



***Amey takod num-a* (Let's go to the garden):  
A rapid ethnography on cut-flower farming  
as a strategy in Sitio Lamut**

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## Introduction

I stood outside Tita Maria's family home as she called out to me, frantically running to a spot where we could see Lamut Elementary School. From afar, we could only make out silhouettes of the elementary class of 2022 and their proud parents. Tita Maria, already in her late 50s, is a grandmother to three graduating students, but could only witness this momentous occasion from a distance because of COVID-19 health protocols. While we waited for her grandchildren to be called on stage, she proudly told me their names and said, "*Ma'am, mga apo ko 'yang ga-graduate. May award sila, pakinggan mo* (Ma'am, those are my grandchildren graduating. They have school awards, listen for them)." Like her grandchildren, Tita Maria also graduated from elementary school way back in the 1970s, but unlike them, she never had the chance to continue her schooling. Tita Maria carried on to become a full-time cut-flower farmer, otherwise known as *gardinero* in Sitio Lamut, to help her mother provide for the family and send her younger siblings to school.

A study by Maria Mercedes Arzadon conducted in the same sitio found that some of the students who dropped out of school, like Tita Maria, pursued a different learning pathway, such as in the administrative sphere or local politics, technical-economic sphere of cut-flower farming, and the Mambunong (village priest-elders) knowledge system.<sup>1</sup> Arzadon focused on two knowledge systems in Sitio Lamut: the Mambunong knowledge system and the public school knowledge system. Taking cues from Arzadon, this paper looks into the local knowledge system that concerns cut-flower farming, also referred to as "gardening" by locals.<sup>2</sup>

Sitio Lamut is a small community in Barangay Beckel, home to Kankanaey, Ibaloi, and Kalanguya-speaking peoples.<sup>3</sup> Most of the barangay's land area is devoted to agricultural use,<sup>4</sup> specifically cut-flower farming, one of the primary means of livelihood in Sitio Lamut. Cut-flower farming is a floriculture business wherein beds of flower plants, like chrysanthemums, roses, anthuriums, and carnations, are cultivated; the

flowers are then cut to be sold and used for decorative purposes.<sup>5</sup> According to the locals, almost everyone in Sitio Lamut is involved in the cut-flower industry. It is one of the many sources of income in the Cordillera Administrative Region. Around 50 million dozen of cut-flowers are annually produced from more than 1,500 hectares of farms.<sup>6</sup>

I was able to conduct participant observation in some greenhouses of Sitio Lamut for a week; and then do interviews through phone calls. While in the field, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven locals, most of whom are *gardineros*, gathered through snowball sampling. I made use of rapid ethnography as a method to collect data. Defined as a "pragmatic strategy that draws on classic ethnographic methods ... [and emphasizes] a quick turnaround of findings",<sup>7</sup> rapid ethnographies have shorter periods of fieldwork. Pseudonyms are used in this paper; some information was also filtered to protect the interlocutors.

I was only able to interview *gardineros* who did not finish a degree in agriculture or any program related to farming. Having the chance to do otherwise might have provided a different perspective on the ways of knowing of locals regarding the cut-flower industry.

In interpreting the data gathered in the field, I was guided by the work of Tim Ingold on correspondence, wherein I tried to follow different lines of beings involved in the cut-flower farming industry, regardless of their animateness, and assessed how *gardineros* correspond to these lines as I tried to tell the story of "human life making a conversation with itself"<sup>8</sup> through thematic analysis. The interpretation of the data gathered was also backed by related literature and studies. The following are the key themes that emerged from the analysis.

## The greenhouse as their classroom and laboratory

The *gardineros* who grew up in Sitio Lamut usually start learning the basics of gardening at a young age. Some of the individuals I encountered told me that when they were younger, their parents would bring

them to the greenhouses or gardens, as the locals refer to them. They would play among their friends in the gardens while their parents worked and from there, even without formal training, they are exposed to what happens inside and eventually learn by watching. Some children do not go to the greenhouses with their parents, but nevertheless still learn how to garden because of how widespread flower farming is throughout the community. According to them, it's not something taught directly, but rather learned through exposure and practice, like a child learning a language.

Those who moved to Sitio Lamut after marrying a local also learn on their own by watching other people in the community, as well as asking their neighbors questions. Although seminars are also held by institutions like the Benguet State University, learning of knowledge or information regarding cut-flower farming is mainly conveyed among the community, through peers and generations of families.

Some of the knowledge learned and shared among residents of Sitio Lamut include technical skills

and techniques for growing and selling flowers. One's familiarity with the seasons, both natural and based on human activity, and knowing how to navigate the changing weather is also important; they refer to it as 'timing' or being able to plant flowers at the right time.

In Sitio Lamut, *gardineros* usually plant three months before events that spike the demand for cut-flowers, such as Flores de Mayo in May and Undas or All Saints' Day in November.

*Gardineros* can also generate their own knowledge through "experiments," such as when they combine different farm inputs to target a variety of pests, undergoing a costly process of trial and error. When new brands are introduced in the market, they also first try the products' effectiveness before fully committing to them. Members of the community also acknowledge the role of scientific knowledge learned through formal educational institutions in providing solutions to some of the problems they face. Concepts taught in seminars or learned through agriculture technicians like the acidity of the soil, and effective



A gardinero carries sticks of bamboo to build a greenhouse

fertilizers and pesticides have been helpful to them. However, *gardineros* filter through information and new developments coming from agriculture experts or technicians and even pesticide companies and do not openly accept them until they are modified and proven effective through their own experiments.

In the interviews I conducted, *gardineros* often emphasized that their gardening practices in the sitio are very different from other cut-flower farming communities in La Trinidad.

*In the garden, “Ikaw na kasi ang professor (You become the professor),” Tito Rolando, a 40-year old gardinero, told me, taking pride in the freedom he has over his garden.*

### **Gardening as an option, a supplement to one’s career**

In Barangay Beckel alone where Sitio Lamut is situated, 19.63% of 194 residents, ages 7 to 21, are recorded to be out of school.<sup>9</sup> This does not include the number of high school graduates who were not able to continue their education to the tertiary level and other adults who stopped schooling. Parallel to this, many of the *gardineros* in the sitio that I met dropped out from high school or college because of various reasons, including financial constraints, lack of motivation, and early marriage; they went on to become *gardineros* and worked in the cut-flower farming industry.

Tita Maria told me about her experiences when she was still in school. She recalled, “[Nung] nag-aral kami Ma’am... wala kaming baon. Wala kaming meryenda. Hindi gaya ngayon. Wala pa kaming tsinelas noon Ma’am ah (When my siblings and I were still in school, we didn’t have allowance. We didn’t have snacks. Unlike now. We didn’t even have slippers back then).” They were able to send some of her siblings to high school, but most of them did not finish high school and none of them were able to go to college because they married early and lacked the motivation to do so or *tinamad na* (got lazy). Other *gardineros* I talked to also expressed that they lacked the motivation to go to school because of the

influence of their friends or *nabarkada* (connotatively, hanging out with the wrong crowd).

Cut flower farming, in these cases, serves as a viable option for those who didn’t finish school. Introduced to gardening at a young age, those who inherited a piece of land built their own greenhouses. Those who weren’t fortunate to have their own rent pieces of land from other locals or are supplied or loaned capital by other *gardineros* or *arawan/pordiya* (hired and paid for a day). One *gardinero* described gardening as a “blessing” because it allows them to make a good living, despite not finishing their undergraduate degree.

Those who were able to finish college still work in the flower farming industry; others leave their jobs entirely because of how profitable the industry is. This is supported by Sharma who explained that “the business of cut-flowers is a promising and lucrative one” – revenue can reach up to a million, with costs incurred only totaling approximately 19%.<sup>10</sup> According to Tita Maria, if one’s work pays less than PHP 50,000.00 they are better off gardening flowers for a living. But it is important to note that she is speaking from the perspective of someone who owns multiple greenhouses.

I was also able to meet other *gardineros* who graduated from college and did not pursue a job related to their program, but instead went on to work in the cut-flower farming industry. Even some individuals who the community would label as ‘professionals’ also work in the industry, either as *gardineros*, cultivating their own flowers, or as suppliers, investing in and supplying other *gardineros*. In particular, I secured an interview with one lawyer in Sitio Lamut, whom I will call Atty. Reyes. Other *gardineros* told me that Atty. Reyes is *masipag* or hard-working because he goes to their family’s garden from time to time despite working full time as a lawyer. He explained that he works at the garden and supplies *gardineros* because the industry is profitable and is an avenue for him to earn more. Similar sentiments were shared by Tita Dina, a 31-year old *gardinero* and a married mother of two.

*“Alam naman natin dito sa Pilipinas na mababa ang sahurang. Tapos ang mamahal ng bilingin. Hindi puwedeng hindi ka mag-garden. Kung sa amin lang ha, kailangan namin ng dalawang source of income (We know that here in the Philippines, income is low. But the prices are high. It is impossible not to work in the gardens. For us, we need two sources of income).”*

In 2018, the living wage, according to Caritas Manila executive director Fr. Anton Pascual was 20,000 pesos, which is more than 90% of Filipinos make in a month.<sup>11</sup> This is also one of the reasons why Tita Dina wants her children to learn how to garden. “Just in case [something happens], *alam nilang magtrabaho para sa sarili nila* (they know how to work and can fend for themselves),” she explained.

### **Gardineros as gamblers**

Although cut flower farming is the community’s main source of income and is very profitable, it is still subject to uncertainty. Even a *batido* (experienced) *gardinero* who is supposed to have mastered gardening is at risk of loss. This is why *gardineros* think of gardening as *sugal* or gambling. Although they take calculated risks by ‘timing’ and using effective farm inputs, it is sometimes pure luck as they navigate through uncontrollable factors like the weather, the changing market, and the rising price of farm inputs.

According to the *gardineros*, one of their primary concerns when farming is the unpredictable weather. One typhoon and everything they worked hard for in the garden might all be *basura* or garbage since they can no longer sell it. There were cases when heavy rains, strong winds and landslides, destroyed their flowers and greenhouses. Moreover, the growth of flowers is sensitive to weather, even if not totally damaged by natural calamities, its quality may be affected, resulting in reduced value.

Calamities are expected to worsen over time because of climate change.<sup>12</sup> Over the past years, it has become more evident that the number of storms and typhoons that hit the Philippines have grown progressively each year and are becoming more destructive.<sup>13</sup> The flower farmers of Sitio Lamut are in a vulnerable position. As Douglas Nakashima et al. explained,<sup>14</sup> indigenous and marginalized populations are sensitive to the effects of climate change because of their resource-based livelihoods.

Aside from the changing weather, the two major challenges faced by the *gardineros* are the rising prices of farm inputs, and the unpredictability of the flower market. Tito Rolando told me that their expenses for gardening have increased over time, for example, the price of one sack of fertilizer



A *gardinero* diligently sprays pesticide over their flowers



tripled over the pandemic. On top of that, *gardineros* also struggle with the unreliability of prices. According to those who sell their produce, the market is really unpredictable and changes every day. For example, even if the flowers are in demand and can be sold at 200 to 250 pesos per dozen on that day, the price may suddenly drop the following day. This is exacerbated by lack of access to information of some *gardineros* who sell their produce to middlemen at much lower prices.

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected the *gardineros*. The demand for flowers suddenly came to a halt because of the lockdowns that hindered the flow of ‘non-essential’ goods from the sitio to markets. The provincial agriculturist of Benguet Lolita Bentrez stated that among the farmers, those who were engaged in cut-flower farming were the ones affected the most during the pandemic.<sup>15</sup> Some of the *gardineros* I talked to went bankrupt during the onset of the pandemic and were, halfway through 2022, just starting to recover. “*Basura lahat ng bulaklak noon* (All the flowers then were garbage),” Tito Rolando recalled the events from 2020. He decided to take a break from gardening then and instead worked in construction. Other *gardineros* also did the same. Tita Maria switched to planting potted plants and succulents, and sold these online; they even rented a place to start a small business and sell snacks to *gardineros*. Tita Dina, on the other hand, put up their greenhouses and store in Dangwa for rent while she worked part-time as an online seller.

Apart from the aforementioned threats, the *gardineros* have no land security. Since Sitio Lamut is situated within the premises of the Busol Watershed Reservation, they cannot claim it as ancestral domain. This problem is also reflected in a study by Padmapani Perez along with BUKLURAN or the Philippine ICCA Consortium<sup>16</sup> where they investigated the overlap between conservation areas and ancestral domains all around the Philippines, highlighting the conflicts with implementing current laws dedicated to protect both the rights of indigenous peoples and the environment.

Tita Dina expressed her worries about the possibility of being relocated. With the ongoing road developments in the sitio and their lack of formal land titles, they might be forced to leave their homes just along Shilan-Beckel Road.

## Conclusion

Before going into this study, I wanted to prove that cut-flower farming as a knowledge system is a “safe” alternative to formal education and can provide a stable livelihood for the *gardineros* of Sitio Lamut, especially for those who were not able to finish formal education. However, I learned that gardening is also *sugal* or gambling. *Gardineros* are “both very prepared and

completely unprepared for what is to come”.<sup>17</sup>

Even if *gardineros* take calculated risks, with the emerging effects of climate change, the precarity of prices of both inputs and produce, and the threat of losing their land, they may be left with nothing. Still, *gardineros* take their chance and gamble. Equipped with knowledge cultivated over the years, the value of hard work, and grit, it’s a risk they’re willing to take to get by and achieve their aspirations – for their children to finish higher education. All the *gardineros* I interviewed aspire for their children to graduate from college and earn diplomas, even if they choose to work in the gardens later on. According to Tito Rolando, “*Kung successful...[ang gardinero], hindi lang naman sa garden [makikita], pati ‘yung sa mga bata, kung may nakapag-aral* (If a *gardinero* is successful, you won’t see it just in their garden but also in their children who are able to finish school).”

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