

Introduction

The main source of livelihood for the residents of Barangay Bahong is farming. They developed their farming practices across generations that went through various changes and shifts. They used to cultivate rice, but shifted to vegetable farming and later on, to rose production because the latter demanded less labor and was more profitable and logistically convenient for the farmers.¹ Another change introduced in farms was the construction of greenhouses that rehabilitate plants during disasters.² Not only do these greenhouses improve the farmers' produce but also empower them in the process by allowing them to grow the flowers according to their personal preferences and practices.³ There have also been recent developments in their farming practices after the introduction of greenhouses.

Beyond producing flowers, Bahong farmers have also opened their farms to tourists. Colting-Pulumbarit et. al state that agriculture is one of the primary economic drivers of La Trinidad which supports trade and manufacturing along with tourism.⁴ The municipality's flower industry has explored opportunities beyond selling cut-flowers, with some farms venturing into agritourism⁵. Many local and non-local visitors flock to eco-parks and farms to view landscaped flowers and potted plants, implying that the municipality is an active participant in the agritourism industry of the Philippines. Flower farmers transform their flower farms into tourist sites⁶ to cope with the decline in demand for flowers due to unfortunate weather conditions—and in the present context, to the changes brought about by the pandemic. In addition, they also utilize new technologies such as the internet to set up e-commerce platforms and widen their market reach.⁷ Belmer Elis, who is the former Barangay Chairperson of Bahong and current councilor of La Trinidad, said that of all farmers in the municipality, flower growers are the most compromised sector during this pandemic because flower shop operations and social gatherings involving flowers such as cemetery visits and the Panagbenga Festival halted⁸.

Our study with the flower farming community of

Bahong was conducted at a time when the Philippines was gradually reopening its businesses, transportation, travel, and other services since the global COVID-19 pandemic started. We wanted to find out how the pandemic and its effects (policies, economic, health, and personal), have (re)contoured the flow of materials within and beyond flower farms, as well as how the people in Bahong navigated their way through the changing nature of the industry.

This study is anchored on Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT)⁹ and Ingold's¹⁰ theory on correspondence. In Latour's ANT, sociological and technological factors—both humans and non-humans—participate in the formation of assemblages or networks through their interactions, which then leads to a realization of a certain phenomenon¹¹. By utilizing ANT in our research, we frame both the members of the flower farming community and the materials needed to sustain the industry as actants, and each of them act as a node of equal value in the networks. Here, the interactions between and among the social and more-than-social networks of the flower farmers of Bahong are essential in the operation and maintenance of the locality's floriculture industry.

As we probed into the flower farmers' networks involving other members of the floriculture industry and non-human actors, we also looked into the "correspondences" that provided room for uncertainties. By using Ingold's theory on correspondence¹², we explored how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected how the members of the flower farming community correspond to each other and how it recontoured their practices in response to uncertainty. We use these two frameworks to get a clearer picture of how the pandemic sets, limits, and provides opportunities for flower growers in Bahong, La Trinidad through flower production and agritourism.

This study is supported by archival documents gathered by our colleagues and personal observations during our Anthropology Field School, which was held from June 24 to July 9, 2022. During our fieldwork, we employed ethnographic methods, particularly

participant observation, key informant interviews (KIIs), and ethnographic mapping. Given the strategic location of our lodging, which was adjacent to a greenhouse and walking distance from other farms, we were able to observe their day-to-day activities and even got invited join in their social gatherings. Ate Lea, the niece of the owner of our lodging, was the one who introduced us to the other members of the flower farming community, most of whom are her relatives and friends.

Scheduled KIIs were conducted with eight flower farm collaborators on-site and observations of the spatial aspect of their farms were recorded on maps. Online interviews via Zoom were also conducted on a case-to-case basis since there were some instances where this was the only available medium for some research respondents. As part of our data analysis, we used Bernard's Interpretive Analysis¹³ to find meanings and interconnections from the observations recorded in our field notes. On the other hand, we analyzed the transcripts of our KIIs using Narrative Analysis, where we documented the regularities and divergences in how our collaborators made sense of their experiences. From this, we developed recurring themes by grouping and analyzing similar motifs together. Our collaborators' identities are concealed using pseudonyms.

Going outside: Entangled connections

Flower farming is a social process involving entangled connections between and among farmers, distributors, transporters, consumers, and other actors in the floriculture industry.

During our fieldwork in Bahong, we met Ate Mae, Mang Jun, Mang Agosto, and Ate April, as well as mother-daughter Nanay Daisy and Ate Lilac. Their ages range from 48-58 years old and all of them have practiced farming since childhood. They farms that are within the vicinity of each other. These flower farmers who collaborated with us work in distinct farm arrangements including (1) a monocrop black net farm, (2) a greenhouse with multiple varieties, (3) a bi-crop open space garden, and (4) two hybrid farms (cut-flower

farms reshaped into tourist farms). To glean more information about Bahong's agritourism sector, we interviewed Ate April, Nanay Daisy, and Ate Lilac since their farms were converted into eco-parks for visitors. Although both Ate April and Ate Lilac graduated with non-agriculture-related degrees, they both pursued flower farming as a profession. We were also able to interview one tourist named Rose who visited Ate April's farm in February 2022, which allowed us to gain the perspective of an agritourism consumer.

In this study, we see the interdependencies of the flower farmers of Bahong and their overlapping roles with other stakeholders while also considering the wider networks that facilitate or disrupt the movement of materials within and beyond the floriculture industry.

The paper begins by describing the nexus of flower production in Bahong, characterized by interwoven social networks that go beyond the barangay, and the narrative goes back to Bahong when tourists visited the area as the COVID-19 pandemic struck the barangay's flower production.

Nexus

The tight-knit flower farming community in Bahong, built upon the relationships of closely acquainted and biologically-related farmers, facilitates the flow of materials and social connections within the local farms. For instance, some farmers including Ate Mae, Mang Jun, and Ate April are able to source their plants from fellow farmers on neighboring farms. According to, Ate Mae, "*Nakuha ko ang mother plant ng anthurium kay [Albert Jose (alias)] sa Tomay. Kapitbahay, kapitgarden ko siya!*" (I received the anthurium's mother plant from Albert Jose at Tomay. We were neighbors and gardenmates!)

Once they acquired a few mother plants for a specific flower variety, they would grow them and propagate cuttings for planting new ones. "*Noong una, binili ko 'yan [mother plant] sa mga katulad kong nagtatanim*

[ng bulaklak]. Ito [poinsettia], binili ko sa Puyat farm do'n sa Irisan, sa Trinidad. Pero noong lumaki na 'yong mother plant, pinaparami na lang' (Initially, I bought [the mother plant] from other flower farmers like myself. I bought this [poinsettia] from Puyat farm in Irisan, La Trinidad. And when the mother plant grew, we just recultivated it), explained by Mang Jun. This practice allows them to produce more flowers using *semilya* (cuttings) from mother plants' stems without having to buy seeds from suppliers regularly.

While some farm materials are bought or acquired locally, other products originate from overseas. Flower farmers often use their connections (usually involving brokers or agents) to access these sources. For example, Ate Mae has a Filipino technician-supplier who works in a Taiwanese seed corporation. This same company supplies Ate April's seeds alongside other seed dealers from Japan. Mang Agosto acquires plants from Bangkok, Thailand through a broker from Baguio, whom he refers to as his *suki*: *"[Galing] Bangkok, Thailand yung gumamela [at] yung ibang pitimini. May suki kaming taga-Baguio na mag-aabroad doon tapos kumukuha ng bulaklak [tapos] ibebenta nila [nang mas mahal]"* (The gumamela was from Bangkok, Thailand. We have a suki from Baguio who goes abroad, sources flowers, and sells them here at a higher price).

In some instances, this supplier-buyer relationship is reversed, and the farmers become the supplier of grown plants while their original suppliers become their buyers. Mang Agosto explained that his *suki* from Baguio, who sources mother plants from Thailand, also buys potted plants from his farm at discounted prices, and then resells them at the Orchidarium.

On the other hand, commercial products and equipment for farming such as agrochemicals and raw materials for constructing farms can be bought from local farm supplies and hardware shops. Additionally, Ate April purchases materials from places outside Bahong such as Nueva Ecija, Pangasinan, and Manila through her relatives.

Outflows

Bahong flower farmers expand their social networks beyond the locality as some materials move from and within the farm to areas outside La Trinidad, such as Baguio, Manila, Quezon City, Cebu, Batangas, Tagaytay, Bulacan, Pampanga, Pangasinan, Bicol, and Bataan. Notably, almost all flower producers in Bahong bring their products to Dimasalang Flower Market in Sampaloc, Manila. Other common *bagsakan* (bulk market) of these flowers are the Strawberry Farm in La Trinidad and the Orchidarium in Baguio.

Bahong's reputation as a flower farming community allows the farmers to secure buyers and reach new potential customers. As Mang Jun explained, *"Alam nilang itong Bahong, talagang taniman ng mga bulaklak, kasi 'yong mga tanim namin, pumupunta sa Dimasalang. Kaya nalaman nilang dito nanggaling 'yong mga tanim na bulaklak."* (They know that Bahong is a flower farming area because our flowers are taken to Dimasalang. That's how they found out that the flowers came from here.)

The flower farmers' access to different areas outside Bahong, as well as infrastructures and material resources either promotes or impedes their relationship with other social agents in the floriculture industry. For instance, access to electronic devices such as phones and the internet allows them to maintain communication with their buyers from distant places amid lockdowns. *"Tinetext nila ako pag magdedeliver [ng potted plants]. Matagal na kaming ganito magtrabaho"* (They text me when they deliver [potted plants]. We have been doing this for a long time), added Mang Agosto. Similarly, access to trucking and to flower shops also play a key role in facilitating the flow of flowers from the farm to the market. For Ate Mae and Mang Agosto, having trucking access is an advantage because it allows them to sell their flowers when direct buyers are unable to visit Bahong.

In contrast, the lack of trucking access put Mang Jun at a disadvantage because customers rarely visited his farm during the pandemic and his potted plants' sales remained stagnant. *"Noong malakas ang pitimini, nagdedeliver ako sa Batangas, Tagaytay, at Strawberry Farm"*

kasi may truck ako noon. Pero noong nakapag-asawa na 'yong mga anak ko, binenta ko na 'yong truck' (When pitiminis were booming, I would deliver to Batangas, Tagaytay, and Strawberry Farm because I had a truck back then. But when my children got married, I sold the truck), he explained. However, having no trucking access does not always equal a loss of income and connections with clients. Since Ate April converted her land to a tourist farm, she no longer needs to harvest and transport most of her flowers. She continues to earn money even without trucking access, and her relationships with buyers are not necessarily affected. Farmers often told us that trucks could be a liability in some cases because of their costly maintenance.

Here, we see that the flower farmers' social networks are not bound to Bahong as they build and maintain relationships with contacts outside the locality. Moreover, it is important to note that the networks do not flow neatly in a unidirectional path; rather, they branch out, get temporarily disrupted, or get totally cut off at some nodes due to certain socioeconomic variables (e.g., (non)access to materials and infrastructures).

Coming in: Cases of tourist influx

With the overflow of flowers, the farmers of Barangay Bahong were compelled to alter to their farms to accommodate their income needs. They ventured into agritourism and opened their doors to people who were interested in viewing their gardens.

The emergence of the two agritourism farms in Barangay Bahong can be attributed to various factors. Both viewing farms were opened in the midst of COVID-19, and their development is closely associated with the pandemic-related challenges experienced by the farmers. As a response, the owners of the two sites actively created opportunities out of their crisis moments by transforming their farms into tourist destinations. Instead of focusing only on cut-flowers, some of the farmers reshaped their gardens into recreational spaces for agritourism.

In the case of Nanay Daisy and Ate Lilac's Farm,

for instance, the death of their loved one at the height of the pandemic became the primary crisis moment that ultimately led to the establishment of their agritourist park. When Daisy's husband died, she and her daughter Lilac coped with their loss by reconstructing their greenhouse into an open-air landscape of flowers and potted plants. This kept them busy and distracted from their feelings of grief. *"Dun kami nagcope syempre [sa] pagkawala ng isang ama. Especially my mom kasi close sila. Mas lalo siyang na-busy, kaya medyo hindi naman siya nadepress na masyado"* (That's how we coped after losing a father. Especially my mom since they were close. She was busy, that's why she didn't get so depressed), Ate Lilac explained.

Ate April's Farm emerged out of crisis moments related to the economic conditions of the flower farming industry amid COVID-19.

According to April, there was low demand for cut-flowers due to restrictions brought on by the virus, consequently leading to flower oversupply on her farm. To avoid letting the flowers go to waste, Ate April decided to open her farm to visitors who were interested in viewing the towering sunflowers, potted plants, and other floral varieties in their vast garden. *"Kasi nga last year, masasayang lang yung sunflower namin. Marami kasi 'to. Lahat to sunflower: Mula sa baba hanggang sa taas, sunflower lahat. Oversupply siya noong May para sa Mother's Day, kaya naisipan ko na lang buksan ng tourist spot."* (Last year, our flowers were going to go to waste. There used to be a lot of these: From bottom to top, all of these were sunflowers. They was an oversupply from last May's Mother's Day, which was why I decided to open this as a tourist spot), Ate April told us. Even though Ate April's farm is marketed as a sunflower viewing eco-park, several other flowers also bloom in her landscape garden, perhaps because of correspondence between Ate April and her suppliers of seedlings who often provide and offer numerous flower options for her to try.

To keep their agritourist farms alive and

functioning, certain strategies are taken by the farmers to ensure a continuous stream of visitors. Promotion through external networks, for instance, plays a vital role in the development and continuation of the farmers' agritourist business. These networks are composed of family members, relatives, friends, government officials, internet personalities, and even some of the tourists who visit the farms.

With the help of these connections, Bahong's tourist farms are able to generate visitors through promotional strategies generally conducted online, such as on social media, particularly on Facebook. For example, Ate April's daughters assisted in promoting the farm on social media before officially opening their doors to tourists in May 2021. For Nanay Daisy and Ate Lilac's farm, they told us about a relative of theirs, who happens to be a vlogger and an online seller, who mentioned the agritourism garden in a video available to their online followers. Ate Lilac also mentioned how some tourists post about their farm visits, which helped in the farm's online visibility. Similarly, Ate April mentioned bloggers who explore their flower gardens and post about their trips on their respective platforms.

Our findings also revealed that the local government unit (LGU) extends its assistance through promotion. The Barangay Hall, for example, posts about these farms on its own Facebook page. There were also instances where the previous Barangay Kapitan informed his external networks about the agritourism gardens after they were first developed. Ate Lilac also mentioned the time when the government-run television network, PTV, visited and featured the eco-park on their official Facebook account. Nanay Daisy also recounted how some student researchers visited their park to obtain data about the plants on their flower farm. In exchange for this knowledge, Nanay Daisy asked the students to promote the farm on their social media. "*Sabi namin, 'O sige, pagbibigyan kayo, pwede kayo pumasok pero ipromote ninyo.' Kaya nakita namin, ito yung pagpromote ng mga estudyanteng bumisita dito*" (We said, 'Okay, we will grant your request, we'll let you enter but you have to promote our farm.' That's how we saw, this

is how the students who visited promoted [the farm]).

As we can see, the farms' visitors often come from different demographics.

According to Nanay Daisy and Ate Lilac's observation, the peak season of the eco-parks in their community is usually during weekends or long weekends (holidays of three or four days from Friday or Saturday to Sunday or Monday) as well as the months of September to December, and February. According to Ate April, she also welcomed several visitors during May 2021 and June 2022 on her farm, including under the rainy season.

Rose, a tourist, shared with us her experience of visiting Ate April's Farm in February 2022 with her mother (who she labels as a "plantita," or a plant enthusiasts) and her dog. This trip was a result of a correspondence between the pandemic surge (which moved their Baguio trip intended for her dog from January to February), her tight schedule, and her hotel's recommendation. Ate April's farm was just an hour's drive from Baguio, informing Rose and her mother's decision to visit. Rose explained "*I wanted to take [my dog] kasi to like, a farm-ish area. Alam mo yun, just because he likes nature. So, medyo pinagsawaan ang Camp John Hay, and the hotel we were staying at, they basically recommended yung sunflower farm.*" (I wanted to take [my dog] to like, a farm-ish area. You know, just because he likes nature. So, we kind of got tired of Camp John Hay, and the hotel we were staying at, they basically recommended the sunflower farm.) Rose shares that she and her mother did not specifically prepare for their farm trip aside from bringing her dog's essentials. Although she felt that the farm could be more comfortable for senior citizens if it had benches aside from a swinging chair, her overall experience was good, and the farm's accommodation of tourists exceeded her expectations. She called it a highlight of her trip.

Different kinds of people visit the farms of Bahong for different reasons which may include beyond-human relations as seen in the case of Rose. Tourists often visit on days when there is no work or school, and most come from nearby provinces. The

area's proximity to Baguio City, a tourist spot, could also be one reason why a lot of tourists visit these farms aside from the scenery and weather.

Disruption and redirection

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the livelihood of farmers as social and mobility restrictions resulted in low demand for flowers and a markdown of their prices. Policies enforced to contain the virus also restricted farmers' access to their regular social networks. However, the gradual easing of the restrictions allowed some of them to continue their daily livelihood and come up with future plans to restructure their farm, pursue new plant varieties, and pass down their land to their children as inheritance.

Ate Mae describes the current flow of flowers as "*matumal*" or slow-moving. The oversupply of flowers, with few buyers also affects the farmers' mental health. "*Minsan matumal kaya na-over na, hindi fast-moving lalo na ngayong pandemic kaya stressed ang mga tao, mababaliw kasi walang ume-entra*" (Sometimes it's slow that's why there's over[supply], it's not fast-moving especially now with the pandemic that's why people are stressed, going crazy because there's nothing coming in), she explained. This sentiment is shared by Mang Jun: "*Alam ninyo, ang problema namin na farmer ngayon na pandemya, wala nang bumibili. Kagaya ngayon oh, walang dumating na bumili. Dati [bago magpandemya], araw-araw meron, pero ngayon wala na. Kaya parang gusto ko ihinto na ito,*" (You know, the problem that us farmers have now with the pandemic is that no one is buying from us anymore. Back then [before the pandemic], every day we had buyers, but now there are none. That's why I'm considering just stopping the business). He also added that his customers would usually buy in bulk pre-pandemic—around 300 to 400 pots—but now, they would only buy as few as 70 pots.

As the farmers continue to suffer from excess flowers low demand, they had to mark down the prices of their products. For instance, Mang Jun could sell a pot of his most prestigious rose called "Bleeding Heart" for as high as 400 pesos before the pandemic. Today,

he would only sell this and his other potted plants (e.g. poinsettias and pitiminis) for as low as 25 to 40 pesos each. Mang Agosto also shared that he marked down the prices of his potted plants, but not low enough to incur financial losses. "*Ngayon, 30 pesos 'yong maliit na potted [pitimini roses], 60 pesos 'yong malaki pero hindi naman nalulugi. Dati, mas mahal*" (Now, a small pot of pitimini roses is 30 pesos, and a large pot is 60 pesos but still not at a loss. The prices were much higher then).

The lockdowns and strict mobility restrictions imposed also affected their relationships with their *suki* or regular buyers. "*Merong suki namin dito taga-Bulacan. Twenty years na sa akin pero ngayon matanda na, ayaw nang palusutin dito sa Baguio, sa Trinidad [dahil sa COVID-19 border restrictions]. Pati yung asawa niya, sila ang magkasamang pumupunta dito sa bahay*" (We have a regular patron from Bulacan. They've been my customers for 20 years, but now that they're older, they're not allowed to go through Baguio or to Trinidad [because of COVID-19 border restrictions]. Even the spouse, they used to come to my house together), Mang Agosto explained.

While the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the flower farmers in Bahong, some of the flower farmers still found a silver lining. For instance, Mang Agosto liked the idea that some people have shifted to a work-from-home setup because it provided them extra time to tend to their home garden. The rise in the number of *plantitos* and *plantitas* in recent years provided them hope that their flowers from their home garden would be in demand again.

Many tourists visited the flower farms in Bahong in the hopes of coping with the stress of the pandemic, which was why agritourism grew in Barangay Bahong. Bahong's agritourism farms now stand as loci of economic and aspirational capital gains, the most obvious being how these serve as an income source for both Ate Lilac and Ate April. Both wish that their children would someday inherit the farms, although they have emphasized how this is not something they would forcefully impose, out of respect for the autonomy of their children. "*If they want. Hindi*

mo naman pwede pilitin ang bata diba? Somehow syempre, wish namin as parents ay sana one of them magmamamange. Pero not literally yung ‘Dapat ikaw dito!’ (If they want. You can’t force a child right? Somehow, of course, we parents wish that one of them would one day manage [the business]. But not in a literal sense of ‘You have to be here [on the farm]!’), Ate Lilac explained. Ate April, since opening the farm, has achieved her aspiration of entertaining a lot of tourists, while Ate Lilac’s dream of opening her cafeteria came true with her farm. They still hope to improve their farms in terms of facilities and/or plant offerings. *“Siyempre gusto kong maimprove ‘to; ma-develop talaga. Mula dito hanggang diyana, dapat lahat flowers hanggang diyana sa baba. Syempre ano gusto kong ma-upgrade ito. May mga plants din ako na gustong i-upgrade, gusto kong i-put up pa dito. Syempre, hindi ko pangarap na magremain as is. So may mga upgradings na gusto kong gawin.”* (Of course, I want this to improve, to have it really develop. From here until there, it should all be flowers until there at the bottom. Of course, I want to upgrade this. There are also some plants that I want to upgrade, that I want to put up here. Of course, I don’t dream of letting it remain as is. So there are upgrades that I want make), Ate April explained.

In spite of the pandemic, working on their farms offered a sense of happiness and fulfillment for both; Ate April feels joy in the presence of tourists while Ate Lilac enjoys working with her plants.

The farms in Bahong have always represented the goals and aspirations of the farmers who made use of available tools and resources to achieve them. But the COVID-19 pandemic is what reshaped these goals and aspirations into what they are today.

Conclusion

Flower farming is a social process that interface with sociopolitical, economic, and environmental conditions within and beyond Bahong. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, conditions of uncertainty set

limitations for the flower farms in the locality, which in turn, disrupted the flow of materials and their networks. But even in times of precarity, flower farmers were able to adapt and formulate new strategies in order to survive in the floriculture industry, creating new opportunities that eventually led to the recontouring of the farms into agritourist parks. New networks were formed from the development of Bahong’s agritourism sector, which helped the farmers reconstruct and later on achieve the goals and aspirations they had for their farms.

Perhaps for future research, the status of the flower farms can be explored in the context of post-pandemic conditions, to investigate potential avenues for change in Bahong’s agritourism.

Endnotes

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