

Producing Spectacles, Appropriating Traditions: The Case of Baguio's Panagbenga Festival

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Panagbenga is an annual festival held in Baguio City, Philippines every February, celebrating Cordillera's flora and promoting the region's culture and economy. Despite the festival being initiated fairly recently, it has found its way to many Filipinos' calendars. Every year, it attracts millions of visitors and contributes to the city's flower industry and tourism. It is curious, however, that even with the festival's popularity, very few social scientists have been intrigued by the festival's inception and traditionalization. To address this gap, this study offers a preliminary examination of *Panagbenga* using nuanced anthropological descriptions of tradition. Central to its analysis of traditionalization is the modification, institutionalization, and multiplication of festival practices that serve various purposes. In exploring the intersection of cultural expressions and economic practices during *Panagbenga*, the study validated the fluidity of tradition, refuting the prevailing Hobsbawmian distinction between "genuine" and "invented" traditions.

Keywords: Panagbenga, Baguio, tradition, traditionalization, festival, tourism

Panagbenga, or "season of blooming" in the *Kankanaey* language,¹ is a month-long annual festival held in Baguio City² every February to celebrate the region's flora and pay homage to its people's history, beliefs, and traditions. Since its launch in 1996, the festival has consistently attracted millions of tourists every year, boosting Baguio's flower industry and tourism (Malanes, 2014; Arnaldo, 2018). Although its organizers introduce new attractions each year, activities regarded as "festival mainstays" have given *Panagbenga* its identity. The most popular among festival-goers are the Grand Street Dance Parade, an exhibition of traditional Cordillera dances, and the Grand Float Parade, a parade of street dancers, marching bands, and flower-decorated floats. These showcases of Cordilleran culture, talent, and creativity mostly happen in Baguio's Session Road, the city's primary thoroughfare. Meanwhile, Baguio's Burnham Park, the city's central park, hosts an equally famous landscape and flower competition. Adjacent roads are also used for bazaars, helping local entrepreneurs market and sell their food, artworks, handicrafts, among others.

Despite repeated success in drawing large crowds and promoting Baguio's culture and economy, *Panagbenga* has been previously assessed only to a very limited extent. Publications about the festival are either government-sponsored research that focuses on its economic impact (see Nagpala, 2014; Fajilan & Manipon, n.d.) or feature stories from local and national news outlets. To fill this literature gap, the study explores *Panagbenga*'s cultural dimension and asks the following questions: Can *Panagbenga* be considered a tradition, given its recent inception? If yes, then how

did it become a tradition? How was it accepted and reproduced, and how does it manifest Cordilleraneness?

In answering these questions, this preliminary study focuses not on the festival's birth but the process of its traditionalization. It argues that *Panagbenga* has become a tradition that spotlights the familiar intersection of cultural and economic practices in the Philippines. Traditionalization here does not refer to what Mould (2005) described as a group's evocation of the past in "an attempt to provide authority to their narrative performance and interpretation" (p. 257). Rather, it refers to the institutionalization and multiplication of new festival practices, which involves the appropriation of past symbols and lifeways, and results in the formation of a new identity marker and production of economic and cultural capital. Also expanding Beyer and Finke's (2019) bottom-up conceptualization of the process, the study looks into various agents' roles in the conscious production, repetition, and formalization of traditions.

The study is divided into four sections. The first section problematizes prevailing definitions of tradition to establish why *Panagbenga* is both a tradition and a convergence of Philippine traditions. This is followed by an enumeration of a few Cordilleran practices modified by *Panagbenga*, and later, an examination of various cultural and economic activities that integrate *Panagbenga* to other Filipino traditions. The summary of the study's findings and analysis are presented in the final section.



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Rethinking the Notions of Tradition

Tradition, according to Oxford Dictionary (n.d.), is "the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation," or "a long-established custom or belief that has been passed on from one

generation to another.” It is also “a set of beliefs and practices that share (or are believed to share) some relationship to the past” (Turner, 1997, p. 348). Central to these definitions are the words transmission, generation, and the past, implying a sense of continuity, longevity, and historicity. Additionally, tradition shapes a population’s shared identity. Linnekin (1983) describes it as a “conscious model of past lifeways that people use in the construction of their identity” (p. 241). It is a practice that has existed since time immemorial and cultivates one’s identity as it maintains the very fabric of society.

Despite attaching antiquity to its nature, some traditions emerge in recent times. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983/2000) describe them as “invented traditions,” or expeditiously constructed and formally instituted practices that instill various norms and behavior through governmental rules and repetition (p. 1). They claim that traditions consciously manipulate symbols and strategically use history to imply continuity, legitimize actions, and forge societal cohesion (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983/2000, pp. 9, 12), serving the agenda and purpose of the state and elite.

With new formalized practices classified as mere “inventions,” traditions inherit all the malicious connotations associated with the term. It also denies them authenticity, for “genuine” tradition, following Hobsbawm and other earlier definitions, must have evolved over a long period. That said, one finds semantic issues in the association of the word “invented” with “tradition.” The idea that all traditions are invented creates suspicions to cultural outsiders, especially to disinterested social scientists and other curious observers (Hanson, 1989 in Turner, 1997, p. 351).

Criticizing the Hobsbawmian notion of tradition, Turner (1997) posited that the gaps in the discourse of “invention” result from an inadequate understanding of “the historical process that produced the particular political fields within which elites must operate” (p. 357). By veering away from approaches that focus on particular historical moments in which tradition emerges, it becomes possible to view tradition not as a deliberate manipulation of symbols but as a product of present conditions and enduring structures. These structures not only influence human interactions but also alter the configuration and interpretation of human practices (p. 373). More crucially, issues concerning authenticity are deemed irrelevant, for such an approach renders the distinction between genuine and invented traditions obsolete. With all traditions considered inherently authentic, anthropological concerns are centered on how every tradition is accepted and reproduced by individuals and societies.

Following Turner’s approach, it becomes possible to see newly established practices outside the discourse of political fabrications and hegemony. This study views tradition (in this case, *Panagbenga*) not as an invention but as a structurally shaped practice that is perpetuated or modified to serve human’s present cultural and economic purposes. *Panagbenga*’s strategic modification of practices and deployment of past symbols are explained as outcomes of people’s contextually situated actions. At the same time, *Panagbenga*, like any tradition, is constantly influenced by a particular economic system that affects people’s actions.

The next section offers a preliminary analysis of *Panagbenga*’s traditionalization. It explains how *Panagbenga* festival practices are accepted and continued, as well as how Cordillera traditions are appropriated or modified for various purposes.

Traditionalizing *Panagbenga*, Modifying Calendars and Practices

Although it was the John Hay Poro Point Development Corporation (JPDC) that came up with the idea of holding an annual festival to promote Baguio's flower and tourism industries, support from Baguio City's local government was instrumental in *Panagbenga's* traditionalization. First, the local government played a pivotal role "in facilitating the granting of permits and providing support services that created a safe and secure environment for the festival" (Baguio Flower Festival Foundation, Inc., n.d.). Second, it actively encouraged people to participate in "cultural showdown" and other related activities (See, 2019). Apart from publishing announcements, a PHP 60,000 (USD 1,230) government subsidy, for instance, is given to participating groups in the Grand Street Dance Elementary School division (Lunas, 2018). Third, to further express support for the festival, the local government allocated a budget for festival competition winners (See, 2017). Although cash prizes cannot recoup participants' expenses, creating a competitive environment helped foster creativity as participants are enticed to exhibit innovative floats and performances every year.

As the government creates an environment that helps sustain *Panagbenga*, the active participation of other sectors, such as education, business, media, and civic organizations, ensures the festival's continuation (Resurreccion, 2014). According to Resurreccion (2014), it is the people's involvement and participation that provided the "soul" and "life force" to *Panagbenga*. Describing the phenomenon, she wrote:

In an explosion of creativity, ingenuity and cooperation, people got into the spirit of things. Children from the City's schools joined their elders in dancing the entire parade route garbed as flowers of every shape and hue. Businessmen came up with flower-inspired products. Civic organizations and communications groups pitched in, providing manpower and facilities that made the Festival truly a community activity.



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Ultimately, the festival founder, JPDC, completed *Panagbenga's* institutionalization by establishing the Baguio Flower Festival Foundation, Inc (BFFFI). The BFFFI organizes and oversees the festival's operation (Baguio Flower Festival Foundation, Inc., n.d.).

While many claim that participants take part in the festival “all for the honor of joining” (Lunas, 2017), it is worth mentioning that big spenders commonly produce a significant number of impressive floats. For instance, Maybank, Coca-Cola, and ASUS Zenphone won first, second, and third place in the 2017 small float category (Lunas, 2017). Meanwhile, some private companies and organizations, such as SM Baguio (shopping mall), NLEX (North Luzon Expressway Corporation), and Baguio Country Club, have been regarded as “Hall of Famers” (Lunas, 2018). Other crowd favorites are GMA Network and ABS-CBN’s floats (the Philippines’ leading media and entertainment networks), which feature their top-billed celebrities or the main casts of their top-rated dramas (Geminiiano, 2018). As these floats help attract large crowds each year, the festival also provides private entities an alternative avenue for brand advertising.



“The winner!” by Randy Bautista is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0. Purefoods Tender Juicy Hotdog is one of San Miguel Food and Beverage, Inc.’s more popular hotdog brands in the Philippines.

One of the initial changes that the festival triggered in the region is the shift in its farmers’ flower harvest cycle. Before the festival’s establishment, Benguet cut flower farmers only included Valentine’s, All Souls, and All Saints’ Day in their cropping and harvesting schedule (Nagpala, 2007). Cut flower farmers adjusted their schedule and increased their production with the popularization of *Panagbenga*. This resulted in a significant increase in cut flower production in the region. According to Nagpala (2007), Benguet experienced a 7.9 million metric tons increase six years after *Panagbenga’s* launching, benefitting local farmers and other people involved in the cut flower production and postproduction chain.

Relatedly, horticulturists and florists involved in the float building would begin brainstorming and designing floats three months before the February parade (Moulic, 2019). This endeavor would also generate seasonal jobs for gardeners, farmers, car mechanics, and some out-of-school youth (Moulic, 2019).

Meanwhile, students from Baguio and Benguet have also adapted to the festival as they commit their time to dance, drum, or lyre rehearsals several months before the competition. Despite receiving government aid, students and their families would regularly chip in to purchase props and costumes for their performance.

The festival did not only alter people's annual calendars. *Panagbenga* qualifies as a tradition for it continuously goes through a repetitive process that involves culture bearers' willing appropriation and modification of historical and cultural referents. This reconfiguration involved culture bearers' strategic deployment of past symbols as indigenous practices became spectacularized and absorbed within the context of *Panagbenga's* festivities. For instance, as Cordilleran performers reduced an hour-long ritual to a few minutes during the parade, they consciously maintained specific elements particular to the ritual's source culture to manifest its Cordilleraness. This included the use of traditional costumes or the replication of gestures, words, or actions that project indigenous identities.



“Warriors Dance from Panagbenga Festival in Baguio City” by Miguel Isidro Photography is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

It must be noted, too, that *Panagbenga* not only repeats cultural activities it introduced in 1996 but also expands them. For instance, in 2017, the BFFFI opened more categories in its two major competitions to make *Panagbenga* a more inclusive festivity (Lunas, 2017). In 2019, they introduced the Paws on Parade, a flora and fauna-inspired dog fashion show and parade open to all kinds and

sizes of dogs. Expanded forms of celebration allow *Panagbenga* to embrace more participants both within and beyond the borders of Baguio City.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Earlier definitions of tradition, though generally accepted, do not adequately account for its fluidity. The modifications and appropriations of past icons and lifeways, which aim to “preserve” culture and raise outsider’s awareness, testify to tradition’s adaptability and malleability. Echoing Turner (1997), since traditions are lived in the present, they are naturally subjected to modifications following the conditions and constraints of the present. In most instances, they tend to form new traditions based on past customs and symbols.

As a preliminary examination of *Panagbenga*’s traditionalization, the study determined critical factors that ensured the festival’s perpetuation: first, the government’s institutionalization of the festival, and second, the active participation of different sectors and actors. The former formalized support for the festival, inducing public participation. The latter involved organic public participation, with actors taking active roles in sustaining and promoting the festival. While actors’ participation of course manifests various agenda, their yearly commitment and engagement enabled the festival’s continuation and growth.

Panagbenga’s traditionalization also involved a spectacularization of the culture it celebrates. With the repetition of “festival mainstays,” reinvention of spectacularized rituals and practices, and constant expansion of festivities, festival organizers are able to ensure the arrival of curious observers across the country each year. Because of the festival’s popularity, visiting Baguio City every February has become a tradition for many Filipino tourists. Similarly, it has become a tradition for *Panagbenga* participants, such as corporations, florists, students, and indigenous peoples, to prepare their products, floats, and performances several months before the festivity.

The study left out many other curious aspects of *Panagbenga* for further exploration. For instance, researchers may find it worth examining the festival’s resistance to politicization, as well as the objectification of various performers’ bodies during the grand parade. One may also study the political economy behind participating actors’ continuous production and reproduction of tangible and intangible heritage. Such an approach should investigate how they embody and negotiate both the intentions of corporations and the Cordilleran population. Future studies can also assess the impact of the pandemic on *Panagbenga* festivities.



“Panagbenga 2009_Our Festival_IMG_8418” by susancorpuz90 is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

To end, the image above perfectly summarizes the success of *Panagbenga’s* traditionalization. Echoing what many *Panagbenga* participants say about the festival, *Panagbenga* is not exclusively performed by and for Baguio and Cordillera residents; it has become a festival that all Filipinos can call their own. Despite being a recent “invention,” people’s active participation and its resulting social and economic relations allowed *Panagbenga* to become a Philippine tradition. It has become fused into the city’s culture and institutions and absorbed into the country’s historical and cultural life.

Notes

1. *Kankanaey* is the language of the *Kankanaey* people in Northern Philippines.
2. Baguio City, popularly known as the Philippines’ summer capital, is a mountain city located in the heart of Cordillera province. Because of the city’s cool weather and abundance of pine trees, it has become a go-to place for people who wish to escape the summer heat in lowland metropolitan cities.

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