

***Mapteng ja biag* (a beautiful life):
A study on the child-rearing practices
of farmers amidst agricultural shift
in Bahong's farms**

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Young ones helping out with the flowers (Photo by Cindy Cruz)

Introduction

Dubbed as the main producers of fresh cut-flowers in the Philippines, Barangay Bahong, along with its neighboring barangays in La Trinidad, produces and distributes various types of flowers and floral products to different parts of the country, catering to special occasions and events like the Panagbenga Festival. Due to its rising demand, farmers in Bahong that specialize in flowers (cut-flower and potted) were able to maintain the production of their produce, as well as sustain a steady income from their flourishing businesses. The success of their businesses manifested in their ability to provide for their family (food, education, family home), acquire material possessions (vehicles, etc.), and expand their land and businesses. However, the indigenous farmers of Bahong were not originally flower cultivators, and just like the rest of the farmers of La Trinidad, they were also once crop and vegetable farmers before deciding to engage in flower farming. The shift, in turn, brought forth various challenges and opportunities in their lifestyle, especially in terms of the adaptability of the people in the barangay—particularly, the families and the children.

While vegetable cultivation maintains its role today as one of the main drivers of economic activity and development in the municipality of La Trinidad¹, some areas like Bahong shifted to farming flowers, mainly due to their location, land conditions, and the profitability and desirability of flowers in the market.² This shift to flower farming and its steady expansion, producing an abundant variety of flowers including roses, earned them the title “Rose Capital of the Philippines.” However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for flowers decreased,³ creating an oversupply that amounted to losses of up to P100 million.⁴ The pandemic situation combined with a decreasing demand for flowers because of bad weather conditions also prompted farmers to develop farms into tourist sites.⁵ Given these circumstances, the flower farmers were left with no choice but to find ways of adjusting financially, all the while prioritizing the welfare of their family in terms of providing their daily necessities.

Barangay Bahong’s gradual shift from vegetable to flower farming prompted us to look into the possible changes it brought to the long-standing child-rearing practices within the community. This includes examining the connection and dissonance between the flower farmers’ agricultural productivity and children’s health and educational conditions as well as their ways of taking care of their children and the barangay’s family welfare policies.⁶ Utilizing the Theory on Correspondence by Tim Ingold,⁷ the research was able to reveal how the the indigenous flower farmers of Bahong ‘co-respond’ or responsively ‘answer’ to other things of this world, through intervening questioning, and reacting to the various circumstances occurring around them evident in their capacity to provide



Flower field as potential toxic landscape



for their children's diet; what resources children find in their immediate environment; what parents or any familial figure expect the children to contribute in their farming business; how these adults have fostered a deeper intimacy with their children; how they introduced flower-farming activities to their children; how they and their children interact with their environment; how they introduced and maintain family values with their children amid modernization; how they keep their children safe; and lastly, their hopes of bestowing their farmlands to their children.

Children's involvement in farming practices may have an effect on their development and upbringing. Larson and Dearmont discussed how children growing up in farming communities were perceived in a negative light before—both concerning exposure to health hazards in farms and their future career paths—and it is important to focus on highlighting and contextualizing the unique values, protective factors, and involvement of the entire community in creating a safe and healthy farming environment for children to live in.⁸ Cognizant of this intersectionality, employing Ingold's theory on Correspondence allowed us a deeper understanding of how the indigenous flower farming residents of Bahong confer their perspectives on child-rearing practices that stray from the conventions asserted by contemporary mainstream society.

To further explore how such shifts in the farming practices in Bahong affected their child-rearing practices and aspirations, it is important to understand how the different layers of the farmers' upbringing; how they raise their children; the environmental, temporal, and material factors of their lives, are interconnected and *correspond* to the barangay's shift from vegetable to flower farming. While it seemed like children were involved in farming practices, we initially wondered if such involvement had an impact on their physical health and nutrition. We intended to focus more on this matter and would eventually realize that many differences and characteristics about their upbringing and well-being were born from the shift in farming practices.

This study was based on the archival documents from the Baguio City and the UP Baguio Library and direct observations of life in the community of Bahong during our two-week Anthropology Field School from June 24 to July 9, 2022. Sitio Central Bahong in La Trinidad, Benguet, was one of the chosen field sites during that year's fieldwork, with accommodations arranged by the Field Director, Dr. Hector Guazon and Ms. Noreen Sapalo, Assistant Field Director. Through Dr. Guazon, we met Mrs. M, one of his former students and the caretaker of our lodging, who then introduced us to her family and friends residing in the neighborhood of the flower farming community.

In the course of this two-week fieldwork, we employed various *in*

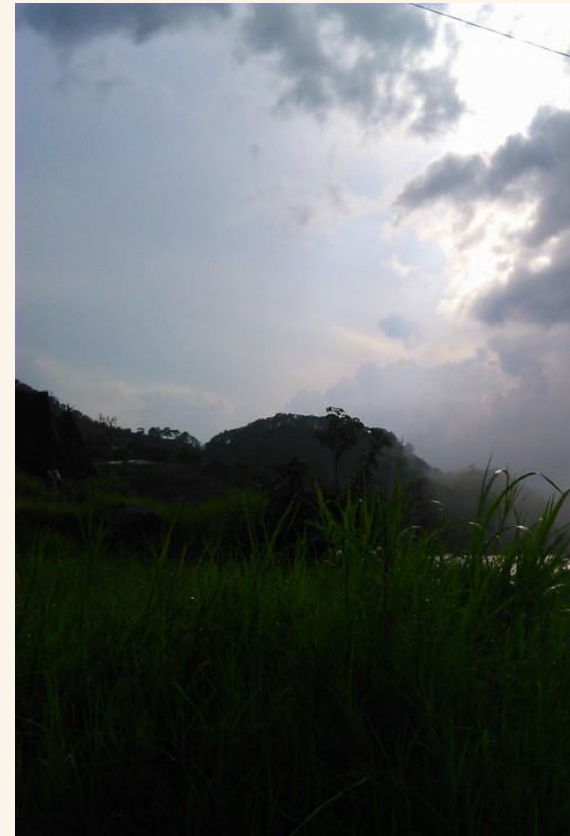
situ methods to gather data and information. We started as participant observers and focused on slowly building rapport with the locals. With the help of Mrs. M, our relationship with the community became closer, allowing us to get invited to their social gatherings and even be entrusted with their children, despite ongoing COVID-19 community health measures. These interactions also led us to collect our data from Key Informant Interviews (KII) where chosen research participants were a vital part of the closely-knit flower farming community of Sitio Bahong.

With farming as the main source of living in Bahong, the farmers spent their childhood being exposed to different farming activities – some of them even tagged along to greenhouses and gardens to help out with small tasks. Such tasks were given to them by their parents/guardians as a way of giving them “experience” in the trade, with the initial expectation that it would also be their future occupation. This exposure initiated them into navigating the farming industry – creating connections, exploring new farming techniques, expanding their businesses – and proved to be especially helpful once their parents retired and passed the lands and businesses to their children. It also helped them adapt to the changes brought upon by the community’s shift to flower farming.

Flower farming in Bahong was initially started and remained stable because of its profitability, practicality, and desirability. At present, majority of the farm owners have appropriated their lands for the cultivation of cut-flowers like white anthuriums, white malaysian mums, and of course, red roses. There are still those who tried selling different produce like potted flowers such as pitimini roses and poinsettias, indoor plants, and even tried planting vegetables again. This shift allowed many farm owners and their families to earn more money and experience a comfortable life—many of them were able to invest in their own houses and properties and maintain farm land inherited from their parents and grandparents, as well as vehicles that they could use for personal or business purposes.

The ability to earn more also made it possible for some to invest in more farming personnel that could help them operate their businesses, allowing them to spend less time on the farm or to shift their focus more on the business side than the physical side of the trade.

On the other hand, the farmers’ children had less exposure to the general farming experience due to a number of factors. Although the majority of the children still had access to the greenhouses and gardens, and some also still have substantial involvement in farming, they were less inclined to join their parents/



Greenhouses as forbidden spaces for children (view from outside)

guardians in farming activities, possibly due to the lack of interest in the practice.

One farmer cited the rise of technology (including the use of smartphones, television, etc.) as a factor in the decline in children's involvement in farming. Another possible factor is the children's limited access to their farms, either due to their parents restricting them from going into greenhouses and gardens to avoid accidents (especially from harmful chemicals) or due to the proximity of the farm from their homes. While a lot of their farms were quite close and within walking distance, some of those whose parents were able to acquire more land and expand their businesses were quite far.

However, when the COVID-19 pandemic started, restrictive health protocols were implemented by their local government, halting business operations and forcing farmers to deal with a number of problems. Some had no other choice but to sell their family lands owned to pay their growing debts, to deal with wasted harvests because of numerous interruptions in farming operations caused by the lockdowns. Financial priorities also shifted – what's most important is that they are able to eat three times a day and provide the extra care, milk, and other necessities their young children require. When asked about how he supported his family despite the financial struggle brought about by the pandemic, one of the informants, Mr. SK, a full-time farmer and househusband answered, *“basta't may pambili siya ng gatas niya ayun. Konting makain at may bigas, kakain ng tatlong beses, ganun”* (As long we can buy [our kid's] milk, that's it. A little bit for food and for rice, [as long as] we can eat three times a day).

There are also farmers who saw the pandemic as an opportunity for their business to grow. Ms. GC, an owner of an eco-farm, was able to gain significant profit from many tourists who visited her farm after the lockdowns were lifted. She was aided by the local government in promoting their business. Mr. CH, earned enough money to build a house of his own from selling potted flowers. He was able to take advantage of the *“plantito-plantita”* trend at the peak of its popularity, in the first few months of the pandemic.

The pandemic also allowed children to participate more in helping their families in the farming business, although children were asked to make sure to prioritize their studies. Some children were incentivized with rewards to motivate them to help out with easy tasks in the farm, which now include creating social media accounts for promotion and online selling (as a way of adapting to the growing digital world). But it is common for younger children, (ages 3 to 6) to be restricted from participating since they are more likely to damage the produce



inside. Though, this is not the case with Mrs. NC opted to assign her child easier tasks, enumerating the following: “...[kapag] maglagay kami ng abono, magbuhat pag magharvest kami, mag-ano ng papel. Ito kasi (malaysian mums), kailangang papelan mo.” (When we apply *abono*, carry stuff during harvest time, take care of papers, since these (malaysian mums) need to be covered in paper).

Nurturing style, consumption habits, and safety

Farmers in Bahong were generally raised by their family members. However, it was evident that women – mothers and grandmothers – were more involved in looking after their children while the male members worked in the farm. If both parents were involved in and busy tending to their farm, assistance was asked from other family members (such as aunts and grandmothers). In some instances, especially if the children are adolescent, the children were left alone to take care of themselves with the permission of their parents and/or guardians.

Such children were taught basic household chores – such as tidying up the house and cooking – which often leads to value independence, and gain the ability to take care of themselves at a young age. At the onset of the shift to flower farming, resources were not as abundant as they are now that the industry has boomed. The farmers (as children) had limited access to different food options. Some of them had mentioned that they were expected to eat what was given to them, usually vegetables and meat dishes.

The practice of vegetable farming was not entirely eradicated – some farmers still planted vegetables for additional income and personal consumption. On the other hand, meat was scarce, and was only available if a close family member or friend had some extra to share, or if a family member had the opportunity to go to the market to shop for meat.

On the other hand, a certain change happened to the number and the type of people that look after the farmers’ children. While some of them were still being taken care of by their parents, some of the farmers have also resorted to acquiring external help in raising their children. This addition may have been brought on by their increased financial resources from the booming flower farming industry, as well additional income from their other non-farming jobs. However, those who didn’t hire external help had applied child-rearing strategies similar to the ones they experienced in their own childhood. Some children were taught basic household skills – mainly cooking simple instant meals such as noodles and eggs. Because children are so used to consuming instant, ready-made food, parents deem their children picky-eaters since they are more inclined to eating such food items instead of eating what is already on the table (vegetables and



Greenhouses as forbidden spaces for children (view from inside)

meat.) Asked about what they feed their children, Mr. SK said: *“Karamihan, mga kwan lang, mga frozen...Alam mo naman mga bata ngayon...”* (Most of them are just [served] frozen [food like ice cream]. You know how kids are these days...) This, however, indicates that parents are more lenient when it comes to their children’s food interests and appetite. This may be because they can now afford to have different food types, on top of having different food options due to the growing market and demand for such food items.



But consumption of “quick and easy meals” among children doesn’t occur often—parents, as much as possible, get involved with their children’s diet and encourage them to eat nutritious food. However, compared to previous times where vegetables could be easily procured because vegetable farms were more common in Bahong, parents nowadays can only access vegetable produce in the market, and from generous neighbors and relatives. (Some neighbors and relatives who cultivate small vegetable farms seasonally give away their rejected harvests.)

Unfortunately, vegetables in the market became quite expensive because of the inflation and pandemic, so some parents would lean more towards a meat diet that is cheaper. Still, there are young children in Bahong, especially toddlers, who prefer consuming vegetables.

Parents are delighted to find that their children are more inclined to eating vegetables instead of being picky, but knowing that these nutritious produce are sprayed with various harmful chemicals, some of them have limited their children’s vegetable consumption. Most of the time though, parents would set this concern aside in order for their children to maintain a well-balanced diet.

Their ample exposure to farming practices during their childhood, have made the farmers quite aware of the dangers that could occur in greenhouses, gardens, and lands. Although they were encouraged to join in different farming activities, the farmers were discouraged from participating in spraying/using chemicals to keep them safe while being involved. When they became parents themselves, they applied the same measures to their children, making sure that their children would avoid being exposed to their newly-sprayed greenhouses and the negative side-effects of agrichemicals. Asked if he allowed his children to enter their greenhouse, Mr. AS said: *“Ah, hindi. Eh... hindi magandang papasok ang bata dito sa greenhouse kasi, ‘yong mga inii-spray namin.”* (Ah, no. It’s not good to let children enter the greenhouse because of the stuff that we spray.) Children were also told not to consume the flowing water from the river because it is contaminated. The toxic landscape of farmlands of Benguet has been discussed in the dissertation of Ruth Sidchongan-Batani (2015).⁹ Nevertheless, parents are still inclined to use these hazardous substances because they are highly beneficial for the flowers they farm. So instead,

limitations are implemented among children as a way of ensuring their safety, but that doesn't mean that they are not allowed to play outside and socialize. Although, when the pandemic hit, parents limited their social interactions by having them stay at home or and making sure they wore face masks all the time. Adults also lessened their visits to their farms during this time for fear of catching the virus and infecting the children who are deemed most vulnerable.

Children in Bahong develop their intrapersonal and social skills through various mediums. One of them is through the consumption of online and/or digital media. Though already done frequently because of today's easy access, consumption of online and/or digital media may have also boomed due to the mobility restrictions implemented during the pandemic. Many children are exposed to various languages, but many of them are more inclined to speak English because of the educational videos that they watch online.

The content of these videos also help children learn fundamental skills, which they develop without the supervision of their parents. Still, most children are able to understand the language spoken inside their homes and adults are still able to communicate with them using the common languages used in Bahong, such as Ilocano, Ibaloi, and Kankanaey. Though, exposure to online media also led some children's increased interest in their gadgets rather than helping out on the farm.

These examples showcase how the farming and household practices correspond to the economic, political, and social changes brought upon not just by the shift to flower farming, but also by the different important events and changes that were happening in the country and around the world.

Such events may have also affected how the community sees farming as an industry and as a career, for themselves at present and for their children in the future.

Aspirations

Growing up in a farming community, especially in a farming household, has shaped the overall experience, knowledge, and perceptions of farmers towards the farming industry. These, as well as other factors, helped them in deciding what they wanted to do in the future. Some of the farmers were involved in the trade during their childhood in hopes of making it into a career when they grew up. Some of them were simply involved to learn the value of working hard, without the expectation of inheriting the business



Another greenhouse as forbidden spaces for children (view from inside)

itself. While it was generally expected that their parents would pass on to their children their gardens, greenhouses, and lands, the farmers were also initially encouraged to obtain their undergraduate education and venture into a different field.

Prior to their current occupation, farmers in Bahong had other jobs and/or career paths. While a lot of them were able to finish college, some of them no longer pursued their original career plan depending on their board exam outcomes. One respondent, Mrs. NC, said: *“Tapos oh, nakapagtapos naman ako pero sa exam, hindi ako...pumasa! Kaya, ito talaga siguro.”* (I was able to graduate, but I didn’t pass the exam. That’s why maybe this is it for me.) Some farmers were able to pass their board exams and continue their initial careers, but physiological issues (age and physical ailments) and marital responsibilities still pushed these farmers to abandon their initial jobs and careers.

Both male and female farmers also had instances wherein they went to Japan to work as construction or factory workers before becoming farmers. Another female farmer worked outside of Bahong as a hired household helper to earn more money before getting married. Some also mentioned that they pursued farming out of obligation to provide for their families, or out of expectation to pursue a farming career, or out of shame from not being able to pursue their original career path. Familiarity with farming practices has also been cited as another reason why some choose to become farmers, or to come back to farming after trying a different occupation.

Some also believe that they were ‘destined’ to work as farmers, especially after experiencing failures in their former occupations, since it was what their parents did and what they grew up doing. In some cases, people from other farming communities would go to Bahong to seek jobs as workers in farms or as helpers that assist their employers in taking care of children. Some of these workers were unable to finish their education because of poverty, but some also mentioned that they prefer farming rather than pursuing an education since they already know how to earn money from it.

Farmers, then look at these experiences, as well as their children’s interest in farming, as factors to consider in passing on their flower production businesses or lands to their children. Although most farmers are willing to hand down their farms to their children, they prioritize and value their children’s preferences and decisions in the matter, and would even encourage them to obtain an undergraduate degree in a different field. Some farmers cite the lack of familiarity and interest in farming as reasons why they would still leave the decision of inheriting the farm up to their children. As farmers who know the trade and are aware of its



advantages and disadvantages, they express worry about how their children would fare in it, lacking the skills and interest.

Patriarchal notions when it comes to gender roles were also still evident among the informants we interviewed, especially in terms of inheriting the business and the lands. Some female farmers, although willing to hand down their farms to their daughters, still expect male members of the family (or in this case, their daughter's future husband) to take over the operations in the farm. Mrs. MT is hesitant to let her daughter, an older child, inherit their farm: "*Sana (...), sana, sana, pero babae eh. And depende rin kung yung mapapangasawa nila eh ganun din*" (*I hope so, but she's a girl. And it also depends if the one they would marry would be [into farming, too].*)

Conclusion

The shift from vegetable to flower farming in Bahong driven by environmental, socio-economic and political factors brought some changes to the child-rearing practices in the farming community. The indigenous flower farmers of Bahong continue to pursue agricultural cultivation that has for years supported them and their families financially. However, their chosen path is largely susceptible to various shifts and trends, especially in the current economic situation such that the challenge of an unpredictable future is still something that they must face head-on.

The farmers' knowledge, training, and experiences in growing up in a farming community like Bahong, in a world of rapid globalization and an ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, has shaped not only how they practice farming, but also how they raise their children. How they nurture, influence, and protect their children have also shaped their children's skills, attitudes, and interests, which, together with their aforementioned farming and overall life experiences, affect what they want their children to do moving forward.

Congruent with the barangay's goals of sustaining a productive farming industry and maintaining children's health and well-being, the local government of Bahong and its community are

challenged to provide and foster proper avenues and projects to restore its industry's bloom while making sure the children are not left behind.

Endnotes

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