



## The Story of Sebae

*Ata Modo People – Komodo Island, Indonesia*

Years and years ago, on the Indonesian Island of Komodo, there lived a woman called Epa. She was an intelligent and beautiful young woman, so it was not long before she caught the eye of a slender young fisherman named Hami. Not long after, the young man's advances met with Epa's response and, after the two families had made appropriate arrangements, the couple married.

Ten lunar months later, Epa gave birth to twins: a boy, whom they named Ndasas, and a girl, whom they named Ora. But the parents' joy became anguish, for the girl did not look like a human being, but like a lizard.

From the very beginning, Epa and Hami decided to hide their daughter so as not to attract the rejection and scorn of their few neighbours. But secrets cannot be kept for long, and one day when Ora left the house in search of a mouse to eat, she was discovered and Epa and Hami were forced to explain matters.

Finally, in order not to expose Ora to the suffering of marginalisation and social rejection, Epa decided to take her to the forests of the mountains, keeping her away from humans, but caring for her every day until she was able to fend for herself. The twins would never see each other again, and even the memory of each other would be blurred in the hazy images of childhood.

Years passed by and Epa's son, Ndasas, followed in his father's footsteps and became a fisherman, and married and had children.

Meanwhile, Ora, in the forests, became an expert hunter and also had her own offspring.

One day, one of Ndasas sons fell ill, and he went up into the mountains to fetch some medicine for his little boy. However, he ended up getting lost among the trees, until he felt a presence watching him. Suddenly turning around, he found a huge lizard staring at him from a short distance. Ndasas braced himself for the worst and, drawing his machete, displayed his most menacing aspect, hoping that this might scare the lizard away. But the lizard was not deterred, and began to advance slowly towards him.

Just then, a woman stepped between them out of the fronds.

‘Stand still!’ she shouted at them. ‘You are brothers!’

It was Epa, who had followed Ndasas fearing that one day he would meet his sister Ora.

After introducing them, she tearfully explained to Ndasas that when they were still very young, she took Ora into the forest so that no one would bother her and so that she would not harm her neighbours.

‘So she is my other half?’ asked Ndasas bewildered.

‘Yes,’ Epa replied, wiping away her tears. ‘You are twins.’

‘Then from now on, as a sign of respect,’ said Ndasas to his sister, ‘I will call you Sebae, “the other half,” and I will ensure that all my descendants respect you and take care of you and your offspring.’

Thus it was that the Ato Modo people, the descendants of Ndasas, always cared for the huge lizards of their island, the ones we now know as Komodo dragons, considering them their ancestral siblings ever since.

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## Comments

This story, passed down from generation to generation among the few members of the Ato Modo People, tells of the atavistic respect these people have for the Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*), which they reverently call Sebae, ‘the other half,’ as they consider them to be their twins.

This history has given rise to a coexistence, sometimes problematic but always honoured over the centuries, between these large reptiles and the humans who inhabit the island.

The Komodo dragon, which can grow up to ten feet tall and weigh over 200 pounds, is a predator capable of preying on deer, wild boar, horses and even buffalo, as its bite is poisonous. This explains the difficulties of coexistence, especially when these reptiles attack an inhabitant of the island or their livestock. But retaliation, or even condemnation, is rare among the Ato Modos. In fact, there have been no reports of any retaliation against the dragons since 2008 (Panggur, Wijayanti and Ardiantiono, 2023).

Recently, however, the tourism industry is creating serious problems, not only for the dragons, but also for the island's inhabitants. The Indonesian government has decided to make a ‘Jurassic Park’ in the Komodo National Park. The idea involves serious environmental destruction, as well as the resettlement of dragons and human populations, and massive restrictions on fishing, farming and local tour guides. And although the ‘Jurassic Park’ has not yet been built, a new airport has been constructed and new hotels are already being built. This has brought major criticism and protests among the islanders, who have been met with criminalisation by the government and violent repression by the security forces deployed on Komodo (Rainforest Rescue, 2023).

Thanks to Maria Kunde, member of Earth Charter and Rainbow Warriors 3.5 in Germany, for bringing this story to our attention and the problem faced by the Ato Modos with the arbitrariness of the tourism industry.

## Sources

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## Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble - Universal Responsibility: The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

## Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Preamble: Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.



Preamble – Universal Responsibility: To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 1: Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

Principle 4b: Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.

Principle 7: Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

Principle 8b: Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.

Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

The Way Forward: Every individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play.

