

ambitious desires such as solar-powered water pumps.

Whether large or small scale, almost everyone in the community would like to finally have an existent and consistent community water system. They are aware that some residents are having difficulty with acquiring and saving up on water.

Residents and farmers constantly engage with water for everyday life and survival. People of the community adjust and improvise whenever water flow suddenly stops in times of crisis.

At the same time, water flow has corresponded with human activities and changes in sourcing and water management. Water in the *sitio* back then only moved in streams from lakes, creeks, and springs. Now, it passes through different channels and makes contact with structures unimaginable in the 80s.

Although this is the case, 'too much' water has also caused inconveniences for humans. During our stay, a typhoon passed. Little rainfall would already cause landslides on the steep slopes and mountainous terrain, making it dangerous to walk along the narrow roads. Despite this, humans and water in *Lamut* flow together. Humans and the water in the community always find a way to meet in the middle and maintain the flow.

This study recognizes that more can be explored in similar research such as specifications on water acquisition structures and a more detailed discussion on water quality. These may provide further insight and discourse on how to improve water systems among communities in need.

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The limits and possibilities of "garage": An ethnographic exploration on the local transportation system of Bahong, La Trinidad, Benguet amid the COVID-19 pandemic

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Garage units at their station in Barangay Bahong, La Trinidad, Benguet

Introduction

From day to night, the narrow streets of Bahong, La Trinidad, Benguet are alive with fumes and sounds from various farming activities and different vehicles passing through its roads. Making up the largest part of this local transportation are Tamaraw FX units, which are commonly seen within the community as they bring locals, agrichemicals, and even tourists to their destinations. “Garage” (pronounced as *garaj*) refers to both the vehicle and the public transportation system used by the locals in Bahong.

Established around two decades ago, the Garage started as a mode of transportation in KM 6, La Trinidad, Benguet and eventually spread into other areas in La Trinidad due to public demand. One of these garage stations is situated in Upper Tomay, a sitio in Barangay Bahong. The Garage vehicles are, as defined by the drivers, phased-out taxi cabs. They are privately owned. The vehicles are parked in garage stations where they wait for passengers, and that is how they got their name, described one Garage driver. The vehicles can be hired in two ways: (1) by directly going to the station and (2) by call or text.

While seamless access to significant destinations like the market, workplaces, and schools influence the quality of life of humans around the world, there are circumstances that can crucially disrupt our mobility¹. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Philippines, for example, non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) were implemented by local governments as precautionary measures. These include stay-at-home orders and social distancing guidelines, reducing physical contact. These resulted in unprecedented changes to individual career paths and normal mobility patterns. The motivations, then, to pursue Garage driving amid pandemic restrictions and despite other challenges arising from its informal operations, form the subject of inquiry of this paper.

Particularly, this research aims to address the following questions: First, how do the garage drivers experience (im)mobility, including local transportation, in Bahong, La Trinidad, Benguet during the pandemic?

Second, under what conditions garage drivers’ career path lead to garage driving? How do these reflect the impact of COVID-19, socioeconomic conditions, and personal aspirations?

This article, with its ethnographic accounts of garage drivers, contributes a lived experience of mobility and argues that human mobility involves much more than mere physical movement, as it is affected by significant global and local processes such as global health crises. With these findings, this research hopes to add to the growing literature about pandemic mobility.

This study was carried out between June 24 and July 8, 2022 in Bahong, La Trinidad, Benguet. Due to limited time, this study gave special attention to one of the three garage stations servicing commuters to and from Central Bahong: the Town Garage Station. The other two garage stations are located in Alapang and Tomay Junction. During our field research, there were 6-8 vehicles in each station per day. There are 18 active Garage drivers servicing Central Bahong. The researchers employed key informant interviews to get emic and in-depth information on the knowledge and experiences of garage drivers. Verbal informed consent were acquired from nine (9) garage drivers prior to recording the interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 to 50 minutes and contained a brief introduction of the researchers and the research topic. According to the president of the garage drivers’ association, there are eighteen (18) active drivers working at the Upper Tomay station. However, only six (6) to eight (8) drivers operate and thus can be seen present in the garage station per day. With the researchers’ limited time in the field, this paper drew narratives from nine (9) participants. The number of interviews was also based on the drivers’ availability and willingness to participate in a discussion.

The recorded interviews were transcribed, then tabulated for data analysis. Data relevant to the research were made into a flowchart highlighting the interconnections between and among themes that emerged during the analysis. The researchers also

practiced participant observation during the two-week fieldwork by serving as garage passengers on several trips inside and outside Barangay Bahong. Lastly, we utilized Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT)² to frame, describe, analyze, and explain the relationship between and among garage drivers, garage passengers, and the rest of the Bahong community.

Dubbed as the “The Rose Capital of the Philippines” or “The Rose Garden of the Philippines”, Bahong is home to extensive plantations of roses and other cut flowers that supply Manila, Ilocos, Bicol, and other lowland areas. Based on the Bahong Ecological Profile (2017)³, about 343 households, which accounts for 36.45% of the total number of families, were engaged in agriculture in 2010. Moreover, 540 hectares of Bahong’s land, which is 82.17% of its total, is dedicated to agriculture and cut flower production. Indeed, a significant portion of Bahong’s community life revolves around agricultural spaces and the network of people that works to create, reproduce, rework, and maintain such spaces. However, with the onset of a global pandemic, mass celebrations and other onsite events were temporarily halted, resulting in a significant decline in demand for cut flowers from Barangay Bahong.

With the drop in cut flower sales, farmers had to find alternative sources of income to meet their daily needs. Iles⁴ suggests that contemporary life is heavily reliant on the transportation of goods from where they are produced to where they are needed, and the transportation of people from their homes to where they must go to pursue significant activities of daily life: work, education, commerce, and leisure activities. However, mobility made possible by transportation is not just limited to physical movement, as it is also a measure and reflection of the material, political, and socioeconomic dimensions of a community. Here, local transportation systems can be observed to reinforce, and at the same time erase inequalities⁵.

In Bahong, the barangay recognizes the presence of garage vehicles and allows them to ply the streets. However, when traveling outside Bahong,

garage drivers disguise their vehicles as private cars for fear of being caught, fined, and having their cars confiscated by Land Transportation Office (LTO) officials who regularly patrol the streets for public vehicles lacking franchise permits, among others. This constant fear of being penalized often discourages garage drivers from operating outside Bahong for long. Thus, although it can provide the community mobility, its potential is still limited because it is not formally recognized as a form of public transport. Allowing the garage drivers to operate, at least within the barangay level perpetuates a kind of limited local transportation system that not sanctioned beyond the barangay, and hence restricts mobility. Such conditions point to how physical movement is an innate part of human life, yet there are socially constructed processes that constrain spatial mobility in distinct, standardized ways, such that immobility and inequality are maintained.

Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT)⁶ probes into the systems that bind the social and the non-social. Actor-Network Theory posits that networks are not only bounded systems but are instead organic structures that may change over time. Furthermore, ANT urges us to challenge the long-existing nature/culture dualism that seeks to discredit the existence of networks or entanglements of humans and nonhumans involved in the world-making process⁷. Identifying these networks is essential to properly examine the dynamics between and amongst various social actors (e.g., garage drivers, flower farmers, and flower dealers), their organizations, and environment. Such interactions direct us not only to the formation, preservation, and disruption of networks.

Garage driving and other jobs

The working routine of Garage drivers in Barangay Bahong is mainly divided between two jobs—Garage driving and flower farming. In this case, flower farming pertains to growing either potted flowers, cut flowers, or both. Among five drivers involved in flower farming, only one checks and tends to his farm every morning to weed before going to the Garage station. The other

four visit their farms only once or twice every two weeks to apply pesticides and harvest flowers. Meanwhile, Garage driving takes up most of their time, starting their day at 5:30 in the morning and ending at 8:00 in the evening.

Often, social drinking happens after work, where drivers share a bottle of gin at a designated area beside the Garage station. This occurs as a celebratory ritual when one earns more than the typical day's income or simply as a self-reinforcement after a tiring work day ("*Pag nakarami.*" On days when we earn more than enough). "*After work. Kung minsan nga'y uumpisahan namin sa alas singko, ganon. Pag wala nang pasahero. Kung minsan alas otso hanggang alas-diyes.*" (Oftentimes we start drinking at around 5:00 PM, when there are no more passengers. Sometimes drink from 8:00 PM until 10:00 PM.)

There are six (6) working days and one (1) coding day a week. During the latter, the drivers spend their time on car maintenance and repair, farming, accomplishing household chores, and personal rest. Moreover, some of their regular working days are not entirely spent on the road. Other times, they go home at any point of the day to tend to their farms, do household chores, or rest.

Six (6) out of nine (9) informants venture into flower farming, particularly anthurium farming, while simultaneously working as Garage drivers. These individuals traditionally come from families currently or formerly involved in the flower farming industry. Aside from inheriting the flower farming job from their families, Garage drivers also acquired flower farming skills from their spouses who either worked in flower farms here or abroad.

Demand for potted plants during the COVID-19 pandemic motivated our informants to work as flower farmers. According to Advincula & Sunga⁸ in their study on the emergence of "*plantito/plantita*" during the pandemic, the community quarantine restrictions provided an opportunity for people to engage in home gardening. The rise of social media posts about home gardening influenced people to try this activity and therefore caused an increase in the demand for potted plants. In this regard, home gardening serves not just as a way of securing household food security but also livelihood and income generation⁹.

Despite the prevalence of flower farming in Bahong, it is important to note that there are still informants who are not involved in farming, albeit belonging to a family of flower farmers, as they chose to pursue a different career path.

With the exception of two (2) informants, the Garage drivers in Bahong currently have other jobs and businesses like flower farming, construction works, auto repairing, and buying and selling of lands and other properties that they do simultaneously with Garage driving. Jeepney



Passengers waiting for "garage"

driving is one of the dominant jobs the Garage drivers entered before shifting to their current work as Garage drivers. When it comes to farming, Garage drivers only grow potted plants or cut flowers that do not require much work, such as anthuriums, since they only consider flower farming as a source of supplemental income.

The ubiquity of Japan-related stickers on Garage vehicles is also of interest. When looking at the outer appearance of Garage units in Bahong, one can observe the presence of Japanese icons (i.e., the Japanese flag, texts written in Japanese, and the Rising Sun flag) in almost every one of them. As Geertz¹⁰ noted, artifacts are loaded with cultural meanings. In this regard, the Japanese stickers attached to Garage vehicles reflect the identity of some drivers as Nikkei-jin, which Ohno (2008)¹¹ defined as Japanese descendants who emigrated to the Philippines before and during the Asia-Pacific War. Some Garage drivers who identify as Nikkei-jin worked as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), specifically as factory workers and oyster farmers, while there are those who only lived and worked in Bahong. The former used part of their savings from working in Japan to acquire a Garage unit.

Garage driving is a sought-after job in Bahong because of the various social, physical, and financial benefits it provides to the drivers, such as time flexibility and extra income. Such advantages make it possible for the drivers to still tend to their garden, apply for additional jobs, and spend time on leisure activities. The absence of a fixed schedule and established work structure reflects these benefits, allowing Garage drivers to have different routines and daily activities. Essentially, their routines vary according to their personal preference, other jobs, and the demands of life outside Garage driving.

Restrictions on mobility in Bahong during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic played a key role in the creation of Garage drivers. Jeepney drivers and flower farmers before becoming Garage drivers, the informants' previous sources of income were disrupted during the pandemic lockdown when public transportation was prohibited and demands for cut flowers declined.

When the general community quarantine was imposed by the Department of Health (DOH) in 2020, safety measures were implemented limiting movement and transportation, among others. Only authorized persons were allowed to go out to take care of essential goods and services. Because jeepneys, a mode of public transportation and an essential part of people's mobility, were banned as part of the state's effort to enforce physical distancing, the residents of Bahong needed to find an alternative

way to go from one place to another. The former jeepney drivers and flower farmers from Bahong utilized this demand to shift towards Garage driving.

They catered to residents who needed to go to the market to buy food and groceries, and to farmers who sought to transport plants and obtain their farming supplies from the town proper.

“Alam ko ang hirap ng farmer na walang sasakyan. Kaya ako noon, ibinenta ko rin ‘yong isang sasakyan ko, [nagsimula] ako [mag]-garden. Mahirap pala kaya nag-utang ako ulit ng pambili nitong [sasakyan].” (I know the struggle of a farmer without a transport vehicle. When I sold my vehicle to start venturing into gardening, I learned that it is truly difficult without a means of transportation, so I loaned money to buy another vehicle.)

Garage and the community

The networks of Garage drivers are deeply entangled with the day-to-day flow of community life in Bahong. Garage, which is the most accessible public transportation means in the area, caters to all types of commuters in Bahong, including students, employees, tourists, market-goers, and farmers. The role of Garage in the community is not limited to the movement of people, but also to that of the goods and services that passengers carry along with them. Such a case is especially true of flower farmers who employ the help of Garage drivers to accomplish farm tasks.

Flower farmers frequently employ the service of Garage drivers to buy pesticides, and other farm necessities, especially when procuring fertilizer or “ebony.” Regular taxis often reject flower farmers because of the foul smell of the *abono*, an organic fertilizer of chicken manure. Garage drivers seem to not reject these trips due to the fact that several of them are flower farmers themselves, allowing them to empathize well with the experiences and struggles of flower farming. The flower farmers also hire Garages to deliver

flowers to various stations at Shilan and KM5-areas where flowers are sorted out before being delivered to flower shops in Dangwa, Pampanga, and Bulacan, among others.

The type of service that a passenger can avail of is relative to his or her relationship with Garage drivers. Throughout the years, longtime Garage drivers have acquired a number of *suki* or regular passengers among the residents of Bahong, which mainly consist of market-goers, farmers, students, and employees. One could say that a *suki* can avail of special privileges because of their close ties with certain Garage drivers. Such services include late-night pick-ups, especially during emergencies, or discounts given to passengers. *“Kung minsan may ihahatid, lalo na kung emergency. Kasi kung may emergency d’yan, tatawag sila, dadalin natin sa ospital. Yan ang mga tinutulungan nating mga tao dito pag may ganitong garage.”* (During emergencies, the residents call for a Garage, then we take them to the hospital. Helping people is part of the Garage’s service.) However, such types of service can go the other way around, placing the Garage drivers at the receiving end, as some Garage drivers mentioned how a *suki* would sometimes add an extra tip to the regular fare.

Although operating informally, Garage drivers have established an association to organize their activities, including creating policies and regulations that guide their daily operations. The association was formed upon the request of Garage commuters and as a response to an initiative set by the barangay officials to regulate Garage fares. Seven (7) officers and eighteen (18) active, regular members constitute the association of Garage drivers. Together, they hold intermittent meetings in a *sari-sari* store close to the Garage station and talk about safety reminders or changes in fare regulations, among others.

Overall, the operation of Garage vehicles, albeit informal, fills in the lack of public transport vehicles in the area needed by farmers, students, employees, market-goers, and other people that need to move around to accomplish their affairs inside or outside Bahong. The contribution of Garage drivers, however,

is not only limited to the transport service it offers, but extends to the social work they do in the community (e.g., *abuloy* for the dead, donation of money to road cleaners during clean-up drives, etc.). This suggests that Garage driving is significant not only to drivers and operators who identify it as their primary source of livelihood, but also to the community of Barangay Bahong.

Garage driving as livelihood: Challenges and aspirations

Garage driving in Barangay Bahong is significantly shaped by socioeconomic circumstances that inform the challenges and opportunities drivers’ experienced, and aspirations formed vis-a-vis their livelihood. Inarguably, lived experiences of mobility in Bahong, La Trinidad, Benguet, is informed by socioeconomic and political processes enmeshed in their local transportation system. For one, the conditions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the drivers to trade formal employment (jeepney driving) for one that is informal yet unrestricted, economically viable, and easily patronized by the community (Garage driving). This sparked an increase in the number of Garage drivers and thus became the impetus for easier mobility among the locals in Bahong.

However, the economic trends involving the recent oil price hike placed financial burden on drivers and passengers alike, leading drivers to reduce the days they drive their garage cars. This limits the number of garage vehicles available for service in the community. Prior to the price hike, according to our informants, there are more cars/ drivers in a ‘station’. Only few of these cars are owned by the drivers.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Garage driving has been identified as both a primary and supplemental source of income among different drivers. Throughout the interviews, Garage drivers would often mention their need to provide food for their families as the impetus to work hard (*“Para sa mga bata”* For my children; *“Para may makain.”* To put food on the table).

However, the income from Garage driving is said to be unstable or *“pana-panahon”*, varying from day to day and from one Garage driver to the next. (*“Tyempuhan lang, depende sa panahon.”*). In particular, they identified Mondays (start of the work week), Fridays (last day of work), Saturdays (market day), and Sundays (church day) as the busiest days of the week. The busiest times of the day, moreover, are seven thirty to ten o’clock in the morning and four to six o’clock in the evening, when employees need a ride to and from their workplaces. After a day’s work, a Garage driver is able to earn around 500-1500 Philippine pesos.

They also cited other factors that impact their income on a day-to-day basis. These include the relatively recent oil price hike, varying weather conditions, the total number of on-call Garage drivers, and the restrictions brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic, among others. Although Garage driving is not consistently lucrative, this job remains to be greatly sought after by the drivers because it allows them to bring home income on a daily basis. It was seen as an alternative job during the pandemic, when jeepney operations had to come to a halt and the flower farmers saw a huge decline in flower demand. One interview participant expressed this sentiment:

“Nagdesisyon [ako] na mag-garage na lang para mayroon ding maibili ng bangus. Pag nag-gagarden lang, kulang naman.”
(I decided to venture into Garage driving so I could be able to afford fish. Gardening alone does not provide sufficient income.)

Aside from financial opportunities amid the pandemic, the drivers also believe that Garage driving is a relatively easier job compared to jeepney driving where they experience stress from everyday traffic and exposure to pollution, and also in comparison to flower farming that demands a longer period of time. In Garage driving, they have the flexibility and the liberty to control their own time.

Moreover, there were informants who expressed

that they settled for the job due to the lack of career choices available to them (“*Walang papasukan dito eh.*” There are no other jobs here). Some claimed that they do not possess any relevant skills to apply for “more difficult” jobs. This strengthens their interest to highly seek a job as a Garage driver. As one informant put it:

“Yun lang kasi ang ano, wala akong alam na ibang trabaho. Yon lang ang parang madaling pagkakitaan ngayon.” (Garage driving is the only job we know that can allow us to earn money easily.)

Further, the narrow roads in Bahong, as well as the informal operations of the Garage, are actualized by government responses, policies, and attention (or the lack thereof) placed on the existing conditions of the community. Although perceived challenges in Bahong vary from one person to the other, such challenges present in the community would nevertheless condition the way people respond to and are shaped by the issues that surround them. For instance, because the roads have been narrow for decades, the drivers are already conditioned to see it as normal, and therefore not needing any attention from the local government. This kind of perception creates a “resilient attitude” as drivers claim that they do not perceive it as a problem because they are already accustomed to it. This embodied resilience was articulated by one informant: “*Bigayan lang.*” (Giving way to other drivers is what’s needed.) and “*Sanay na kami.*” (We’re used to it.).

Conclusion

With the halt in jeepney operations, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted drivers in Bahong to switch to driving Garage vehicles. This form of transportation has become an essential part of the locals’ daily life for various reasons. For one, it makes mobility easier by filling in the lack of public transport vehicles in the area needed by farmers, students, employees, market-goers, and other people that need to move around to accomplish their day-to-day tasks. Garage vehicles also

serve as the means of transportation not only of people, but also of livelihood necessities such as fertilizers for farming. Moreover, the existence of a Garage station in Bahong has provided an alternative source of income to drivers who lost their prior jobs in the pandemic. In turn, these drivers formed an association that strives to give back to the residents of Bahong through small monetary contributions on certain occasions, such as community service activities and wakes of a community member.

There are many manifestations of the Garage drivers’ ties with flower farming. Although not all of them work as flower farmers and grew up acquiring or inheriting this form of livelihood from their family, each Garage driver still plays a huge role in the flow of farmers and farming necessities alike. This certainly keeps flower farming operations easier and more accessible in the community. Aside from that, the drivers also have other jobs and businesses along with Garage driving. From the interviews, we learned that they were also involved in construction work, property rental, and auto repair. This plurality of jobs stems from the fact that Garage driving alone is not sufficient in providing financial security to drivers. It represents the everyday challenges they face to obtain a decent wage. Moreover, the capacity to work multiple jobs is made possible by their flexible working environment.

To add, the working conditions of drivers and the lived experience of mobility and local transportation in Barangay Bahong are informed by many political processes. Among these are the informal operations of the Garage and the road problems in Bahong which are both affected by the local government’s response and attention given to the issues present in their sector.

The findings of this research may be important for policy-making in the local government level of Bahong, La Trinidad, Benguet. City and Barangay officials may use this paper as a basis to see the lived realities and issues faced by the Garage sector, and come up with the best course of action to further cooperate and initiate a dialogue with

them towards more mass-oriented transportation policies. Additionally, this study may also be used as a springboard for future research on the Garage sector in La Trinidad, Benguet, considering that local studies on this sector are scarce. Essentially, this paper provided an overview of the working life of the Garage drivers stationed in Upper Tomay, Bahong. However, there are still many social and political factors influencing the aspirations and lived realities of the Garage drivers that need more in-depth probing. Religion, for example, is an important part of Bahong’s culture that was not tackled in this paper. Future researchers can delve into this, and perhaps interview more drivers to have a more holistic view of the Garage sector.

Overall, the working life of the drivers can be characterized by many things: flexibility, resilience, and service, among others. Indeed, the intricate networks of people, places, and things constituting the “Garage” in Bahong signals the multiple, overlapping identities of Garage drivers and the rest of the people making up the community. The preservation and persistence of such networks are determined by the value that they hold, particularly in maintaining key livelihood activities that sustain people, its potential to strengthen social cohesiveness, and its power to ensure the proper flow of the community life in Bahong.

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