



MODESTO GAAB
Municipal Planning and Development Coordinator

At one level, Modesto Gaab and his town of Besao (*pronounced bess-ow*) can be simply described as one of the many officials and towns in the 1,494 municipalities in the Philippine archipelago. But at another level, Modesto and Besao represent one of the few examples where local government officials are also cultural leaders and where traditional forest management systems are struggling to get their due acknowledgement and recognition from the national government and the larger society.

Modesto was born and grew up in Besao, one of the 10 municipalities in Mountain Province in the Cordillera region in northern Luzon. Selected as a recipient of a government college scholarship grant for bright young scholars during the Marcos era, Modesto was sent to the Technological University of the Philippines in Manila and obtained his BS degree in Industrial Education. He went back to Besao after obtaining the degree in 1986 and taught at St. James School, a local private school. In 1988, he entered local government and served as the Municipal Secretary for two years. In 1990, he was appointed as Municipal Planning and Development Coordinator (MPDC) and has held that position up to the present. Because his post is not an elective one, Modesto is a survivor of the various political shifts in the local leadership.

Besao is 276 kilometers from Manila, a mountain town of about 10,000 people, with an elevation of 1,400 meters above sea level (masl) and dominated by terraced rice fields, pine forest blocks, and mossy forests. The landscape is a magnificent array of towering peaks,



sharp ridges, steep slopes, and deep ravines. Besao is about half an hour from Sagada, a popular tourist destination. The communities are defined anthropologically as northern Kankanna-ey, although there is a preference to be referred to as *iBesao* or *iSagada*.

Forest governance with the elders

As Besao's MPDC, Modesto and his colleagues at the local government implement municipal and *barangay* ordinances to care for their resources. As *iBesaos*, Modesto and his colleagues, with the elders of the community, implement the customary laws and practices. This daily integration of his government job and the cultural check-off he needs to obtain is what makes Modesto's job distinct from his counterparts outside of the Cordillera.

As *iBesao*, they must maximize use without putting much pressure on the resources. Land, water and forests are the primary assets, but they can only capitalize on them for as long as the resources are sustained. Indigenous beliefs are founded on the physical environment and some of the cultural practices revolve around the natural resources.

The system of forest management is a part of the *iBesao*'s cultural heritage. It is based on their deep regard for their ancestors' efforts to manage their resources such as irrigated rice fields, the *payeo* (water), or the *daga* (land). It is guided by their belief in the *inayan* and is sustained through care and concern for the younger generation.

Modesto's cultural check-off is through the *dap-ay*¹, which is the traditional center of governance for the *umili* or community. Thus, while his counterparts convene and get the endorsement of the local municipal council, Modesto in addition has to ensure that the elders are informed or when necessary, approvals and endorsements obtained.

Modesto has a vision for Besao: that his town maintains its population within the carrying capacity of the environment, that food is sufficient for those who are there, and that Besao's resources can supply their needs. He identifies hunger, water shortage, and solid waste management as the problems that Besao needs to address.

"In Besao, we need to work with the resources we have to supply for our needs. All we have are the pine trees and we need the pine-related technology to fully maximize these resources. There were previous attempts to tap pine resin, but that did not work out. We are also processing the fruits from the forests. Of course we also have the rice fields, but the rice production is not even sufficient to meet Besao's needs today and we need to import from other areas. There are vegetable gardens too and some of these products are sold outside.

"I had an opportunity to visit the Kalahan Education Foundation in Imugan, Santa Fe, Nueva Vizcaya. The Ikalahan are preserving and bottling fruits and berries which they then sell to commercial centers. They seem to have gained some success in that. But the context is different in Besao. The Ikalahan are probably successful because there is not much discussion. In Besao, we discuss until morning," Modesto laughs.

The role of the elders through the *dap-ay* system remains respected in the community's decision-making, especially in relation to resource utilization. Modesto is concerned though that there is an increasing erosion of cultural values. "When you enter the *dap-ay*, one is obliged to hear the words of the elders. But now, the youth are alienating themselves from the elders.

"I am working on developing modules in resource management for the local high school students, with the help of some professionals from the University of the Philippines in Baguio City. We brought some students to the *dap-ay*, and they were allowed discover what they wanted to know from the elders. I am proposing this as a separate subject in high school in our area. The elders feel they are the end of



tradition, and do not see themselves as role models anymore. There is a generation gap, and this must be addressed. I relate this with my childhood days when we had a good relationship with elders, and that is what we are losing now. Even the rituals and ceremonies are not connecting with children and the youth anymore.”

Modesto relates his personal run-in with the elders when he suggested to plant strawberries in his own small field. “If I sell the strawberries with the rice, I can probably get PhP20,000-25,000 a year from my area. My area is located directly above four springs, and I asked the elders for permission, also assuring them that this will not pollute the springs. But the elders told me that the strawberries will dry up the land, and my riprap will not be able to hold and may give way. So, I was not allowed to plant strawberries. Even my own mother did not want to speak with me for a week when she learned what I was proposing. She told me to wait for her to die, otherwise she will be ostracized if I proceeded against what the elders are advising. In a way, the elders are saying also to let them die first. It is not just the money, that’s the problem.

“But by opening this topic, discussions are at least started amongst the elders. A project in a mossy forest area is now being planted with strawberries and the elders are saying that in two to three years, a pest will mutate.

“I value the reality of what the elders are saying and seeing. A site was allowed for the construction of a transmitter for cellular phones and the areas around are now planted with vegetables. They have no problem with the planting. Their concern is with what will be planted, the chemicals that will be used, and the constant movement of the soil. They advised that the vegetable gardens must not be chemical-based and the soil be left undisturbed for at least a year.”

Modesto acknowledges that talking about this is part of the normal governance in an area. One just looks at the land because the land

is always standing in front of them, hitting them every day, and so is part of the daily discussions.

Traditional management system of forestlands and national prescriptions

Long before government intervention in Mountain Province, Besao and other ancestral domains had their *lakun*, *saguday* and *batangan* systems of managing pine forests. These indigenous practices are the precursors of the government’s community-based forest management program. Ironically, these practices remain unrecognized and in conflict with state policies. Imposition of state-run programs without proper consultation and cultural sensitivity contributes to the erosion of the cultural fabric and the capacity of the communities to manage their watersheds. These further complicate inter-tribal feuds, some of which have deteriorated into armed conflicts.

State forestry laws ban the cutting of trees at 1,000 masl. The entire Besao municipality is around 1,400 masl. Most of the pine stands and all of the mossy forests above them are within that prohibitive elevation. The law also prohibits titling of land 18 degrees in slope and over. The ancient rice terraces and many other ancestral lands fall within this angle.

In Besao, forests are perceived as both wood resource and water resource. There are two types of forest classified by the *iBesao* based on dominant vegetation: the *batangan* (or pine forest) and the *kallasan/pagpag* (or mossy forest).

The *batangan* areas are recognized as wood and water resources. Locally, it is the source of timber for constructing houses, granaries, schools and buildings. Pinewood is also used for furniture and as fuelwood. It is also perceived as a water source that supports the community’s household needs and agriculture.



Based on *iBesao* culture, there are three types of woodlots in terms of ownership and access to it: these are the communally-owned woodlot which belongs to the municipality, group of *barangays* or managed by a *barangay*; the kinship or clan-owned woodlot; and the individually-owned woodlot.

Most of the species found in the kallasan areas are *aas* trees, including the hardwood varieties like *tikem*, *gasatan*, *payen*, *awiyaw*, *narra* (*Pterocarpus indicus*), *bita-og* (*Calophyllum inophyllum*) and *buuken*.

Besao's new initiatives

From the government side, there is an attempt to formulate a Chico watershed development plan and they are trying to find a common perspective along the Chico River. However, Modesto realizes that the technical and legal definition of a watershed excludes culture. "If we call it a catchment, and we talk about catchment management, then that is culturally inherent."

Along with other officials, Modesto is trying to develop an agroforestry plan for western Mountain Province that will include the towns of Bauko, Besao, Sagada, and Tadian.

"We will recognize the policies already existing in Besao and Sagada and impose a moratorium on road openings if they cut across forest areas. We are promoting the planting of coffee, as the cost is not too high and there's an assured market. We prefer the Arabica variety, as this commands a more stable price than Robusta, and Arabica is what grows best in western Mountain Province."

"The plan is for each family to plant five coffee plants per year. While the young coffee is growing, these will need shade and therefore there will be no cutting of trees. If nobody will plant, local government will require everybody to plant. They can start in their backyards, then proceed to the vacant communal areas. There are some communities with common resource areas and these can be utilized as such. Sagada has the seedlings, but nobody is planting. Besao, for its part, is willing to plant. There's a document to show that Sagada was allowed plant in Besao areas in previous years, and I'm willing to recognize a common

resource area. The processing center will be in Sagada and they can run the roasters in the town center. Sagada has more experience in running a business, while Tadian will take charge of environmental concerns. We will decide the land allocation and land use together.

“I tell the other officials that even if we can’t do anything if the elders say no, the fact that we’re talking about this will still be important as the elders will keep on asking to be updated. We can always be part of the elders’ agenda. But sometimes you give the elders a finger, and they will ask for the hand.”

Besao gets extremely dry in February and March and the water shortage is a perennial concern. Modesto recounted that the Department of Science and Technology designed a mini-hydropower system, when what people wanted was micro-hydropower, so that the inundation area is lesser.

“I also met an old classmate, now a UNDP consultant, who told me that if there are rice terraces, there can be dam terraces. The belief of the elders is that the first four years will be good rain and harvest, but we need to prepare for the fifth year. They said that if we maintain the areas so that the top of the hill will not heat up, the springs will be maintained. And if we let water run its natural course, the springs will be supported. If we can compute our water demand, we can build a creek impoundment to support us in the two dry months. This would be acceptable to the elders.”

Modesto also learned that what is most important for water retention is the soil compaction. When there is lesser compaction, there will be more water and its movement is slower.

Reflections

On Besao’s forests, Modesto asserts that his worldview is negative. “People used to freely get trees from the mountains. It was theirs.

Then the *monteros* and the foresters came, and the State now owns the trees, and we can now be imprisoned if we cut! So we cut, before anybody gets the extraction.”

Modesto understands forest management in Besao in relation to controlling forest fires, which are common occurrences during the dry months. “Before liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) was introduced in our area, we relied much on pine for firewood and everybody responded to fires. But now with LPG in many households, the forest is losing its role as a supplier of pinewood for fuel. And when growth is stunted, we are not allowed plant other trees or crops. The extraction now is really to supply the housing boom in Metro Baguio.

“The positive shift I can see is that during the 1970s, the LGU teamed up more with the foresters, and the LGUs feared government. Now there’s a transformation, the LGUs are working more with people, and they can stand up to national government.

“We are still saying no to large-scale mining, although we recognize pocket miners. The Philippine Forest Corporation also came to us and presented jatropa as an alternative plantation species. But this is not feasible in their area. We can offer them the wastelands, the cogonal (*Imperata cylindrical*) areas, but that’s all we can offer.

At present, the Besao municipality has a theme by which it wants to proceed with its development. Playing on their name, these are:

- I-mproved Income
- B-roadened delivery of services
- E-mpowered communities
- S-ustained environment
- A-dvanced culture
- O-utstanding governance

On the issue of autonomy for the Cordillera region that the national government attempted before during the Aquino administration,



Gathering of iBesao at the *dap-ay*

Modesto personally feels that “an autonomous government in the Cordillera is a dangerous thing. A situation like the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) could never happen in the Cordillera. There are separate value systems for the different cultures, such as the Ibaloi, the Bontoc, the Kankanna-ey. While the Cordillera is more geographically solid than the ARMM, the only commonality is in relation to the lowlands. This attempt by the national government to create a Cordillera Autonomous Region illustrates how a program fails when there is no cultural discussion, no foundation in the culture.”

“Among the tribes in the Cordillera, there are extractionists and the protectionists. Benguet, where Baguio City is, has nothing to protect, and therefore can play host to mining and the vegetable industries. There are discussions on giving the environment a break from all the resource extraction that’s going on.”

Asked why he remains in Besao, even with the continued outmigration, Modesto responds, “I have nowhere to go and this is the nature of my job. It requires constant discussions with communities. If I leave, there might be nobody else to do the job. Yes, the outmigration is still strong, but for those who leave, they want Besao protected for when they return. My family is also here in Besao.”

In the Philippines, nothing can be discussed without the Cordillera region in northern Luzon, and more so if the discussions are on cultures and resource management. There is an integrity in the various cultures, no matter how divided. The Cordillera is where the local government officials are also cultural leaders. It is only in this region of the Philippines where this relationship comes together and where leadership can be understood. The Cordillera represents the most articulate block of cultures in the Philippines and they use their experiences and concepts in defining and developing their ways of life, thereby securing their cultural integrity as they adapt and grow.

¹ *The dap-ay refers to a group of men in the community. They have authority to assign lands to people. They have the responsibility to protect the rights of every individual, preserve the culture and tradition of each tribe, and resolve conflicts within or outside the community. Dap-ay also refers to the physical structure, a place where the council of elders meets and decides on matters affecting the ancestral domain.*

Within the dap-ay system, the lallakay or amam-a holds authority on matters concerning customs and traditions. The lallakay literally, “old men” or elders are sought for their maturity and wisdom gained through years of learning, experiences and community service and after having fulfilled their major responsibility of raising their children. Foremost among the qualifications of elders is their personal integrity, and willingness and capability to serve others.



E.J., Bros, Rico and Mark

Atoy, E.J., Noel, Bros, Jovan, Rico and Mark are Jesuit scholastics undergoing their formation studies and activities at the Loyola House of Studies in Quezon City. As *formandi*, they are assigned to various social apostolates of the Philippine Province of the Society of Jesus to obtain a deeper understanding of the social context within which they are expected to serve as future priests. Atoy is a doctor, Bros and Noel are chemical engineers, Jovan is a mechanical engineer, E.J. is an accountant, Rico used to work with a drug company, and Mark is a management engineer who used to be the Executive Director of the Jesuit Volunteers Philippines. A few years back, they signed up for a long training program as Jesuit religious and continue to engage in social realities whenever studies let up.

During these formation activities, the scholastics are provided time to reflect on their experiences and exchange insights. It is in this context that our exchange with the scholastics took place. Recently, this group, over one week, had occasion to visit abandoned fishponds in Batangas, a province south of Manila,

YOUNG JESUITS



To feel and to act: accompanying life
amidst the ruins



the landslide area of Real, Quezon Province on the east coast, and the Payatas dumpsite in Quezon City where over 10,000 families live. The ecological focus of these activities was given particular attention.

While the rains lasted, we followed the dispersal of some of the seedlings that Cesar Aguinaldo nurtured. The seeds came from a diverse mangrove-beach ecosystem of Calatagan in west Batangas. These were to be planted in an effort to rehabilitate a small estuarine area that had been subjected to fish pond development on the east side and that had lost some of its diversity. We went off to Mark's hometown and his father's land by the sea to sow the seedlings. From there we discussed the more difficult realities affecting the country and globally, recognizing that the little things we can do right are the things that together will help us locally be responsible in addressing global warming, the catch-all for environmental responsibility today.

After Batangas, we traveled to the east coast where in 2004, landslides and floods killed over 2,000 people. The obvious reason to many was the deforestation in the area, but Bros and Noel in particular wanted to look more closely at the clays in the area to see if they were "quick" clays, or clays that liquefy faster than others due to their chemical composition. Potentially, these were the clays that washed down across the coastal road, burying hundreds of people who thought they were safe from the floodwaters.

On returning from two days of continuous rain and a great deal of mud, we visited the Payatas dumpsite in Quezon City. Barangay Payatas officially exists in this dumpsite along with public schools, a church, clinics, and day care centers. Officially, Barangay Payatas is listed as having a population of around 100,000, but unofficial figures estimate a 600,000+ population. The Payatas dumpsite gained national prominence when, in the morning of 10 July 2000, after 15 days of rain, a portion slid down and buried the sleeping residents. More than 200 people, and possibly up to 800 (most of whom remain unrecovered to this day) were buried under the "garbalanche." With low shear strength, the garbage mountain slid under the heavy rains; 30,000 tons

of garbage buried the residents of *Lupang Pangako* (Promised Land). The ensuing discussions were unguarded personal appreciation for the engagement.

Mark

Mark identified three things he appreciated most from the activity in Batangas. First, having also worked on the oil spill in Guimaras in the Visayas, he expressed being tired of just hearing or learning more about environmental problems and was now “simply happy to be able to do something (however small) to help in regenerating the mangroves.”

Second, the smallness of the operation, “made it feel so much more doable and therefore the challenge of doing something for the environment becomes more reachable, attainable, and replicable in other spots as compared with my past experience in Pangasinan, (a big operation with 600 seedlings.) Using the seeds germinated and cared for by Pedro, we planted the small area with new trees. And that was good.”

Third, “I am also excited about what more can be done. I was thinking of other possibilities like opening a dike and giving access to cutting *nipa* to a poor family there. It was made more special because I practically spent all my childhood summers there, and that’s why it is very important for me to be able to do something. That was rewarding for me.”

On the other hand, the Payatas visit for Mark was where “I saw how it made sense for people to live there and acknowledged the importance of really understanding the situation before changes can be made. I affirm it as indeed worth spending time to understand the contradictions. It was also an experience of witnessing of sorts, where people (e.g. other scholastics, friends and family) get the sense that there is something we can do.”



Mark



Noel and Rico

Mark used to be puzzled why people in Payatas would not go back to their provinces, but now understands better. “Their day-to-day existence (in the dumpsite) is characterized by a sense of control. As long as they can gather scraps and sell them, they are able to make ends meet, compared to life in the province which is much more unpredictable.”

It was also in Payatas where Mark saw the big contrast in the way government people respond to ordinary visitors and government officials. “I saw how people changed their manner of conducting themselves in the presence of a government official like the mayor. They dropped the appointments we made with them just because the mayor was visiting. I understand now why often, so little gets done.”

Noel

For Noel, the visits were “an experience of environmental awareness. Though it was unfortunate that the weather was not cooperating well when we went to the Quezon flood sites, we actually could see the soil erosion and strength of the river grow. The hill that came down in Real and buried the community that was seeking security in the building below has been replanted and cleaned up, but no preventive action has been taken. The next hill threatens the neighboring houses by the shore and the people respond as if they have no basis to act or change their circumstances.”

He noticed that there were many groups working together in Infanta, Quezon, but the results do not look promising because of limited resources. It’s a “make do, will do” engagement by the local government in the housing reconstruction, with use of substandard materials, and due to limited resources, there was poor and hasty planning. “The infrastructure is an immediate response to the need to act, but was poorly designed and built and will not hold up in the long term,” observes Noel.

“But the visit was enriching in a way as I caught myself asking ‘Am I making sense in the work I am doing? Am I contributing something to

the community? How can I be more effective?’ I also appreciate God’s grace through the Carmelites who were very accommodating and also the staff in the mayor’s office. How things fell into place made me feel the presence of a providing God.”

Noel also values the opportunity to speak with the root carvers in Infanta. “I think they also share in this whole effort of regeneration, including the tree planting initiated by the local government. I like the experience of knowing their conditions and it was a touching experience for me to see how they rely on nature for their needs and yet they don’t harm it, even if they benefit from its abundant sources of wood.”

Noel agrees with Mark about the reluctance of the Payatas community members to return to their home provinces. “I think I am beginning to understand why. The reasons of a more desperate situation in the provinces, lack of jobs or source of livelihood and poverty should be stressed to find a more secure way forward.”

Atoy

Atoy’s viewed the trip to Batangas as an experience and opportunity to reflect anew about nature, the environment and people’s relationship with it, and his own role in that big picture. He spends time listening to patients as a doctor, but he also knows there is time for prognosis and action. He focused on three main points as the overarching themes for these reflections – stewardship, dialogue and life.

“We have a privileged position as the ones tasked with the responsibility to care for the environment. Sadly, this accountability to nature is wanting. This was confirmed during last summer in Infanta where I talked with survivors of the landslides and floods brought about by a succession of typhoons, watching the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, and the various half-a-page (sometimes even less) news articles that I get to read.



Atoy: where philosophy finds its roots in the quagmire of life

“It seems that somewhere along the way of our progress, or lack thereof, as a human race, we have lost the capacity to respect and nurture the very world entrusted to us. For every space left of lush greenery and mirror-clear blue waters, many more surface areas of the globe are encroached upon by cold steel and dull concrete, many more bodies of water are seething with foul-smelling, brackish slush that not too many living organisms can survive in.

“We have lost our ability to listen to nature’s mysterious language, her silent communications, her very heartbeat. For at the end of it all, we are connected to her as she is connected to us in an intricate, elegant and mysterious force called life. We breathe our life from her as she sustains her life through us. And I think and feel that by reclaiming such a listening disposition we can begin the slow and excruciatingly difficult task of not just rehabilitating, but actually regenerating the environment. It is in engaging in dialogue with nature herself that we can actually know how to start helping her heal herself and reclaim our rightful place as stewards of the environment.

This dialogue also requires tough negotiations in society. Society needs to focus on the problems being generated that are way beyond our capacity to manage them. Government, all institutions in society and the people need to turn their individual wants to a more forceful and collaborative action that takes account of and seeks to overcome the damage done. That is easy to say, and times are difficult, whether it be in the political forum and institutions of government, or the extent of poverty, malnutrition and basic needs of many of our people.

“And so the weekend at Batangas gave me the rare chance to once more think about and reflect on the beauty of the world that surrounds me, and the injustice we do to her, whether consciously or unconsciously. I enjoyed the experience; it was an opportunity for me to relax. The community we all shared was very comforting. I enjoyed again the experience of touching nature and to touch base

with nature. Strolling along the beach was quite an experience for me. The sand under my feet, appreciating and feeling the wonder with nature, hearing the waves, getting hands dirty, isn’t that wonderful, to be able to feel the pulse of Mother Nature? There was also solitude, with only the howling wind and the waves, when I felt as one with the rhythm of nature.

“By setting an example, by planting and caring to regenerate the surroundings, what we did was to do and show that we can do something. Knowing one’s self, knowing nature and knowing society must lead us to action. This is not the time for information overload. Now is the time to work; we need to walk our talk.”

E.J.

E.J. shares that he was initially driven with “selfish motives as I was more concerned about what the experience will do for my own growth. It was enriching for me because it broadens my horizon, made me appreciate the beauty of environment, especially when I first learned about regeneration during the presentation that night. I was reflecting on what I can contribute to environmental advocacy and preservation. Maybe at the moment I am just building purely on my keen interest in environmental issues and an emerging environmental awareness. I know this opens me for possible future ministries. In fact, a very concrete way of pursuing this interest is to consider this dimension in my future papers in Philosophy or Social Sciences. So it was more of an experience of a personal growth for me, rather than a real action for environmental preservation or regeneration. It is a personal growth that opens for me a wide variety of possibilities.

“I enjoyed the experience, I enjoyed the company and the community we shared. I enjoyed and appreciated the experience of touching the soil, the aroma of the trees we cleared to let the seedlings grow and the food we had that night.



Makeshift bridge still serves the General Santos community since the floods of 2005

“I saw how it made sense for people to live there and acknowledged the importance of really understanding the situation before changes can be made. I affirm it as indeed worth spending time to understand the contradictions. It was also an experience of witnessing of sorts, where people (e.g. other scholastics, friends and family) get the sense that there is something we can do.”

Mark Lopez S.J.

“A beautiful thing I also learned from the experience in Batangas was about regeneration in contrast to reforestation. I know God has given mankind the bountiful resources for us to enjoy, but we don’t have all the freedom to exploit them in ways we like. We need to take responsibility in terms of preserving nature. I realize that after using the resources, we cannot just simply replace what we have used. We need to regenerate.

“Incidentally, when we went back home to Loyola House, I saw this copy of *Time* magazine praising the heroes of our environment. I came across this lady named Janine Benyus who invented the concept of biomimicry. Then I realized that is also what we mean by regeneration. We don’t change the ecosystem. We mimic it in order to preserve its beauty. I thought that it’s good to explore this discovery.”