional water use practices of local and indigenous communities, undermining their cultural heritage, as well as their means of living and environmental sustainability (Brosius et al., 2005; IPCC, 2022). Looking at how the water practices of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe through an ecocentric lens are viewed as critical not only to their community but even as a model for environmental stewardship in the wider society.

In this paper, I explore how traditional water practices, beliefs, and rituals, as a whole, form the cultural identity of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe and how these practices constitute an emerging environmental ethic among them. This seeks to illuminate an ecocentric knowledge of water amongst the tribe—a natural practice of the health and balance of land, water, species, and products (Cruikshank, 2001). According to Barman (2022), ecocentrism holds ecosystems themselves and the relationship between all living beings in a web of life to be of intrinsic value. Therefore, scholars like Arne Naess and Aldo Leopold suggested this view on ecocentrism, which is, in this context, nature being of supreme worth. Ecocentrism contrasts simultaneously with anthropocentrism, and ecocentrism critiques anthropocentric ideas of dominion and administration and advocates holistic, restorative administration. Naess's 'Deep Ecology' theory argues that all living beings have intrinsic value independently of their utility for humans, while Leopold's 'Land Ethic' theory is explained as a moral responsibility to respect and care about the land and all of its inhabitants (Guczalska, 2023). The paper acknowledges the importance of ecocentric principles in explaining the traditional water practices of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe but falls short in illustrating how these principles have shaped the interpretation of the results. Greater attention to theories of ecocentrism and how it is manifested through the tribe's practices with water would further develop the theoretical foundation and deepen our wisdom of the cultural and ecological significance of tribal traditions with water. Including ideas as one might find in the philosophies of Arne Naess and Aldo Leopold would bolster the theoretical toolbox with which this field can work, in addition to providing a level of sophistication to the generalizations over the tribe and their environment. These ecocentric perspectives offer a framework for understanding the cultural and ecological importance of water practices among indigenous groups like the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe. The study also examines the effects of contemporary issues that the tribe faces regarding its traditional

practices surrounding water, both on the immediate consequences of tribal infrastructures and the broader environmental impacts. The study further finds that such examination underscores the significance of indigenous water practices as demonstrative of cultural knowledge and environmental stewardship.

### **Methodology**

The present study uses a qualitative research design to discern the traditional water practices of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe through the lens of ecocentrism. The fieldwork of the researcher shall primarily be based on participant observation documenting the water-related activities and, at the same time, identifying the ecological implications that may contribute to ecocide. Semi-structured interviews will also be conducted with tribal elders, community leaders, and knowledgeable members to understand the values of the tribe regarding ecology and water management. Data collected will be analyzed through an ecocentric lens, focusing on the extent to which the tribe's cultural practices parallel ecological sustainability and stewardship. It is clear to me that ethical considerations will include respect for informed consent, the importance of cultural sensitivity, and the value of the research for the community. To further enhance the validity of ecocentric interpretations, this work will undertake validation and triangulation techniques. Focusing on an ecocentric perspective, this methodology is designed to offer insights into the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe's traditional water practices in their ecological ethos — articulating how this can inform sustainable water management within their environment. A Datu/Matanem – a Bagobo Tagabawa elder doing the traditional water blessing ritual at the Municipality of Sta. Cruz, Davao del Sur, Mindanao, Philippines — April 27, 2024. The ceremony is symbolic of the tribe's strong spiritual ties to water and the traditional respect they hold for the environment. The scholar provided consent to use this image.

### **Result and Discussion**

On April 27, 2024, during the fieldwork in the Municipality of Sta. Cruz, Davao del Sur, Mindanao, Philippines, the researcher observed and documented various traditional water practices of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe. A photo of a Datu/Matanem — a Bagobo Tagabawa elder who performed the water ritual, the traditional water blessing practice, was showcased during the fieldwork. The occasion is a reflection of the tribe's spiritual reverence for water, age-old respect for the environment, and a cultural bonding with nature. An interview with the tribal elder or Datu/Matanem, as well as community members, provided additional insights into the importance of these practices. It was by far the best indication that water to the tribe is as holy as the Christian Bible for the Bagobo Tagabawa people. As the Datu/Matanem said, *“Ang tubig akong gigamit para muayo sa mga samdan nakong katribu na naigo sa bala atong naay engkwentro nahitabo batok militar ug anti-militar”* (*The water I used to heal the wounds of my fellow tribe members who were hit by bullets during the encounter with the military and anti-military forces*). This line from the Datu/Matanem is an indication of how holy the water is, as it is believed to heal the wounds of the people.

Interpreting the findings through an ecocentric perspective, the tribal attitude of water management leans towards the health and balance of the ecosystem. The ecocentric



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perspective recognizes that the ecosphere that serves as the material substrate for all of Earth's ecosystems is the medium from which life originates and is the only source of life support for all living beings. It is an overarching worldview that sees the true value of ecosystems as the living and non-living organisms that they live and the ecological processes that link them in space and time (Gary et al., 2018). This reverence is rooted in a spiritual tradition that thoroughly reconciles the relationship between humans and nature and honors water not only as a source of life but also as a sanctifying substance that restores both the physical and the spiritual balance. Water holds sacred significance in numerous indigenous cultures worldwide. For these communities, water is far more than a resource; it embodies their way of life and is integral to their cultural identity. Indigenous peoples have depended on water for their sustenance, spiritual rituals, and ancestral knowledge for countless generations. They possess a profound awareness of the interconnection between water, land, and all living beings. In many indigenous traditions, water is regarded as a living being with its spirit, and it is believed that humans must protect and nurture it. To Indigenous peoples, water is not merely a commodity but a form of communication, a community, and a reservoir of wisdom and law (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2024). However, with contemporary challenges such as urbanization, industrialization, and climate change, the cultural endeavors of the tribe to conserve their water traditions face high risks of virtual extinction and environmental collapse. Culture is both material and lived: an integral part of our identity, our communities, and our sense of place — all of which are under threat due to the effects of climate change. In terms of how societies are likely to adapt culturally to the risks and realities of climate, these are major considerations. Culture, Environment, and Society are mediating elements (Neil et al., 2013, p. 112). Culture is also claimed to be essential for both the adaptation to the impacts of climate change as well as for the mitigation of those impacts and the reconfiguring of climate change as a social problem (Massey 2018).

Fieldwork revealed that tribal water systems are not immune to modern problems and identified examples of contemporary issues that have impaired tribal water resources, illustrating the immediate necessity for adaptive management measures and ecologically sound strategies to protect cultural landscapes and the landscape itself. The Datu/Matanem mentioned that "*Kaniadto kusog pa ang agas sa tubig pero karun tungod sa pagpamutol ug kahoy nag anam anam na kinig kahinay*" (*In the past, the flow of water used to be strong, but now, due to deforestation, it has gradually become weaker*). Significant changes can deeply challenge otherwise cohesive narratives or behavior patterns, disrupting traditional activities from subsistence to recreation. Environmental changes, such as altered seasonality and increased resource competition, can severely limit individual participation in cultural life. Responses to these challenges vary, potentially fracturing cultural groups as individuals seek stability and prosperity in new contexts. This strain will either deepen existing divisions or give way to the emergence of new conflicts as people respond to perceived threats to their interests. It is going to be an uphill battle for groups that broadly agree on what to do but will need to adapt to the changes that come with global warming. Given the complexity of natural systems and the multitude of interactions among them, it is hard to predict the exact local changes. This chaos is more threatening to tradition itself (Massey, 2020). From the ecocentric perspective, it underscores the importance of the indigenous wisdom of the

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ancient civilizations to govern and sustain the water resources. Results show that the existing cultural practices of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe can serve as a model in environmental stewardship through the fusion of cultural, ecological health, and community resilience.

### **Conclusion**

Viewing the water practices of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe under an ecocentric lens has unraveled the deep cultural and ecological value of its tradition. The results of this study demonstrate that generations of experience and value consensus have produced a set of water practices for the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe that is based on its cultural identity and environmental ethic, representing principles of ecological sustainability and stewardship. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, the research found the tribe held the water source in the highest esteem, as the giver of life and spiritual connection, and worked together to protect the health and balance of the ecosystem. From an ecocentric standpoint, the findings were interpreted in a way that emphasized the relationships between all the wild living things and humans, the value of nature for its own sake and not merely for what it can do for us.

Above all, the research made a strong case that the water resource sustainability of the area was driven by indigenous knowledge and management, with the cultural practice of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe as a model in environmental stewardship. However, it also illustrated the struggles that these traditional beliefs face today, competing with modern issues such as urbanization, industrialization, and climate change that threaten the strands of their culture and environmental sustenance. In summary, the study underlines the necessity of adaptive management practices and ecologically sustainable solutions in safeguarding cultural landscapes as well as the environment. We can build on the importance of Indigenous traditional water practices and overlay ecocentric values into water management perspectives to create resilience among our indigenous communities, like the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe. In sum, this research ultimately furthers discussion over the interconnected relations between cultural identity, ecology, and sustainability within water resource management.

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