Water flows in Sitio Lamut: A study on the value, acquisition and embodied relationships of a local community with water

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Pumped spring water to the household reservoir through a hose

Water tank

Introduction

Water is an essential resource for human survival and overall well-being. It moves through streams, consolidates rivers, runs under cities, is pumped from wells, and makes its way to plastic containers.[1]

Although it is an old entity, new questions about water are being asked because of shifting consumption patterns, local politics, environmental degradation, and climate change.[2] Water and humans have coexisted on earth for millenia. Ten Bos provides a philosophical view of this relationship saying that humans may view water as an environment, an ominous threat, or even as an opportunity.[3]

By living and interacting with water every day, humans have developed certain understandings of it and its significance to them. Kortelainen's study assesses how a community's understanding and making meaning of the Pielisjoki river in Eastern Finland evolved.[4]

It can be drawn from Krause's research that as water moves and flows through the environment, people's lives continue to change as well and are associated with these flows.[5] In turn, the flow of water should also be seen in a sociocultural context that is tied to people but distinct from the flow of human life.

As water and human life flow in different yet interconnected ways, issues concerning both parties may arise. Wutich and Brewis studied how certain communities are pushed into the vulnerabilities of water scarcity, suggesting researchers look into the community, household, and individual levels by breaking them down.[6] In Hoag's study, he touches upon the destructive qualities of water and suggests that anthropologists must account for the creativity by which capitalists manage to commodify water and question the conventional tropes used to contest it.[7]

The framework of this research is Tim Ingold's Correspondence Theory. Correspondence, in Ingold's sense, is the process by which beings 'answer' to one another over time.[8] In this research, his theory can also be connected to the thought of production or ecology of correspondence wherein humans must attend to the needs of non-human lives.

Ingold stresses that entities on earth must admit to movement as both its condition and its consequence. This, in turn, is a necessity born out of commitment to things and ways they want to go rather than being negligent.[9] Ingold explains that in order for the human economy to flourish, humans must attend to 'active' materials.

The primary research method used for this research was semi-structured interviews, a flexible approach that allows the researcher to ask new questions during the interview depending on the prior answers of the interviewees.[10] Seventeen people from Lamut, – residents, officials, and farmers – were interviewed and asked about their specific water situations. These recorded interviews were then transcribed.[11]

Ingold emphasizes participant observation as a way to study *with* people and not to make studies *of* them.[12] Even with the limited time, some form of participant observation was also done, specifically, with some e farmers who were kind enough to share almost half of their day in their farms, and afternoons with mothers in front of their sari-sari stores.

We made use of field notes to capture our thoughts and observations on paper. Field notes are written observations recorded during or immediately following participant observations in the field and are supported by questions, thoughts, opinions, and feelings of the researcher.[13] They provide further context to the data and help the researcher practice reflexivity.

The informants were chosen randomly by us as we went from one house to another. Other informants were then identified through snowball sampling.[14]

In analyzing the data, the interview transcripts were examined and interpreted through deductive coding. This type of coding is a somewhat top-down approach, applying predetermined codes to the data.[15] The codes created for this research were based on the questions and propositions of the researchers.

A cemented and a dug-up *kwelo*

Carrie's deepwell

The stream back then: The history of water in Sitio Lamut

Nestled deep in the mountains of La Trinidad, residents of Sitio Lamut in Barangay Beckel have cultivated a culture of their own as a cut flower-farming community. Flourishing for generations, the community continues to reshape its identity in an ever-changing world.From vegetables, coffee beans, and now cut-flower farming, Lamut had always participated in the bigger economy outside its local farms. To this day, the sitio remains proactive in catering to the sizeable demand for flowers, serving Dangwa, Manila with chrysanthemums, radus, and Malaysian mums, just to name a few.

Aside from numerous flower farms, different bodies of water also

characterize the landscape of Lamut. According to the Beckel Barangay profile provided by the Municipality of La Trinidad, 344 households get their safe water from natural sources. The *Lamut* community is rich in rivers, creeks, and springs that make it able to house a watershed that also serve some parts of La Trinidad.

The same waters from rivers, creeks, and springs cater to the farms and houses in the sitio. Residents and farmers have been reliant on these ever since. Koko, our oldest informant who is 65 years old, recalled his younger years when his entire family sought refuge in Lamut from Japanese intruders. In their newfound settlement, their family rebuilt their homes and lives. As farmers, they planted hope into this land, seeking to reap its generosity. Challenges always exist however, as they became good friends with the earth, they faced the consequences of reliance on groundwater. Koko shared, "*[p]ero mahirap naman yung ano noon trabaho. Wala yung pump, walang hose. Yung ginagamit na pandilig yung balde na pang gallon.*" (Work was hard before when there were no hoses or pumps. We had to use of pails and gallon containers to water our plants.)

Informants who have lived there long enough remembered having to fetch water from springs and creeks on a daily basis. Some of them even did laundry in these nearby sources that aside from buckets full of water, baskets of clothes were carried back and forth. There were also little to no cemented roads back then, making it hard for them to access water. They had to first walk difficult terrain. This was how they lived in the sitio for a long time.

It was not until around 1985 that the water system in the sitio underwent a significant transformation. This was when some of the mechanical and technological advancements made their way into Lamut. Projects were initiated by the barangay with the assistance of higher government units. Springs were pumped and connected to households and farms for consumption. Deep wells were also constructed. Thus, the residents were handed greater entitlement to water delivery into their very households.

The construction of public sources of water went on for many decades. Many families also initiated private sources of water by digging up their own deepwells or by incorporating hoses and water pumps. But because of road and landscape obstructions and prohibitive costs, among other things, some families could not sustain their efforts.

As time went on, residents realized that the water in these natural bodies has lessened significantly and attributed these to catastrophes and drilling activities. For instance, earthquakes were felt more often, and after each catastrophe, the water was not as plentiful as it used to be. Drilling also became a more common activity as the population of the place grew larger. Currently Barangay Beckel identifies water scarcity as one of the main issues in the area.

To address lack of water, public deep wells were built for community use. The supply of water for farmers and residents increasingly became scheduled and fixed for each day as many households grew to share sources. In theory, this was a good system. However, the execution leaves a lot to be desired.

With farming being the main source of livelihood in the Sitio, water providers tend to prioritize farmlands which meant often renegging on the promised supply to households. This indicates that the community would do anything for prosperous flower production. Carrie shares that:

> *"...inuuna yung garden kaysa sa tao – ay kaysa sa household. Kaysa sa mga bahay-bahay." ("...gardens were prioritized over supplying people and households.")*

They also enforced distribution via rotation. Those residents subject to rotation are neighboring families who share the same source of water. The more families share, the lesser their water supply and the more frequent the rotations.

According to an informant, the Lamut Cooperative started a project, but it did not last because the water source dried up. Ultimately, the community

system faded away and people went back to doing things on their own.

Acquiring and classifying water

Farmers go the extra mile to acquire water to maximize their harvest. Koko, having endured the tougher days of acquiring water, gets the water he uses for farming from the spring close to his greenhouse. Spending most of his day in the greenhouse, he has found efficient ways to gather water. This includes creating a couple of water reservoirs which he calls the *pondohan* or sometimes, *kwelo*. Pondohan usually means capital or to money in business. Using the term to refer to reservoirs shows how much he values water.

While some residents rely heavily on springs, others have access to deep wells. Carrie uses a deep well shared among six households in their neighborhood. She says that it is common for residents to share deep wells with households related by blood. Flower farming and keeping a store afforded her family their own deep well. She recalled how constructing these private water setups was a gamble since some areas in the community are incapable of pumping water at a high level. It required putting up a big amount of money, and being ready to lose it. Despite the risks, she felt like it was the best option and luckily, she won the gamble.

Almost every household has its own tanks and drums to store water. Some gather rainwater in buckets which they use for cleaning bathrooms and watering plants. Everything seems fine, that is until summer time comes when the water in the springs and creeks run dry, making it difficult for their pumps and hoses to pump water up. Those with deep wells have a hard time getting water whenever electricity is out.

In times like these, they improvise. Carrie and her relatives walk or drive up the steep road of Marlboro, a place in La Trinidad, to fetch water from the well there. As for the rest of the farmers we encountered, they get from water they have saved up in their kwelo(s). When these run out, however, they are forced to sacrifice some of their harvest, thereby lessening their income. Thankfully, unlike Ennis Mcmillan's research, they do not experience bodily distress due to scarcity.[16] Although, by the somewhat discouraged tone of their answers, it is obvious that they find those times draining.

Residents without access to springs and deep wells are forced to order water from delivery companies or from the refilling station. Imelda, a 56-year-old mother of two who has been a resident of Lamut for a couple of decades, still gets her water from truck deliveries. For many locals, more efficient access to water from a nearby source is restricted by their individual capacity to finance it, especially the deep wells. Imelda and her husband's combined earnings from her small sari-sari store and her husband's work as a security guard have not been enough for them to afford this efficiency despite many years of working because they have had to prioritize feeding their family and putting their kids through school.

Furthermore, the delivery of water by trucks may take some time as these usually come from Baguio and farther parts of Beckel. Many households reliant on these water deliveries endure long hours or even days of waiting. As for those ordering from the refilling stations, we find it a bit odd and wasteful to be using purified water for other things aside from drinking, but it happens.

Hearing all these, we assumed that it is every family for themselves even in dire situations. However, Gail, 26, who just started a family in Lamut together with her farmer husband, told us a distinct story about times when some of her neighbors would ask desperately for water. She said she would willingly tend to their requests whenever she had excess. This practice of sharing water would go both ways as these same neighbors would also give their water to those in need. In the same manner, Jon, a 58-year-old farmer with a family of six, is able to generously share water from his spring with those from *"taas"* or the people above them, distant from natural sources of water. Reciprocity, in this case, is not something Jon expects because they have a supply of water all year round. Gail tells us that:

"Usually, 'di na sila nagpapabayad, bigay lang ganun kapag may kailangan." (They don't usually charge for it, they just give it to those who need it.")

Water: Engaging social life

From cooking meals and sharing them at the table; doing laundry at the height of noon; and in preparation for warm baths, water flows in and outside the households of the community. Thus, lack of water is an inconvenience to families' daily routines and damages farmers' earnings. In response, they reprioritize their uses of water. *"Pagtitipid" or practicing austerity* is not an unusual concept for the residents who are keenly aware of their irregular access to water. From their practice of *"pagtitipid,"* they have learned how much water is enough and how long it lasts.

Perceived water supply influences their decisions and reactions on a daily basis. If they feel that water is in adequate supply, this is put towards the demands of farming and household consumption. When they feel that water is scarce, they reevaluate if they should plant a certain portion of their farm or take a bath that day. According to Gail, *"...basta summer, hindi lahat ng garden namin, sabay sabay na matatamnan"* ("... in the summertime, we are unable to plant all of our gardens.")

Similarly, Jon who has an abundance of water, finds himself pumping water only twice a month in the summer and even less frequently in the rest of the year. Notions of water quality are also relevant, certain residents opt to purchase water from water refilling stations as they deem it safer. Other residents, on the other hand, prefer getting their drinking water from springs, describing it as "fresh," "mineral," and "alkaline" that is safe to drink and "naturally processed." "Natural water" is also believed to retain its consistent taste over time, which is more desirable compared to treated water, due to the former's nature of being a "blessing of God."

Residents' reactions and responses to the amounts and quality of water are informed by their past experiences and learned notions shared across the community. Koko experienced bowel discomfort after drinking water straight from springs. Since then, he has been boiling his drinking water. While Carrie, from her past experience of some crops spoiling due to inadequate watering, realizes that a certain amount of water is needed in planting Chrysanthemums.

While the community's responses to different water situations and conditions vary on the household level, the dynamic of responses on the community level was also considered. Substitutions for clean water occur among cultures.[17] At the household level, aside from those we tackled earlier, this includes reusing water that has been previously used, like gray water. In Lamut, using rainwater for cleaning bathrooms and farm use is widely practiced across neighborhoods.

As mentioned earlier, sharing water is an act of help. While some people take the opportunity to make a profit in reselling water, the water system is a venue for both exchanges and sharing in the community. The commodification of water is not something that can be overlooked here. It manifests in the everyday flow of water in the community. These aspects are influential in shaping the form of the water system in Lamut today.

Although the commodification of water has resulted in some good by creating opportunities for income, some still think that it should be free. A couple of informants voiced out that people should only be paying for the service and delivery fee, but not for the water itself like Evan, the 52-year-old Brgy. Captain of Lamut who said:

"Yung sinabi mo na magpepermit na eh biyaya ng ang Diyos yan." (They still charge us for water even though it's already a blessing from God.)

Conclusion

With the people of the community holding water in high regard, it is no surprise that they would want the best water system for their s*itio.* Aspirations range from simple things like more tanks per house to more

ambitious desires such as solar-powered water pumps.

Whether large or small scale, almost everyone in the community would like to finally have an existent and consistent community water system. They are aware that some residents are having difficulty with acquiring and saving up on water.

Residents and farmers constantly engage with water for everyday life and survival. People of the community adjust and improvise whenever water flow suddenly stops intimes of crisis.

At the same time, water flow has corresponded with human activities and changes in sourcing and water management. Water in the s*itio* back then only moved in streams from lakes, creeks, and springs. Now, it passes through different channels and makes contact with structures unimaginable in the 80s.

Although this is the case, 'too much' water has also caused inconveniences for humans. During our stay, a typhoon passed. Little rainfall would already cause landslides on the steep slopes and mountainous terrain, making it dangerous to walk along the narrow roads. Despite this, humans and water in *Lamut* flow together. Humans and the water in the community always find a way to meet in the middle and maintain the flow.

This study recognizes that more can be explored in similar research such as specifications on water acquisition structures and a more detailed discussion on water quality. These may provide further insight and discourse on how to improve water systems among communities in need.

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