

Bloom Network: Seasonality in the lives of flower market actors and the networks formed in the Dangwa flower economy

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Flowers in styrofoam boxes delivered in Dangwa (Photo by Jake Salvador)

Introduction

Flowers have gained numerous and diverse meanings from people while becoming a part of events that facilitate social relations. How the cut flower industry has bloomed into what it is today is telling of how flowers are widely distributed and used by many people at this particular point in time. Flowers play an inconspicuous yet necessary role as gifts, donations, or offerings—flowers are gifts on birthdays and anniversaries; in church settings they are donated as offerings; and as objects with varied symbols, we find flowers in funerals and weddings. Flowers have come a long way in fostering its own industry with several webs of networks interconnecting one to another. In focusing on the life path of flowers, we observe the networks that were formed along the way. As Igor Kopytoff suggests, biographies of things-in-motion tell of their cultural imprints for they are cultural entities, and in examining them, we shall see a cultural network unfolding beyond the thing itself.¹ Zooming into one place—such as a flower marketplace—we find the networks central to flowers.

Aside from flowers being relevant actors within a flower economy, the network also consists of human actors such as flower sellers and flower buyers. Various networks in several events central to flowers have been formed, and one of the many sectors wherein flowers flow is through flower sellers. On the other hand, depending on social activities, flower-buying could vary in terms of peak seasons and flower demand. In this light, we see how the flower economy is not static and constant, rather the whole economy moves alongside social occasions, making it an active enterprise consisting of interactions among flowers, humans, places and spaces of market activity.

This study will look at the seasonality of the flowers sold in the Dangwa market—determining which months flower-buying usually peaks and the specific occasions that significantly affect the flower demand, how these seasons manifest in the daily lives of the human actors involved, and the networks that are established and maintained in the whole enterprise.

Given how flower-selling and buying networks involve bonds among flowers, buyers, and sellers, we deem it necessary to explore the flower economy—its sociocultural implications and the relationships it builds among the actors involved in a flower market.

The Dangwa Flower Market is located in Sampaloc, Manila where it covers four barangay constituencies—Barangays 343, 489, 490, and 491. Ate Felicia (all names are pseudonyms) recalled that the flower market is named after the adjacent Terminal of Dangwa Tranco, a bus company that plies the Manila-Baguio route. “*Yan ang unang pinagpapadalhan ng bulaklak noon*” (That’s where the flowers were first started to be brought in), said Ate Felicia as she pointed to the terminal where passengers used to bring fresh flowers from Baguio City, Benguet and other parts of the Cordilleras. The main theoretical frameworks of this research study are Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory and Tim Ingold’s idea of correspondence.

Actor-Network Theory refers to the networks of relationships that are constantly shifting in relation to negotiations in the social and natural world.² It proposes that within a social realm, there are various actants, living or non-living entities, that interact as active members of the whole network, forming connections within one another. Meanwhile, Tim Ingold mentions the concept of ‘meshwork’, wherein he discusses that “every living being is a line.”³ According to Ingold, these lines interlace with one another to form what he calls ‘knots,’ representing the relationships formed within the meshwork. These knots are what make things cohere in a world that is continually undergoing a process of growth and being. Aside from this, Ingold also highlights relations not only among living entities, but also including connections of and with non living entities.⁴ Humans also form connections and networks with non-human entities as much as non-human entities form relationships with humans and other non-human entities.⁵ In other words, given that the lines of the human entities work in correspondence with the lines of non-human entities, humans—though regarded as the producers of their actual material life—

are also changed and altered in the process.

Latour and Ingold explore the idea of human and non-human entities in one collective network, and how every actor in a network is an active entity that corresponds to each trajectory every actor has taken. Drawing on these theoretical frameworks, this studies views flowers as an avenue where the relationships formed with it demonstrating entanglements between human and non-human entities. Through Latour's framework, this paper explores the flower economy in terms of the existing networks between human entities such as the flower sellers, buyers, and farmers. The existence of these human networks is also determined by its constant interactions with non-human actors, including the present environmental conditions in the flower farms and the flower markets. Hence, this paper tackles the system of networks that is formed and negotiated by the actors through flower selling in a flower market, specifically the relationships formed between the sellers and the seasonality of the flowers according to its demand.

To understand the relationships of the flower sellers among themselves and their engagements with the unpredictable market of flowers, Tim Ingold's discussion on the process of undergoing, of being and of growth, is informative. Here, he highlights the active interaction of the lines in a meshwork which he refers to as "knotting."⁶ The flowers, flower sellers, and flower buyers in a flower economy are moving and engaging with one another; they are not static nor passive of the movements other actors undergo in a given network. As Tim Ingold illustrates, lines, and bundles of lines, cohere through knots that represent the permeation of actors with one another in social life.

In this case, flower sellers and flower buyers attend to the trajectories of flowers, wherein a process of entanglement ensues as the lines of these actors meet. This engagement is ever-changing and constantly redefined as social life, as mentioned by Ingold, and is in a process of growth and movement.

For this ethnographic study, we mainly did on-ground site visits to the Dangwa flower market in Sampaloc, Manila for a total of five days to do limited participant observation on the commercial activity in the flower market. We observed what tasks sellers accomplish at their respective stores at certain times of the day, and how they interact with one another, how they approach customers, among other activities. Although we did not participate in activities like flower bundling, arranging, and selling due to the limited time of our fieldwork, we still took on the role as participating members of the public, carrying out what Laurier defined as "legitimate peripheral participation."⁷

To establish rapport, we had informal conversations with the flower sellers, which yielded valuable information on their practices.

The two flower sellers we were able to talk with were point persons identified by field students in Sitio Bahong and Sitio Lamut in La Trinidad, Benguet. These flower sellers are from Sitio Central Bahong. They introduced us to three more research participants we were able to interview. Semi-structured interviews were used with the five key participants. The interviews were recorded, with the consent of the flower sellers. This was followed by transcription of the recorded interviews for the thematic analysis of the raw data to draw out data patterns from the transcribed materials. While we used thematic analysis in laying out the flower economy in the Dangwa Flower Market, we also sought to look at possible variations in the experiences of the different flower sellers in the Dangwa Flower Market in relation to the seasons of flower demand.

The five flower sellers in Dangwa were informed of the research project's purpose, goals, their contribution to it, and their rights as voluntary interlocutors—through verbal and written means. Names that appear herewith are pseudonyms.

Networks in the flower economy in Dangwa

The actors involved in the flower economy are the flower sellers, the buyers, the middlemen, and the flowers themselves. Fig. 1. shows the routes of the

flowers as it travels from producer to seller to buyer, showing the line that a flower follows as an actor. The lines in the diagram represent the movement of a flower within the network, and its relationship to each human actor it meets throughout its social life. Moreover, as the flower moves along its path, the lines also signify the relationship that forms between the human actors that the flower encounters. This line also constitutes a power dynamic⁸ among the actors and the increase in supply and consumer demand.

Our interviewees identified the peak seasons in the Dangwa Flower Market as All Saints' Day (November 1), Valentines Day (February 14), and Mothers' Day (every second Sunday of May). This is no surprise – flowers are usually given as gifts on these days to express love and appreciation. Among these occasions, three of our interviewees emphasized how the flower demand in Dangwa is at its peak during All Saints' Day, as both locally-grown and imported flowers, regardless of the kind and color, sell well. Even so, it is undeniable that the kinds of flowers most customers still look for during Undas (All Saints' Day) are the *radus* and *malaysian mums*—white flowers known to symbolize purity and peace for the departed. Three of our interviewees shared that businessmen, funeral home owners, and flower shop owners from different parts of the country mainly make up the customer demographic during the last weeks of October until the first week of November. On the other hand, students and young adults are mainly the ones who stream to Dangwa during Valentines Day to purchase roses, and in more recent years, sunflowers, as gifts for the occasion. These flowers are usually bought in bouquets arranged by florists who are also flower sellers in Dangwa. Roses were also identified as the best-selling flowers on Mothers' Day.

On the other hand, the flower sellers referred to “low seasons” as periods of low flower demand and slow rate of customer purchases. The rate of flower purchases is described by three interviewees to be “*matumal*,” or slow, which happens mostly during the months of June and July. Ate Felicia explained that this

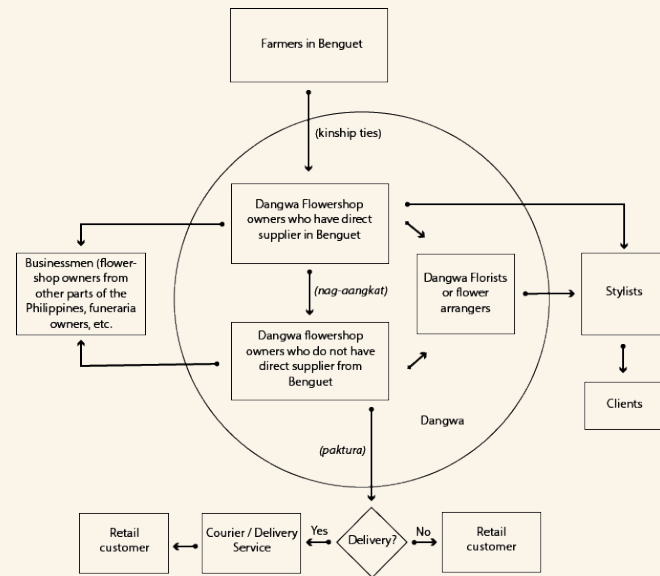


Fig. 1. Diagram of networks in the Dangwa Flower Market

was because classes usually start in those months. She added that the rainy season, which normally starts in June, may also have something to do with it. This aligns with what Kuya Peter said about how the rainy season affects the flowers' appearance, and subsequently, the flower supply and prices. He explained, “*Mga pangit yung mga ano, dumadating kasi bugbog sa ulan. Kaya kaunti lang ‘yung supply. Kaya bumababa yung [supply] tas nagtataas sila [yung presyo] yung mga flowers*” (“Because of the rainy season, the flowers that arrive are not in good shape; making the supply low. As the supply decreases, the prices increase.”) For Ate Felicia, the low season continues until August, as there are no significant events relevant to flowers in August. For Kuya Peter, the low season lasts until mid-October.

Apart from the seasonality of flower demand, the profits earned in the flower market are dependent on the supply. Ate Rose and Ate Stephanie explained that if the flower supply is high, the prices decrease, and vice versa. They said that the prices in the market become more stable because they fluctuate less during peak seasons. This is because sellers cannot increase the prices of their products since the high supply leads to more flower shops selling the same products.

All these point to a general trend of high and low flower demand alternating throughout the year,

emerging from key annual events where flowers are integral parts. This trend links to an established farming and harvesting schedule followed by farmers from Benguet so that they can supply flowers to Dangwa in time for the peak seasons of flower demand. This demonstrates how the planting and harvesting seasons of La Trinidad are directly affected by the flower demand in Dangwa. At the same time, it is important to also note how the flower economy in Dangwa is affected by the conditions of flower farming in La Trinidad.

These lived experiences of flower sellers in Dangwa are a testimony the dynamic participation of actors of the Dangwa Flower Market network—both human and non-human. The demand for flowers changes according to the need of the human actors, following the seasons for flower-giving. In the same way, these “seasons” also yield to non-human factors like environmental factors, as can be seen by how the general climate, both in Dangwa and in the flower farms in La Trinidad, affect flower supply and demand in the flower network. Given that the actors existing within this network are active, the above-mentioned seasons also expectedly have noticeable manifestations in the human actors’ daily lives.

The seasons in the daily lives of flower sellers

Increases in flower sales within the year compel flower sellers to make some changes in their daily lives. Ate Stephanie and Ate Lourdes mentioned that adding helpers and/or store locations are a must during these times. Ate Lourdes said that *“Kumukuha siya [shop owner] ng mga tao panghanda. Kumukuha siya ng puwesto doon sa bilihan.”* (She hires people to help in preparations. She rents a place in the market.) She explained that an additional store location is for extrastorage because there are a lot of flowers coming in during occasions when flowers are in demand. As for Ate Stephanie, she said *“Nagdadagdag kami kasi kailangan ‘yun...Nagha-hire din kami.”* (We add more people because we need it...We hire, too.)

Preparations for a big occasion in the flower market, like All Saints’ Day, begin roughly three months

ahead. Depending on the duration of the demand for flowers, helpers will be in the store to help manage the flowers and accept orders. During peak seasons, flower sellers anticipate a high volume of customers and sales, which, for the additional helpers, provide job opportunities, however temporary. This demonstrates that aside from moving with and being moved by flowers, the Dangwa flower network also shows social and economic mobility of human actors as their lines intersect particularly during peak seasons.

Even so, flower sellers do not fully control the schedule and arrival of flowers. Flowers arrive in an imprecise frequency because farmers do not plant flowers all-year round. Ate Lourdes mentioned *“Minsan kasi yung ibang farmers, lalo na pag mura, hindi sila nagtatanim. Mag-aano sila pag medyo mahal”* (Sometimes, farmers do not plant when the prices are low. They will farm only when the prices are a little high.) Farmers do not farm when demand for and prices of flowers are low, usually in the months of June and July and might extend until August to mid-October. Another reason is because of storms and typhoons that affect the harvest of farmers. Ate Stephanie explained, *“kung may bagyo, masisira lahat. Masisira yung bahay ng bulaklak, lalo na pag greenhouse* (When there is a typhoon, everything will be destroyed—all the flower shelters, especially the greenhouses).” During typhoon season, which is from June to August, flowers, and the greenhouses where the flowers are, get destroyed. Farmers are unable to deliver flowers, making it difficult to procure more flowers in the rainy season. Here, we see the direct effect farmers have on flower sellers: when farmers are unable to produce flowers, flower sellers are also unable to sell. That could mean little profit for them.

However, if flowers are constantly arriving from the flower farms to the shops, the flower sellers must see to it that they sell all of the flowers before the next batch arrives or the flowers will pile up in the shop. If this happens, it will become a loss for them because they still have to pay the farmers—their direct suppliers—for the flowers. When flowers pile up and they are not selling enough, flower sellers award their

customers a “*tawad*” or discount to dispose of the flowers in their shop. Otherwise, they turn to another actor in the network, the cooperative. Most of the flower sellers in Dangwa are members of the cooperative known as the Central Market Coop. Ate Felicia mentioned “*karamihan nga ay nasa coop sila, so ‘don sila humihiram; mas mababa ang interest tapos may mga dividend pa sila*” (Most are members of the coop, where they borrow money from; the interest is lower and they also have dividends).

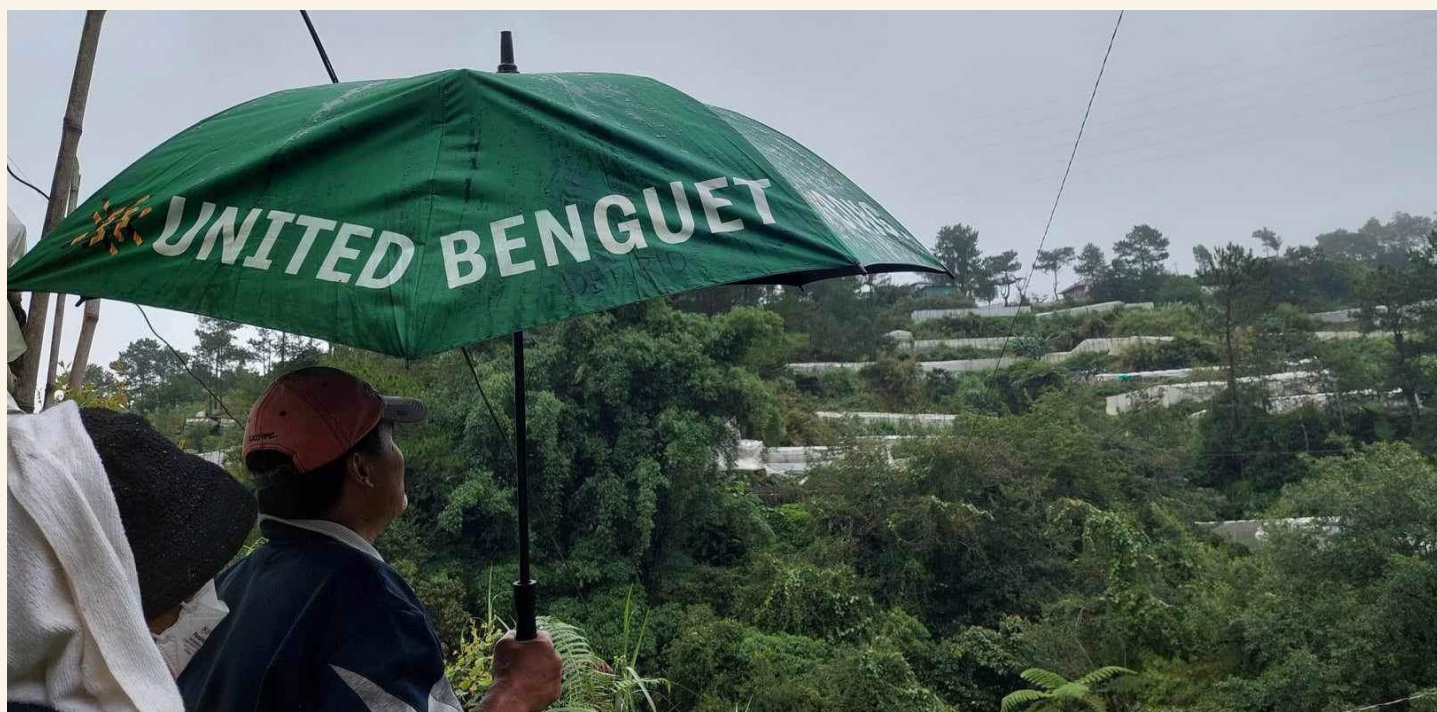
Aside from flower-selling, flower sellers are also entwined with other non-human actors in the flower economy such as the shop they rent, electricity, water, food, and other basic necessities. All of these require financial capacity for the shop and their business enterprise to continue so they mentioned that the cooperative is definitely helpful to them, especially during low seasons.

Another layer within the social network of flower sellers in Dangwa are the other flower sellers. Ate Stephanie said that flower shops who get their flowers from her through *pag-aangkat* do not procure flowers if they are not in demand, even if the supply is high. She describes that “*‘pag matumal, Diyos ko, doon ang problema*

namin kasi syempre alangan naman ikaw mag-aangkat ka, matumal nga eh” (If sales are low, that’s a problem for us because who would buy flowers to sell if sales are low.) This is commonly followed by frustration because flower shops only buy flowers when flowers are in demand, and not when sales are poor. To address this problem, Ate Stephanie has two stalls where she is able to sell her flowers. The first one is where the flowers arrive from Benguet and the other one is where flower arrangements are done. If flowers are not sold in her first shop, the flowers would go to the other one to be arranged and be sold as bouquets or arranged flowers either for weddings or funerals. She mentioned that there are times when flowers are sold more easily in her first shop, but not in the other. But there are also times when flowers are sold more easily in her second shop, but not in the first. Customers are portrayed as being active actors as well in the network. Similar to the flower sellers above, customers also assess and negotiate with flower sellers depending on the seasonal demand of flowers.

Conclusion

The Dangwa Flower Market exists within a broader field



The meshwork of flower market bringing forth a local political party

of social arrangements, in correspondence with forces that flow through the marketplace. Inside the Dangwa flower economy, we observe networks between human and non-human actors—networks following the lines of flowers among flower sellers themselves, between flower sellers and farmers, and between flower sellers and customers, in the meshwork of the Dangwa Flower Market.

Unfolding these networks also bring observers into a life of highs and lows in the flower market. Depending on the demand for the flowers, these networks are continuously negotiated, revisited, or abandoned, as flower sellers continuously establish, maintain, and break relationships with the number of actors they encounter every day. The experiences of flower sellers enable anyone to see an image of a typical market activity based on supply and demand, and a story of how these theories manifest in the lives of the flower sellers in the Dangwa Flower Market.

We recognize that the research project is limited, especially since the data gathering was conducted only in a span of five days. Rather than a rapid ethnographic methodology, a more formal ethnographic approach could be employed to understand the relationships inside the Dangwa Flower Market. Other layers of entanglement in the lives of flower sellers, such as their relationships with landlords, the local government units, organizations and associations were not touched upon in this research, but could be explored. Ultimately, this will contribute to existing literature on the social lives of actors, and engagements and entanglements inside the Dangwa Flower Market.

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Endnotes

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