

# ***Kapwa at kapamilya: Relationship and networks among flower farmers in Sitio Lamut, Brgy. Beckel, La Trinidad, Benguet***

Joanne Grace De Guzman

Mikka Zaila Palisoc



Cañao or Kanyaw in Lamut, Beckel (Photo by Hector Guazon)

## Introduction

How close the greenhouses stood next to each other was the first thing that met our eye as researchers beginning our first days of the two-week fieldwork in Sitio Lamut, La Trinidad, Benguet for Anthropology Field School 2022. After meeting the flower farmers, we became more curious as to why people who we expected to be competitive towards each other seemed, instead, “too close” and friendly with each other. We wondered if and how their means of livelihood could be leading to the creation and strengthening of social bonds. Thus, the conceptualization of this research paper.

The sitio of Lamut belongs to a province that was known as the “*Salad Bowl of the Philippines*” in the 1970s because of its high production of vegetables. It was not until the 1980s that the diversification from vegetable production to strawberry and cut-flower production started. So it is no surprise that greenhouses abound in the community.

Most of the related studies on family owned farmlands we have come across deal with the ways in which kin relations prevent cheating and not honoring financial obligations within their circle. *The Meaning of Kinship in Sharecropping Contracts* by Elisabeth Sadoulet, Alain de Janvry, and Seiichi Fukui stated that the value of altruism among kin helps in creating a bond of trust and confidence wherein cheating is less likely to be done by the members as the conflict of interest between them is reduced by their selflessness. This expectation of putting the welfare of other family members before the self is important for families who enter several repeated contracts. In their analysis, the Philippines’ household survey showed that there is a higher expectation for kin landlords to help during emergencies than the other landlords. Thus, there is a more cooperative behavior in sharecropping contracts among kin or with hindi *ibang tao* (one of us). Kinship and Social Relations in Filipino Culture by Amaryllis Torres (1985), on the other hand, discusses the changes that happen when farmers borrow money from credit institutions and fertilizer producers. This is where they find themselves in constant indebtedness. Since kapwa

relations are absent and there are no expectations of reciprocal obligations between farmers and lending institutions, as Torres pointed out, farmers are not pressured to pay their loans. So next time they borrow money, credit institutions will not or will take caution on lending to them. But what if we look at farmers who are not related by blood, but see each other as family or “kapwa” (fellowman/woman) and “kapamilya” (family) from years of flower farming together and being in the same community? What do they expect from each other and how do they interact within this bond?

Alliances – usually formed from the basic unit of community – are important for social institutions to function and be advantageous. According to F. Landa Jocano, alliances at the level of the community are important to examine because this is where local authority, rights and obligations, and modes of relationships are expressed, defined, ordered, and systematized<sup>1</sup>. This study conducted in Sitio Lamut, Barangay Beckel, La Trinidad, Benguet explores flower farmers’ existing relationships and poses questions on how flower farmers build their alliances despite the very competitive livelihood of flower farming; how they benefit from this connection; and how they strengthen these alliances or relationships.

## Unveiling memories of relationships in greenhouses

When we arrived in Sitio Lamut and started to roam around the community, we found countless greenhouses at the lower areas of the roadway. Almost all of Lamut’s residents practice flower farming, their primary means of living. The community is almost covered by greenhouses. As we went down to these greenhouses, it revealed the flower farmers who owned them or the “*gardeners*” as they call themselves.

The first flower farmer we interacted with was Tito (57 years old). Their whole family, even his wife’s side, practiced flower farming. Tito was very welcoming even though we had just met for the first time. He led the conversation and he was telling us all the information he thought would help us. On our

way to farther flower farms – as Tito had promised to introduce us to his fellow flower farmers – we saw how Tito seemed to know everyone we bumped into. We had many stopovers so he could chat with and catch up with people. He also told us about all the weddings that would happen that week and invited us to come and meet other flower farmers there. He assured us that many of them would attend because in their sitio, *everyone was invited*. Besides living in a small community, one factor that can explain why everyone knows everyone is because almost all of them are flower farmers, and this status intermediates their interactions even outside their greenhouses, like how they come together for a fellow’s wedding. This can be compared to a related study by Stephen Acabado entitled *Defining Ifugao and Social Organization* where early settlement indicated evidence that the rice field was the tie that bound the society<sup>2</sup>. As for the flower farmers of Lamut, working in their greenhouses may also be one of the ties that bind their community and shape their interactions.

As we met more flower farmers, we were told endless stories of their lives as flower farmers and members of their family and community. We could tell how vivid their memories were when it came to their experiences and history as flower farmers. When we asked them about how long they had been practicing flower farming, some of them answered in an exact number of years. They would also enumerate the sequence of flowers they used to plant and harvest.

Lolo, 73 years old, who had been a flower farmer since the 1980s, told us how flower farming began in the community. He told us that the first person who started flower farming in the community was one of the residents who used to work on a farm of a Chinese corporation in Tuba, Benguet. That person had taken home some seeds, planted them, and he was able to harvest flowers. Other residents heard the news and when they found out how much flowers cost at that time, they became interested in flower farming. The pioneer shared his knowledge about flower farming with the residents until the whole community hopped onto the flower farming trend. In this narrative, we can

already see how their connection with that one person led to their discovery of flower farming activity and its methods. Their interest in flower farming that spread throughout their community started with that one person who had more experience by practicing it. And now, they continue to work towards their goals, in their greenhouses and alongside other flower farmers who also benefited from the know-how shared by a pioneer. This knowledge has been passed down for at least two generations as the community became and remains a farming community, still growing their crops with their children.

All of them narrated how they already knew how to do garden work since they were children. They start with cutting pieces of stems that can be stuck into the ground, a task said to be easy enough for children, until they learn all the other work inside the garden. They were introduced to the world of flower farming before they were introduced to other aspects of life; flower farming was one of their first steps to having a sense of the world. The greenhouses contain their memories of growing from child to adult, thus, showing a stronger foundation of their connections within their kin and other flower farmers. Their activities inside their greenhouses, like the simple act of cutting, is a commonality of a shared history as flower farmers and a community which further tighten their bonds.

### **Seeds of relationships: From where do the flower farmers’ relationships sprout?**

When asked who they consider as part of their family outside their consanguineal and affinal kin, the gardeners would name other flower farmers because of their shared history as flower farmers and common origin as Igorots.

Filipino-English dictionaries generally give the word “fellow-being” or “fellow” as a translation of *kapwa*. In Filipino, *kapwa* is the unity of the “self” and “others”. Therefore, *kapwa* is a recognition of shared identity, an inner self shared with others. “*Birds of the same feather flock together.*” “*Pare-parehas naman kami.*” (We’re all just the same). One of the interviewees, 45

year-old Ate L, also mentioned similar words in the context of flower farming, she said “*Kung nagbobota... ‘yung ano nagbobota rin.*” (If someone is wearing boots, we’re just the same). The words they used to respond to the question indicate that seeing and feeling they are similar with fellow flower farmers, with the same experiences, struggles, goals to achieve, and successes, creates an attachment with each other. During the focused group discussion with two of the flower farmers, one of them said that they consider other flower farmers as family because they have been with them in the garden, in her words “*karamay sa garden*” (garden companion).

Besides living in the same community, we found out that most of the gardeners in Sitio Lamut are Igorots and call themselves the “*highlanders.*” We asked one flower farmer if brand names of chemicals were kept secret from fellow gardeners which he directly responded with “*wala sa mga Igorot [ang nagsisikreto] parang isang pamilya.*” (there are no secrets among Igorots, just like in a family). Their common ethnicity makes them trust each other with things that could be beneficial for their livelihood. He said that the gatekeeping of proven beneficial chemicals may be observed in other farmers, but not in the Igorot flower farmers who treat each other as family, not as competitors. The flower farmer pointed to fellow workers in the garden as people who he treats as his family besides his kin, because they are great contributors to what they have in life today. They were not only “*karamay sa garden*” (garden companion), but their connection goes beyond their greenhouses as their network helped them be successful flower farmers.

We also observed another act seemingly common to the community that says a lot about their closeness. On our way to interview Tito’s family – whom we have met on the first day of our data gathering – his wife, Tita (51 years old), went with us and guided us to their house, far from their greenhouses. We came across another residence where *sayotes* were planted. Tita picked out a number of *sayote* and uttered jokingly, “*Kahit ‘di na magpaalam, nagpaalam naman sa puno.*”

(It’s okay if I don’t ask permission from the owner, I already asked permission from the tree). This act of freely picking out each other’s crops without having to ask permission shows as if the property of one already belongs to everyone else. Their strengthened network of flower farmers does not only benefit them as workers, but as normal neighbors who have everyday needs. Since they already created a social reality where they are each other’s family, things outside of flower farming and greenhouses are shared, such as other necessities, as tight-knit neighbors or families do.

### **Growing bonds: How flower farming affects kinship relationships**

Starting with how flower farming influences the relationship between consanguineal and affinal kin of gardeners, flower farming, as a main source of living in Lamut, is a livelihood inherited and passed down to children. Lola, 60 years old, whose whole family is also involved in flower farming, shared how her children learned how to farm before they learned in school. Her children, now adults with their own different jobs, still find time to help in the greenhouses. Flower farming also becomes more than just a source of living for the kin of flower farmers. Since everyone in the family plays a role in their greenhouses, this becomes their quality time. For instance, Tito and Tita’s daughter reminisced about their childhood as children of flower farmers. She did not realize that the simple cutting off a section of a stem would become one of their greatest childhood memories where their attachment as a family was strengthened. More than just a means of livelihood, it becomes a way of tightening a family’s bond as this is also where they spend most of their time together. This also applies to the relationship established with fellow farmers outside the family, greenhouses are where they catch up with each other besides during special occasions. These are some of the many practices in flower farming that became the intermediaries for their strengthened relationship as they serve as sentimental memories between them. Being with each other in these simple moments may have led to a feeling that they can

also be there to help each other in their livelihoods.

While flower farming becomes more than just a source of living for the gardeners, it is undeniable that it is still a source of income where everything needs to be computed and balanced. Thus, it becomes a factor in how and what they can offer as help to fellow flower farmers. Some think that lending tools for farming may be too expensive. They consider the price and refuse to lend when it is too expensive for them, which they think they can save for their own greenhouses instead. Most of them help each other through “*arawan*” (a term they use for daily wage worker and/or worker) and pay the wage to those who helped them in taking care of their crops. Even if their “*arawan*” is a family member, the wage is still paid as they say, “*Wala nang libre ngayon*” (Nothing is free nowadays). They believe that this system is a way to help their family and others earn more income. These acts of keeping livelihood matters separate from personal and sentimental ones show that their commonalities as flower farmers help them think about how a fellow’s mind works. There is a balance between maintaining systems in flower farming and not affecting each other’s livelihood negatively. More kinds of help become related to flower farming, including the gifts given or received during special occasions, either between members of a family of flower farmers or only between flower farmers themselves. It can also be inferred how close their relationship has become with fellow flower farmers because it has reached the extent of remembering each other on special occasions and exchanging gifts. It is also a way of extending their networks and strengthening their ties.

### **Divisions: Setting boundaries for the better growth of social relations**

Because they share the same experiences as flower farmers, they know what to consider when asking for help. They think carefully about whom they can ask for help and whom they think cannot provide help at that moment. The boundary of when to lend a hand and when not to seems clear for the flower farmers. This pushes some to resort to lending associations and

corporations in order to protect the relationship built with fellow flower farmers, believing that debt might it. With lending associations and corporations, maybe they feel that there is no expectation of reciprocal obligations here, or the responsibility to immediately pay back what was lent to them, since there is no relationship that needs to be protected between flower farmers and institutions. In his study, Torres observed that changes happen in farming labor when farmers rely more on credit institutions due to absence of social relations between them<sup>3</sup>. But they often find themselves to be in constant indebtedness due to the lack of expectations when it comes to reciprocating obligations.

The bond flower farmers created make them feel like it is sometimes their responsibility to offer help when needed. One interviewee said that withholding new knowledge or discovery may cause resentment. This may mean that with trust already established within their relationship, they would share these kinds of information with fellow flower farmers. Sharing of information about flower farming becomes not only a way of helping, but a way to protect the trust and relationship they created.

Other kinds of help even extend to more personal matters, not just as flower farmers. The way they lean on lending institutions rather than on fellow flower farmers and the way they share knowledge and strategies on flower farming, indicate the importance of the personal relationships and how these affect how they act on flower farming related matters. This shows how their trust is important in building their networks as flower farmers.

### **Nurturing planted relationships: Building relationships in the community**

A good harvest means a call for celebration and “treat” for others. It is a kind of celebration where everyone in the community is free to join. Lolo shared that being invited to a celebration of one’s good harvest is more appreciated than tangible gifts. From Lolo’s narration, we sense how they already have an expectation of being invited and included in a kapwa’s celebration of good

harvest because it is already the usual occurrence for them as close fellows. In this way, flower farming has created another event in which flower farmers can tighten their bonds and a way of acknowledging the fellow farmers' contribution to their success.

Though flower farming becomes the base of fictive kinship and helps in establishing the relationship, it still cannot be compared to consanguineal and affinal bond for some. We have always heard the line "*Syempre pamilya mo*" (Of course, it's your family) throughout some interviews indicating that some resources are easily given and shared among family of flower farmers compared to non-kins. When it comes to sharing, be it *semilya* (seeds) or information, their family comes first and the others next. Some of the narratives from flower farmers show that some things are better kept inside the consanguineal and affinal kin. This may imply that within their large network, smaller networks like traditional kin can receive more advantages because there is an increased feeling of obligation to help a family member and the actors' connection has a stronger foundation.

Nevertheless, the flower farmers' connection still creates an alliance that makes flower farming collaborative work for them. Some flower farmers are very hard to convince when it comes to new flower farming techniques. They only trust and receive benefits from their fellow gardeners who attest to the effectiveness of the shared knowledge. They only listen to fellow farmers' tips, advice, shared strategies and recommended products. We noticed their frequent use of the word "*tayo*," a very inclusive word for Filipinos denoting "we" that includes "you." Flower farmers may be using this term to encourage others to attend events so that they can all receive, together, the advantages the event may offer to their flower farming activity. They even share knowledge on when best to plant so that their harvest would fall at a time when the flowers could fetch high prices. Sometimes, they would also look at fellow farmer's price when setting their own, if they are not sure about how much it should cost depending on the situation in the market. From this, we can say that

the kind of relationship they established is a network where the success of one becomes the success of everyone.

They also share *semilya* – which is like capital for them – from where their plants grow. Some flower farmers do not have their own *semilya* and need to buy them before they can grow flowers. Flower farmers of Lamut share *semilya*, especially in times of excess. Instead of paying for them, they exchange these with each other when they are available, in an act of reciprocity.

Their kinds of relationships help them identify who they can count on when they encounter problems on their flower farms. Having known each other for long, they have a sense of who they can seek for help, be it with looking out for their crops, setting up their greenhouses, or supplementing the capital they need. Given these relationships, even if not blood-bound, some flower farmers say that they already feel that they have the responsibility to help others if they know they are in need. One helped to the extent of adopting the children of some of the flower farmers working with him. Similarly, an earlier study done by Sadoulet et al compared kinship sharecropping contracts with non-kin sharecropping contracts and found the former to be more efficient<sup>5</sup>. Kin landlords indeed help or are expected to help more frequently in case of emergency than the other landlords.

From these findings, we can infer that in the Sitio of Lamut, gardeners do not live solely to the status of being flower farmers, but also as individuals within kinship ties of the community, be it consanguineal, affinal, and fictive kin, or as *kapwa* to others. Their close-knit relationship in the community is advantageous in building and strengthening their networks in flower farming.

## **Conclusion**

Flower farmers of Sitio Lamut showed how their relationship is important in their means of livelihood. Their relationship sprouted from their common ground of being flower farmers, having similar activities,

experiences, struggles, and even the occurrences which they can share from fellow farmers, became intermediaries to building of their networks or alliances. These alliances increase the advantages they can receive for their flower farming activity and even extend to their usual everyday lives. Trust is built in their social reality by sharing important information about their flower farming activities. How they interact with their *kapwa* flower farmers further strengthens their network and alliances by turning to treat each other as *kapamilya*. Their close-knit relationship is a big factor when it comes to sharing knowledge, accepting new ideas and techniques, and creating a functional system in flower farming.

We understand the depth of “*Sino-sino pa bang magtutulungan, kundi tayo rin naman.*” (If we won’t help each other, who else will??). Having known each other since they resided in the sitio and started flower farming, they see that maybe, no one else could understand and help them the way their *kapwa* and *kapamilya* flower farmers can. Though having their own experiences and history, it was easy for them to relate with each other because most of the time, they also go through the same struggles and achieve favorable outcomes.

The study was conducted in a short span of time, limiting the data gathered and the story that it can tell. To be able to observe how flower farmers actually interact and systematize flower farming, we suggest that researchers interact with them more often, be with flower farmers on a daily basis, and note not only how they socialize, but also the atmosphere when they are conversing. This may be helpful in differentiating the level of openness to different actors in their network.

Most of the participants of the study were also recommended and introduced by the flower farmers themselves. The narratives they provided may not have great differences since they may only had the same experiences to tell when it came to their interactions. We also recommend future researchers to find participants outside of the specific circle of flower farmers, who can provide narratives which may support

or contrast some information. It might be easier to assess if the same narratives apply to most of the flower farmers population.

The participants may be less in number, but less does not mean insignificant. To be able to see that there are groups of flower farmers who are bonded by instead of being divided by a competitive livelihood, we can conclude that flower farmers of Lamut were able to use their relations within their network of kins in shaping the dynamics of their social interactions and reality.

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### **Endnotes**

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2. Stephen Acabado, “Defining Ifugao and Social Organization”, *Asian Perspectives*, 52(2) (2013).
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5. Sadoulet et al, “The Meaning of Kinship in Sharecropping Contracts”.