

# From Source (Bahong) to *Bagsakan* (Dangwa): Tracing the flow of cut-flowers, agents, and local knowledge

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Flowers travelling from Bahong to Dangwa (Photo by Dale Mercurio)

## Introduction

Flowers are versatile in that they can have different kinds of functions, such as in celebration during birthdays, graduation, and anniversaries, as well as to be given as sympathy flowers at wakes and funerals. Filipinos usually buy flowers for occasions such as Valentines Day, and Mother's Day, as well as when visiting deceased loved ones in cemeteries during *Undas*. The prices usually increase around these seasons<sup>1,2</sup> when there is high demand for flowers.

Annually, about 53 million dozen cut flowers are produced from flower farms in the Cordillera Administrative Region.<sup>3</sup> In the municipality of La Trinidad in Benguet, specifically, vegetable farming has been replaced with flower-planting because the farmers find flower-farming relatively more profitable.<sup>4</sup> They produced about 17 million metric tons of flowers in 2012.<sup>5</sup> One of its barangays, Barangay Bahong, is known as the "Rose Capital of the Philippines."<sup>6</sup> Located about 10 kilometers away from Baguio City, Bahong sits in the southwestern part of La Trinidad, Benguet. About 82% of the land used in Bahong is dedicated to agriculture.<sup>7</sup> Barangay Bahong was originally a farming settlement that focused on producing vegetables. After some time, many of the vegetable farmers shifted their plots to accommodate flowers and sold those instead.

One of the main markets for cut-flowers from Benguet is about 254 kilometers from Barangay Bahong by road.<sup>8</sup> The Dangwa flower market is located in the streets of Dos Castillas and Dimasalang in Sampaloc, Manila. It has been the *bagsakan* (delivery place) of flowers that come from Benguet since the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> In the early days of Dangwa, farmers from Benguet were the only suppliers of flowers. Manila locals sold the product, which meant that farmers relied on whatever prices were set by the sellers. Eventually, the farmers decided to sell their own products, entrusting their harvest to their children or relatives to sell in Dangwa. Some vendors grew up in the trade, helping their families sell flowers. By the 2000s, many farmers and their families had already set up shop in Dangwa, expanding the flower market to what it is today.

There are systems in place that aid in the movement and distribution of flowers to the various parts of the country. This research traces the flow and non-flow of flowers and people from Barangay Bahong, the source, to Dangwa as the market.

Hoping to shed light on the flower industry in the country, including challenges and opportunities during uncertain times, this study looks into the distribution, networks, and mobilities of flowers and people between Barangay Bahong and Dangwa, as well as the expansion of local knowledge among farmers and vendors. Conducted at the flower farms in Bahong and flower shops in Dangwa, this study also includes an overview of the relationships among farmers, shop owners, shopkeepers, florists, and customers, to demonstrate how the mobility of the flowers and networks of people cannot be separated. The study also aims to provide insight into the experiences of the people both in Barangay Bahong and Dangwa during the COVID-19 pandemic and how it might have shaped transactions and correspondences in each area that affected the networks and realities in both the farm and flower market.

Specifically, this paper aims to answer the following questions: First, how is local knowledge on flower production (re)configured in the context of material (im)mobility from Bahong, La Trinidad, Benguet to Dangwa, Manila and vice versa? Second, what are the ramifications of local knowledge under varying conditions? In terms of materials? In terms of pre and post-pandemic conditions? For whom is local knowledge?

The research was conducted from June to July for the 2022 Anthropology Field School in Barangay Bahong and Dangwa. Participant and field observations were used to immerse in the community. Although we mainly conducted informal interviews as a means to build trust and confidence, we were able to gather data useful to our study. After establishing a good relationship with our key informants who we identified through community mapping and word-of-mouth, we started conducting formal and recorded interviews

with the farmers and sellers. Given the time constraints, we relied on snowball methods and referrals from informants to gain key informants. The recorded audio from interviews were transcribed to organize data and categorize them into themes that could be easily analyzed and presented.

In total, we interviewed four farmers in Bahong, four shop owners from Benguet, one on-call shopkeeper, and one florist/flower arranger. The cold climate, inclement weather, and unfamiliar geographical landscape of the area all contributed to difficulty in conducting research in Bahong. In Dangwa, five interviews and one follow-up interview were also done to triangulate data obtained from field notes and informal interviews.

This research draws concepts from Ingold's correspondences, Latour's Actor-Network Theory, and Ford's Embodied Cultural Ecologies (ECE). Correspondence is a process, open-ended, and dialogical. Social life itself, according to Ingold, is a tangled mesh of correspondences.<sup>10</sup> In tracing the social life of flowers, we also trace their correspondences and continuously conduct an anthropological inquiry into why things are the way they are.

Latour's Actor-Network Theory views actors as humans and non-human agents whose importance in understanding social life<sup>11</sup> is found within the networks among the actors. In the case of this research, flowers and other related materiality such as transporting materials are considered.

Embodied Cultural Ecologies shows that there is an interconnection between the people and their environment, suggesting that people are situated deeply in their environment and at the same time, function as environments themselves.<sup>12</sup>

With these as a collective framework, the research explores local knowledge in flower production by examining the relationship between farmers of Barangy Bahong and their environment demonstrated in the movement of local flowers to the flower market in Dangwa, including the networks, relations, and transactions involved in selling flowers.

### Local knowledge

The flower farmers of Bahong generate local knowledge through their actions and social interactions. Most of the farmers have come across the practices of their families and community but, in the process, devised techniques and methods that suit their needs and goals. The engagements that the farmers and sellers are involved in, including challenges and opportunities in contemporary life, from within and outside their communities, have expanded their local knowledge.

The results and discussion presented here are organized mainly under two categories: the source, which covers the fieldwork in the flower farms in Bahong, and the *bagsakan*, which covers the fieldwork in Dangwa.



Fig. 1. A field of flowers in Brgy, Bahong, La Trinidad





### ***The source***

There are two types of places where flowers are planted in the community: inside a protective greenhouse or left outside with no protection (see Fig. 1). When asked, Manang Natalie, 38, said: “[M]as matibay ang roses. Yung tangkay niya mas matigas. Ito [malaysian mums] pwede sa outside pag hindi tag-ulan, pero more on greenhouse siya.” ([R]oses are sturdier. Their stems are harder. These [malaysian mums] are okay outside if it’s not the rainy season, but they’re usually in greenhouses).

In addition to Malaysian mums, poinsettias and anthuriums are also grown inside greenhouses because they are high maintenance. Poinsettias need to turn red at the right time, otherwise, they will wilt and cannot be sold. This is why Mang Antonio, 71, manipulates their growth by turning the lights on inside the greenhouse at night, preventing the leaves from prematurely turning red. Anthuriums have their own dedicated greenhouses in Bahong where black nets shroud the plot to limit the amount of sunlight the plant receives. Once the plants are ready, they are moved to an adequately shaded area to allow the flowers to finally bloom.

When it comes to the storage and handling of the flowers before transport, the farmers have their own methods born from local knowledge. Despite roses having sturdy stems, they need more care during transport. Farmers need to make sure that the styrofoam boxes (see Fig. 2) that contain roses are cooled. Ice is usually packed with the flowers to ensure that they do not bloom earlier than intended. Otherwise, the roses will start to wilt and cannot be sold. The porters have to be extremely careful when handling the boxes. They cannot just throw them around because the flowers inside may shift, get damaged, and not survive the trip from farm to market. Styrofoam box coolers are also reported to be expensive, starting at around 1500 pesos each, so handling each one with care is important in order to make them last and survive more trips.

Mang Antonio used to own a truck that would aid them in transporting these flowers. However, as per Mang Antonio, he sold it when his children got married. It seems that owning a truck isn’t an immediate requirement for their family. There are also additional costs and fees that come with owning and maintaining their own truck; a problem when one’s income is seasonal. Instead, they employ a third-party trucking company that would go around the community every day to pick up boxes of flowers and deliver them from Bahong to Dangwa (see Fig. 3). The costs are also minimized by organizing the box coolers at the back of the truck according to what flower suited each cooler. Styrofoam boxes offer more protection, but cost more to transport (around 360 pesos per box). Roses and anthuriums are stored in the styrofoam boxes since they need to be handled



**Fig. 2.** Styrofoam coolers used in storing flowers for transport

with care. The cardboard box is cheaper to transport (around 180 pesos per box), which can be used for flowers that do not need special handling. Malaysian mums are known to survive transport in cardboard boxes. These costs are significantly lower for farmers, specifically in view of permits, maintenance and labor costs, toll fees, and fuel which cost tens of thousands of pesos.

These knowledge and practices are continuously curated by the farmers and the community to adapt to their circumstances. Mang Antonio said that due to the difference in temperature requirements and adaptation of flowers, they have different growing methods for each plant on their farm. The same goes for Natalie when she talks about how flowers are packed in boxes for transport.

### ***Bagsakan***

While there are now many flower sellers and vendors in Dangwa that come from other provinces, many of them



**Fig. 3.** A truck transporting boxes of flowers

are from Benguet. Most of them grew up in the trade, learning from their family and the community. They eventually moved to Dangwa and stayed to sell flowers. The local knowledge in Dangwa involves not only how to sell flowers, but also how to transport them from Benguet, as well as unpacking, and shipping orders within and outside of Dangwa.

Generally, flower trucks start unloading boxes at Dangwa at around 8 pm every day (see Fig. 4). This schedule is maintained due to the imposition of truck bans in Manila and Benguet. These trucks carry cardboard and styrofoam boxes that had been packed in Benguet. Depending on what they need, sellers wait for specific trucks carrying different types of flowers, such as asters or callas from Sayangan and roses from Bahong. The volume of flowers arriving depends on the amount of harvest as well as the season. Some shops receive flowers every day, while other shops only receive flowers every certain number of days, depending on the harvest of the farms that directly supply them. Thus, the more farms that supply the shop, the more flowers they receive. Shops that receive supplies directly from the farms in Benguet are the *bagsakan*. Shops in Dangwa just purchase the flowers from them at wholesale prices practice what is known as *pag-aangkat*. Manang Josefa, 52, a shop owner, explains:

*Marami nang ganyan ngayon, yung nag-aangkat lang walang farm. Wala talagang direct supplier, nag-aangkat lang kami dito. (There are many of those nowadays, shops that just buy flowers and don't have farms. There's no direct supplier, we just buy from the others.)*

Some shops ship out bulk orders of a variety of flowers to their customers outside of Dangwa; this is called *pagpapaktura*. Flowers can be sourced from the different shops in Dangwa depending on what other florists need.

After the *bagsakan* receives supplies at night, the remaining flowers are sold in shop stalls (see Fig. 5)





**Fig. 4.** Unloading flowers in Dangwa

during day time. Although some can still be sold in bulk, these are more often sold at retail prices commonly as bundles of 12s or 24s, sometimes by 10s (e.g. sunflower). Some sellers put more than 12 to thicken the bundle, as buyers prefer thicker-looking bundles. Some flowers such as asters are sold by kilo. Pre-arranged bouquets are also available in some shops. To gain or retain customers, shops would give discounts, while flower arrangers keep clients by ensuring the quality of their work.

### **Profit and Risks of Trade Under Varying Conditions**

Businesses often come with associated risks and rewards. This section explores how the cut-flower industry maintained profits under pre-pandemic conditions as opposed to the current and post-pandemic setting.

#### ***During “normal” circumstances***

The farmers showed certainty when talking about specific aspects of their livelihood, namely the seasons of their harvest and massive profits. Sellers in Dangwa also talked about guaranteed profits during certain seasons that correspond with the experience of the farmers.

Profit for a lot of the farmers is usually seasonal since flowers fluctuate in demand depending on the occasion. Knowing these dates increase their chances at earning big returns. The farmers plan their harvests so that flowers are ready to be sold exactly during these seasons. They claim that there would always be a high

demand for flowers during these times and farmers would often scramble to send their supply of flowers to the market. This system provided a certainty for the flower farmers in Bahong that they will be able to earn money.

Pre-pandemic shops in Dangwa ran on a 24/7 schedule since most shipments arrive at night and at dawn. During the off-seasons, prices go down as flowers remain unsold. Sellers just look to get their investment back, so sometimes any price would suffice just to turn flowers into money. As Manang Josefa said, “*para lang mapera.*” And they have to contend with new shipments coming in again, stiff competition flower stocks that will eventually have to be thrown out if they remain unsold for too long.

Peak season in Dangwa includes Valentines Day, Mother’s Day, and Undas which sellers prepare for by renting extra spaces for storing flowers, as well as hiring additional workers who can be relatives of the flower shop owner. For example, one of the shop owner, Manang Susan disclosed that they bring their cousins and nephews/nieces to Dangwa from Benguet to help in the shop during peak season.

#### ***In pandemic times***

The cut-flower industry in the country faced uncertainty during the pandemic, and the conditions that came with it (i.e. lockdowns, curfews, and produce regulations). Many of the farmers and sellers lost their income. As per Mang Antonio, given the devastating loss of income in the last two years, they thought of changing



**Fig. 5.** Bundles of flowers in a shop in Dangwa

the flowers they plant on their farms into something that can be sold all year round. Reasons for the possible shift are mainly pandemic-related, worsened by increasing costs of gas, supplies, and commodities that drive away potential customers. Manang Maricel, 30, expressed that they had trouble earning income during the pandemic. The sudden strict lockdowns which caused the temporary closure of markets rendered them unable to export and sell their produce in Manila. Some farmers resorted to selling flowers on the street while some were even forced to smuggle flowers into the city in order to provide for their families.

In recent years, the seasonality of the flowers has changed. This caused a shift in the way they conducted business. Due to the implementation of lockdowns, truck bans, and production restrictions on non-essential goods, there was a halt in flower production. Manang Rose, 54, experienced lockdown in Manila, where their shops had to close, but the rent for their house and stalls still needed to be paid. They were forced to use whatever savings they had in order to pay rent. In turn, these closures drastically affected the income of the farmers back in Bahong.

The pandemic caused an immobility of materials and agents in Dangwa. According to Manang Rosalie, 34, while some farmers were able to directly send their flower produce to customers by sending them inside vegetable trucks, not all farmers could do this. This is related to what some people in Bahong also said about smuggling flowers to the city. According to Manang Rosalie, “[*m*]ay mga nagswertehan din kasi, yung iba nagpapaktura na doon, diretsyo yun. Yung truck ng gulay nagdadala na dito sa Manila pero limited lang. Hindi naman lahat ng mga farmer eh, nakabenta talaga” (Some got lucky, sold their flowers directly from there [farms]. The vegetable truck brings some here in Manila but only in limited quantities. Not all farmers were able to sell [their flowers]).

Curfews imposed during lockdowns hindered the usual 24/7 operations of the flower markets and generated lots of waste as flowers withered and were thrown away. To get by, some sellers ventured into other

businesses and tried selling flowers and plants online. According to an informant, Dangwa was filled with cacti and other plants during the lockdown. Some couldn't keep their businesses afloat and went back to Benguet.

Despite uncertainties, some flowers were still being sold, even in limited supply, such as the radus, which are mostly used in flower arrangements that are used for burials and funerals. Manang Josefa shared her conflicting emotions on how her flower business survived during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the same way how some Dangwa sellers were able to pull through in the pandemic: “*Nung maraming namamatay, maraming nag-oorder ng bulaklak. So, parang nakasurvive din ang flowers, sa totoo lang... syempre nangingibabaw pa rin yung emotion mo sa mga taong namamatay*” (“When many died, many were ordering flowers. In a way, the flowers survived... but of course, you still feel for those who have died.”)

But in recent months, people are starting to bounce back as Dangwa returned to its usual operating hours. Informants in Dangwa acknowledged the risks they are taking when it comes to selling flowers, but in the end, they choose to stay in the business because they grew up in this industry and it is hard for them to leave. Their parents were farmers and became vendors in Dangwa. One of the informants, Manang Rosalie, hesitated to shift to a different business that was not in their line of work, while Manang Susan hoped for other farmers to return to flower farming after the pandemic.

### **Un/Certainty: Network of Relations**

Part of the system of transportation and movement of flowers are the people, their networks, and their relationships. This section explores the complex network of farmers and sellers; how certain group formations occur, as well as how spaces are shared internally within the market. While there are shops in Dangwa that receive supplies directly from the farms in Benguet, the relations of those shops to the farmers may vary. Some farmers sell their own flowers. Others have relatives that sell flowers for them, while there are those who hire workers that care for their farms in Benguet



and sell their flowers in Dangwa.

In both Bahong and Dangwa, family businesses are common. There are also a number of associations that exist in Bahong and Dangwa for flower sellers as well as florists. Bahong has a farmer's association that seeks to address issues that farmers may encounter. Many of the informants interviewed in Dangwa were part of one particular association that was established to protect the flower vendors from crimes like stealing, assault, etc. The association which was formed by people from Benguet also coordinates with LGUs regarding certain ordinances, such as negotiating truck bans and paying fines. Members pay membership fees and receive IDs as proof of their membership. Associations also help its members by facilitating solicitations as well as giving aid during crises.

The group for florists, on the other hand, is not formally established. However, there seems to be a profit-sharing scheme that is the basis for membership

in a group. No matter how big or small the profit was from a flower arrangement, it will be divided by the number of members. Additionally, when a florist gets hired by an event coordinator, the florist can mobilize additional manpower from their own group. This establishes who is part of which group and who is not.

There also seems to be a noticeable spatial arrangement. In Bahong, many families and relatives live next to or with each other. Their houses are contained within a single compound with their farms close by. Farmers who are not related by blood are connected by a shared history of the land and act as extremely close neighbors. In Dangwa, some shop owners share their spaces with other shop owners who are sometimes their own relatives so they can save on rent. Some freelance florists do not have a space of their own where they can arrange flowers, thus they share space with some of the flower shops, a practice called *pumupwesto/nakikipwesto*. In exchange, they help



Flowers on the move



with the chores around the shop. In a separate line of observation, the people who did not come from Benguet used the term *pakikisama*, getting along with others by way of prioritizing group harmony over individual benefit, to describe how they form and maintain relationships and connections.

## Conclusion

This research is a preliminary study that explores the flow of things, bodies, and knowledge from the source in Bahong to the market in Dangwa. This includes farming and market practices that have been cultivated in their respective communities for decades. Examining the local knowledge within these two points in flower production uncovers the practices and transactions involved in the mobility of flowers and people. One takeaway is that family and local knowledge seem to play a large role in keeping the flower business alive.

The network and relations among farmers, shop owners, shopkeepers, florists, and customers facilitate the mobility of flowers from source to market. The flow of flowers and agents can be traced through this network. However, the local knowledge in relation to flower farming and selling has shifted due to the pandemic, bringing uncertainty for the people. While it is essential in coping with risks and uncertainty in an ever-changing world, local knowledge is not a cure-all to the woes of local agriculture<sup>13</sup>, thus there is a need to adapt and generate new knowledge in order to navigate these trying times. On-going crises and rising prices make both farmers and vendors uncertain about their future, especially those that are hoping for a constant stream of income.

Fortunately, prices have started to slowly stabilize and the peak seasons they used to rely on are gradually returning. As Dangwa reverts to its original schedule, there is hope for the flower industry. In the year 2022, social events like the Panagbenga Festival returned and were celebrated. It is only a matter of time before people eventually venture back into Bahong and Dangwa, making flowers bloom again for farmers and vendors.

## Endnotes

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