

## People's cultural identity as reflected in Panagbenga (Flower) Festival

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**ABSTRACT**

The Panagbenga (Flower) Festival is a cultural celebration that showcases the local arts and traditions of Baguio City, situated in the Cordilleran Region of the Philippines. This study aims to explore the festival as a form of artistic expression that embodies the unique identity of its people. Employing a qualitative methodology, specifically cross-media ethnography, the research draws upon face-to-face interviews, direct observation, and analysis of digital artifacts to connect both physical and digital elements of the festival experience. Five purposively selected participants involved in the festival's committee and planning provided insights into its significance. The findings demonstrate that the Panagbenga Festival is a dynamic event through which the Cordilleran community, especially the residents of Baguio City, honors and sustains their cultural heritage in a contemporary context. The festival symbolizes the resilience and hope of the people in the aftermath of the devastating July 16, 1990 earthquake. Moreover, it serves as a vital platform to preserve traditions, values, and beliefs for future generations amidst the pressures of modernization. The study recommends the promotion of cultural appropriation as a means to further emphasize and celebrate Cordilleran culture.

Keywords: Festival, unique identity, artistic expression, culture

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**INTRODUCTION**

Culture is a fundamental aspect of human identity, serving as a defining feature of what it means to be human. Its absence diminishes the essence of human existence, as culture embodies the historical development and creative capacity of humanity across diverse activities and life forms. Scholars emphasize that culture forms the foundation for self-identification and shapes an individual's societal position, highlighting that humans both construct and preserve culture as an intrinsic element of existence. Culture comprises both material and non-material components that are deeply interconnected. Material culture includes physical objects and artifacts, such as technology, which influence various aspects of daily life including communication and transportation. Meanwhile, non-material culture encompasses values, beliefs, symbols, language, norms, rituals, and forms of cultural expression such as literature, music, arts, fashion, and lifestyle, which collectively guide behavior and shape social interaction.

Festivals stand out as one of the most tangible expressions of culture, serving as symbolic events that bring together both material and intangible cultural elements. They incorporate artifacts like food, fabrics, regalia, and linguistic tools, alongside intangible elements such as proverbs and folklore, all imbued with symbolic significance. Festivals offer opportunities to showcase and commemorate diverse cultural facets—including crafts, symbols, and historical

narratives—paying tribute to ancestors and shared heritage. Defined broadly as social and cultural gatherings that unite communities in celebration, festivals promote social cohesion, unity, and the preservation of indigenous culture. They function not only as moments of joy and harmony but also as tools for nation-building, social recognition, and the fostering of positive communal values.

Beyond their social and cultural importance, festivals also contribute significantly to local economies by attracting tourism, generating income, creating jobs, and promoting the hosting locale. Festivals serve as platforms for artistic expression, symbolizing cultural values and transmitting knowledge through time, thus shaping community identities. They often feature vibrant music, dance, costumes, and other cultural activities that highlight the diversity and richness of the peoples involved. Globally, festivals vary widely in form and meaning but share common roles in celebrating life, heritage, and communal bonds.

Around the world, numerous festivals highlight cultural creativity and identity through unique celebrations. In Africa, the Egba-Eze festival in the Ibagwa-Aka community exemplifies a sacred period of peace, reconciliation, and familial unity. Latin America's Day of the Dead blends vibrant colors, dances, and communal remembrance of deceased loved ones, emphasizing family and community involvement. In Europe, events like Amsterdam's Light Festival showcase art installations and light sculptures that enliven the city's winter months, reflecting a fusion of tradition and contemporary art. South America hosts renowned festivals such as Brazil's Carnival Rio, Peru's Inti Raymi, and Mexico's Day of the Dead, each known for elaborate costumes, dances, and celebrations that honor cultural history and indigenous traditions. In Asia, the Taiwan Lantern Festival features fireworks and sky lantern releases tied to religious and communal meanings, further illustrating how festivals integrate entertainment, cultural preservation, and spirituality.

Festivals also promote local craftsmanship and cultural identity, as seen in Thailand's Chiang Mai night markets where artisans display unique handicrafts that attract tourists and sustain cultural heritage. The physical and historical environment of cities contributes to their distinct cultural identities, which festivals help to express and reinforce. Some festivals commemorate historical events or celebrate agricultural cycles, blending cultural memory with community celebration.

The Panagbenga (Flower) Festival in Baguio City, Philippines, exemplifies such a vibrant cultural celebration. Originating in 1996 to revive tourism following a devastating earthquake, the festival has grown into one of the nation's most colorful and significant events, drawing millions of visitors annually and boosting the local flower industry and tourism sector. Its name, derived from the Kankanaey word for "season of blooming," reflects the festival's timing in February, when weather conditions favor outdoor festivities. The festival features grand parades, floral displays, dance competitions, cultural performances, and markets showcasing handicrafts and local cuisine, collectively celebrating the region's natural beauty and cultural legacy. Beyond entertainment, the Panagbenga Festival honors the local flora, historical traditions, and communal spirit, becoming an integral part of Baguio's identity.

Research underscores festivals as crucial for community bonding, cultural identity, and economic development. While Filipinos highly value their festivals as cultural treasures, further research is needed to understand their broader impacts and meanings, especially in the Philippine context. Festivals are increasingly recognized globally as instruments for celebrating local identities and multiculturalism in transcultural settings. This highlights the need for deeper

investigation into how festivals relate to their host cities, with open-ended approaches allowing new insights to emerge.

Accordingly, this study seeks to explore the Panagbenga (Flower) Festival as an artistic expression of the unique identity of its people, addressing the cultural elements that manifest this expression. The study aims to benefit society by highlighting the city's culture and talents, providing valuable information for academia, educators, residents, and tourists alike. It can inform teaching about Philippine culture and history, promote cultural appreciation among locals, and foster unity and openness to diverse visitors. Furthermore, it offers future researchers a foundation for continued study of Philippine festivals and cultural identity.

Overall, festivals impact their host communities economically, environmentally, and socially, making it essential to understand and assess these effects. The Panagbenga (Flower) Festival stands as a vibrant, culturally significant event in Baguio City that expresses the Filipino spirit through artistry, tradition, and environmental connection. Featuring elaborate floats, street dances, and various art forms, the festival symbolizes resilience, solidarity, and creativity, reinforcing a sense of belonging and heritage preservation. This study is formulated to examine these dimensions, seeking to illuminate the cultural expressions within the Panagbenga Festival that define the people's unique identity.

#### Statement of the problem

This study was formulated with the objective of exploring the Panagbenga (Flower) Festival as an artistic expression of people's unique identity. Specifically, it seeks to answer the question: What are the cultural elements featured in the Panagbenga (Flower) Festival that manifest the artistic expression of the people's unique identity?

#### METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design due to its capacity to explore the nuanced and complex dimensions of the Panagbenga (Flower) Festival. The nature of the research questions, which sought to understand the "how," "why," and "what" aspects of the festival, necessitated an approach that transcends quantitative measurement (Tenny et al., 2022). Qualitative methods, with their focus on interviews and observations as primary data sources, allowed the researchers to uncover the cultural intricacies and multiple perspectives embedded within the festival (Robey & Taylor, 2018). Rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, this approach embraces the subjectivity inherent in social phenomena and acknowledges the active role of the researcher in shaping data collection and interpretation, thereby facilitating a deeper connection with the participants and their lived experiences (L. Haven & Van Grootel, 2019).

Complementing the qualitative approach, the study utilized cross-media ethnography, an effective method for engaging with locals who actively participate in or have experienced the Panagbenga Festival. This approach aligns with contemporary digital ethnographic methods employed to analyze cultural participation and community engagement in festival settings (Cocco&Bertran, 2021). Through this design, interviewees were encouraged to describe their culture from their own perspectives and share observations regarding its context and environment. The researchers employed participant observation techniques during interviews with key informants, including members of the Panagbenga cultural committee and Baguio City public officials. When direct interviews were not feasible, the design allowed for the

incorporation of digital and physical festival documents as supplementary data sources, thereby enhancing the breadth and credibility of the research findings.

The researchers ensured the validity and reliability of the data by triangulating multiple sources, including online platforms such as videos, photographs, and advertisements, alongside face-to-face interviews and participant observations (Angela Delli Paoli & D'Auria, 2021). This mixed approach was particularly advantageous given the festival's limited annual duration in February, enabling efficient data collection within a constrained timeframe by capitalizing on available digital artifacts.

Participants were purposively selected to provide rich and relevant insights into the festival. The study engaged five individuals through focus group discussions, comprising representatives from diverse but related sectors: two participants belonged to the Committee on Tourism, Special Events, Parks, and Playgrounds as well as the Committee on Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous Cultural Communities; two were members of the Baguio Flower Festival Foundation Inc., holding leadership roles as president and chief of staff; and the fifth participant served as the Chairman of the Panagbenga Cultural Committee. This purposive sampling ensured that the participants possessed firsthand knowledge and authoritative perspectives on the festival's cultural and organizational facets.

Data collection instruments encompassed individual and focus group interviews, complemented by document analysis, field observations, and digital media review. Focus group discussions were particularly valuable in facilitating dialogue among stakeholders, enabling negotiation of research themes, eliciting diverse viewpoints, and capturing experiential nuances that might otherwise remain obscured (Nyumba et al., 2018). The cross-media ethnographic framework further bridged physical and virtual realms, enriching the understanding of the festival's multifaceted context (Angela Delli Paoli & D'Auria, 2021).

The procedural framework guiding data gathering followed the model proposed by Irshad et al. (2021). Initial field site selection focused on Session Road and Melvin Jones in Baguio City, where the researchers established rapport and obtained buy-in from key stakeholders including the Panagbenga Cultural Committee Chairman, city councilors, a former city mayor, and representatives from the Baguio Flower Festival Foundation. This preparatory phase was instrumental in facilitating access and building trust with participants.

Fieldwork incorporated participant observation alongside the systematic collection of digital artifacts. Prior to conducting in-person interviews, researchers engaged in online fieldwork, analyzing digital materials sourced from various platforms. This dual modality enabled the extraction of supplementary information that enriched the ethnographic interviews and strengthened the reliability of the collected data. Detailed field notes and matrices were developed to organize insights derived from both online and offline sources.

Ethnographic interviews were carefully constructed using an a priori coding scheme to ensure alignment with the study's focus on social and cultural identity. Data collection was conducted via audio recording, preceded by the acquisition of informed consent and assurances of ethical compliance. Participants were briefed on the purpose and significance of the study before formal interviews commenced. Field notes were generated concurrently and post-interview, encompassing jottings—brief mnemonic cues—comprehensive descriptive accounts pertinent to research questions, analytic annotations, and reflective commentary on observations and researcher experiences.

Data analysis employed matrix analysis as a means to classify, categorize, and succinctly summarize the rich qualitative data. Transcriptions of interview recordings from both individual and focus group sessions were subjected to intelligent verbatim transcription and initial coding. Field observations and document analyses were organized into detailed notes and analytic memos, while digital artifact data were systematically cataloged and annotated. The use of matrices facilitated the simplification of complex cultural phenomena, enabling researchers to intuitively grasp key practical issues (Krupina, 2020).

Subsequently, the integrated dataset underwent thematic analysis, a method designed to identify, examine, and report patterns or themes significant to participants' lived experiences (Lochmiller, 2021). The iterative process involved repeated reading and coding of transcripts and notes, generation of initial codes, and the emergence of salient themes. This comprehensive approach ensured that the final thematic framework accurately reflected the full scope of data collected from interviews, observations, and digital media. Thematic analysis facilitated the distillation of voluminous qualitative data into coherent and meaningful patterns, thereby illuminating how individuals interpret and understand the Panagbenga Festival as a unique cultural expression (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Naeem et al., 2023).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Panagbenga (Flower) Festival, Baguio City's annual flower festival, was conceived in 1995 as a means to revive the city's struggling economy in the aftermath of the devastating 1990 earthquake, which registered a magnitude of 7.8 (PTV Philippines, 2018). Faced with dwindling tourist arrivals, city officials and stakeholders sought strategies to reinvigorate interest in Baguio. Central to the festival's success was the rich Cordilleran culture, notably its dances, music, traditional attire, and other art forms. Attorney Damaso Bangaoet Jr., then Vice President of the John Hay Development Corporation, proposed the creation of a festival sponsored by the Bases Conversion Development Authority (BCDA) to remind Baguio residents of their environment and cultural heritage. Bangaoet brought the idea to Mayor Mauricio Domogan and Congressman Bernardo Vergara, who together spearheaded the festival's realization. They chose to hold the festival in February, naming it "Panagbenga," which means "season of blooming," to highlight the city's flowers and indigenous traditions through floral floats and cultural dance performances. The inaugural festival took place in February 1996, with primary funding from the BCDA (Domogan, 2024).

The festival's founders envisioned goals extending beyond economic revival. According to Domogan (2024), Panagbenga was intended to unify the people of Baguio, foster appreciation for their natural environment, preserve unique cultural traditions, and strengthen community identity. Universities such as St. Louis University, University of the Cordilleras, University of Baguio, and the Philippine Military Academy played early roles in supporting the festival, contributing artistic elements including the iconic Panagbenga festival march composed by Professor Macario Fronda† of Saint Louis University. Though BCDA funding ceased over time, the city government and the Baguio Flower Festival Foundation Inc. (BFFFI) sustained the event through budget adjustments and strategic partnerships. Residents actively volunteered, from tribal dancers to Boy Scouts, transforming Panagbenga from a modest celebration into a source of civic pride, widely regarded as one of the most organized festivals nationwide. By showcasing Baguio's creativity and cultural vibrancy, Panagbenga significantly contributed to the city's designation as a UNESCO Creative City in 2017 (Domogan, 2024).

The 2024 Panagbenga Festival adopted the theme “Celebrating Traditions and Embracing Innovation,” where participants gather to witness synchronized dances reflecting the Cordilleras’ rich heritage. The opening parade previews a month of events including marching bands, dance troupes, and local community performances. Traditional dances, indigenous music, and folklore representations collectively celebrate Baguio’s identity (The Baguio Channel, 2024). Despite modernization often leading festivals to abandon traditional elements or commodify culture merely for entertainment, Baguio City has preserved its cultural integrity. The festival’s meaning has evolved through diverse perspectives, including social cohesion (Rathna, 2023), cultural showcasing (Thompson, 2023), preservation of traditions, and economic significance.

Baguio’s close-knit, culture village-like community—strongly connected through Igorot traditions—benefits from the Panagbenga Festival by reinforcing camaraderie and a sense of belonging (Cayabas, 2024). The festival encourages the practice of *binnadang*, a culture of mutual assistance and care. Artistic expression functions as a dynamic tool for shaping and communicating countercultural identities, challenging dominant norms, and disseminating alternative values domestically and internationally (Rathna, 2023). However, a cultural awareness gap exists between locals and tourists who may lack firsthand knowledge of Baguio’s cultural heritage (Hyndman & Flower, 2018). The festival’s artistic expressions serve as a universal language bridging this gap, allowing participants and observers to deepen understanding of cultural dances, clothing, and practices, while reinforcing preservation efforts across generations (Thompson, 2023; Al-Zadjali, 2024).

Cultural identity in Baguio is pluralistic and interconnected; individuals may maintain unique identities yet relate and respect local traditions through cultural relativism (Chen, 2021). This interconnectedness influences human behavior, intellectual growth, artistic expression, and social norms, even among non-residents partaking in the festival (Boruah, 2020). The festival’s showcase of culture and creativity extends to schools, which compete in dance, music, and other artistic categories. This inclusion fosters pride in Cordilleran heritage and promotes cultural transmission to younger generations. Baguio’s cultural melting pot status is further strengthened as participants from outside the city contribute to the festival’s diversity and collaborative spirit (P2, P3, 2024).

Panagbenga’s contributions extend beyond cultural enrichment to economic development. Its colorful parades, market events, and festivals attract national and international tourists, establishing Baguio as a premier destination. The festival also supports local businesses by promoting products and services, providing a vital boost to small and medium enterprises.

Flowers serve as a key symbol of the festival and Baguio’s unique identity. Festival activities prominently feature Cordilleran flowers not only through decorations and costumes but also via events like landscaping competitions, fluvial parades, float parades, and street dance contests. The festival’s original name, “Baguio Flower Festival,” reflected this focus until it was changed to “Panagbenga,” derived from an Ibaloi term meaning “time of blooming.” The sunflower, selected by esteemed artist BenCab during an environmental art competition, has become an emblematic flower of the festival (Resurreccion, 2019). Landscaping competitions at Burnham Park showcase abundant flowers—roses, bougainvillea, hydrangeas, orchids, and more—integrated creatively with water features, wooden furniture, stonework, recycled materials, and tribal cloths, illustrating innovation alongside tradition (The Baguio Channel, 2023). This creativity underscores Baguio’s recognition as a UNESCO Creative City (P5, 2024).

The fluvial parade at Burnham Lake features flower-laden water vessels accompanied by performers in traditional Cordilleran costumes, offering audiences an immersive cultural experience (GMA Integrated News, 2024). Similarly, the street float parade along Baguio's streets displays elaborate floral arrangements and cultural props, with floats often featuring local celebrities, artists, and competition winners. The number of float entries has doubled recently, reflecting the festival's growing scale and economic impact, particularly benefiting the local flower industry (Agoot, 2024; P2, 2024). These flower-centered activities not only celebrate culture but also bolster Baguio's economy.

Another vital cultural element is the street dancing competition, which begins with a procession from Upper Session Road to Melvin Jones Football Grounds. The event features choreographed dances accompanied by music, colorful costumes, and elaborate props. Choreographers from Manila and beyond are invited to innovate while respecting Cordilleran narratives, ensuring performances blend modern creativity with traditional storytelling (P1, 2024). The competition is divided into traditional and cultural dance, drum and lyre, and festival categories (The Baguio Channel, 2023).

The dances themselves predominantly originate from Cordilleran culture, encompassing courtship, celebration, conflict, and harvest themes. Courtship dances such as Turayan, Pinanyuan, and Takik depict rituals performed in weddings and gatherings, with specific movements symbolizing elements like the eagle (*tayaw*) and *salibi* (P3, 2024). Celebratory dances like *Bendian* commemorate successful headhunters and victorious wars, while harvest-themed dances highlight agricultural prosperity, as exemplified by performances from Saint Louis University during the 2023 festival (P1, 2024). The participation of performers from neighboring regions fosters cultural collaboration and reinforces Baguio as a melting pot of traditions (P2, P3, 2024).

Annual parade themes further enrich the festival's cultural tapestry. The 2023 theme, "A Renaissance of Wonder and Beauty," featured drum and lyre performances with elaborate choreography including fans and traditional dances (ChaDventurestories, 2023). In 2022, the "Cordillera Festival" showcased provincial dances from Abra, Apayao, Benguet, Ifugao, Kalinga, Mountain Province, and Baguio City, highlighting regional diversity (Baguio City Guide, 2022). The 2019 theme, "Blooming Forward," included cultural festivals representing *Maskara*, *Ati-Atihan*, *Higante*, and *Dinagyang* traditions, with costumes inspired by natural materials (Baguio City Guide, 2019). The 2018 theme, "Celebration of Culture and Creativity," featured performances by various tribal and cultural groups, including the *Bendian* dance, which symbolizes healing, celebration, and victory (Baguio City Guide, 2018; Cajipe, n.d.).

Economic stimulation is another significant outcome of Panagbenga. Events such as the Market Encounter at Burnham Park and "Session in Bloom" provide platforms for local entrepreneurs and artisans to showcase products ranging from food and beverages to clothing, souvenirs, and accessories. These venues not only support small to medium businesses but also serve as outlets for artistic expression that reflect Baguio's identity (P3, 2024; Kotradyová, 2019). Local crafts, including wooden carvings symbolizing Cordilleran motifs like strawberries, sunflowers, and the *Barrel man*, alongside modern fashion and diverse cuisine offerings, embody the city's cultural and contemporary character. Souvenirs such as wooden keychains, knitted goods, and trending items allow visitors to carry a piece of Baguio home, reinforcing socio-cultural comfort and wellbeing (Kotradyová, 2019). The Market Encounter exemplifies how cultural events can drive economic growth by fostering both commerce and cultural preservation

(Amri & Kobiyh, 2022). “Baguio Blooms,” another vibrant marketplace, offers strawberry-infused treats and unique gifts that enhance the city’s festive appeal (The Baguio Channel, 2024).

The festival’s popularity has also created numerous opportunities for local artists and performers to showcase their talents through concerts, exhibits, awarding ceremonies, and grand fireworks displays. Events such as Little Ms. Panagbenga, Handog ng Panagbenga sa Pamilya Baguio, LIGAWAN: A Valentine Series, Coke Studio Concert featuring BINI and DILAW, Panagbenga Kapamilya Karavan 2024, and Celestial Blooms contribute to making the festival an engaging and memorable experience for both residents and visitors (The Baguio Channel, 2023). These activities foster communal bonding, creativity, and cultural exchange, reflecting the festival’s dual focus on cultural heritage and public enjoyment (P2, 2024). Post-event meetings and brainstorming sessions ensure continual improvement, aiming to make each Panagbenga celebration better than the last (P4, 2024).

In summary, the Panagbenga (Flower) Festival embodies the artistic expression and cultural identity of Baguio City through its diverse elements—flowers, dances, products, and celebrations. Its unique focus on nature, culture, and local produce distinguishes it from religion-centered festivals and has earned it international recognition, including listing by the International Festivals and Events Association and contributing to Baguio’s UNESCO Creative City status (P3, P5, 2024). The festival not only promotes local products and economic vitality but also fosters environmental awareness and community resilience. It serves as a living testament to the people’s strength in overcoming adversity while preserving their heritage. Importantly, the festival involves the younger generation in cultural activities, ensuring the transmission of traditions. Through continuous planning and innovation involving artists, choreographers, and cultural experts, the Panagbenga Festival remains a vibrant and evolving cultural phenomenon that strengthens unity and celebrates the distinct identity of Baguio City.

## CONCLUSION

The Panagbenga (Flower) Festival stands as a dynamic and evolving celebration that remains deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the Cordillera region despite the influences of a changing world. Through its various events and expressions, the festival enables the community to recognize and honor traditional practices, values, and beliefs that have been upheld and passed down by their ancestors over generations. This commitment to cultural preservation is reflected in the festival’s incorporation of indigenous customs, which facilitates the transmission of cultural knowledge not only to future generations but also to visitors and non-residents, thereby fostering broader appreciation and understanding.

Looking ahead, future research on the Panagbenga Festival could benefit from a more inclusive approach to participant selection by incorporating the perspectives of local residents, artists, and performers. Such an emic viewpoint would provide richer, more nuanced insights into the festival’s role as an artistic expression of cultural identity, adding depth and comprehensiveness to the findings. Furthermore, promoting cultural appropriation as an advocacy within Baguio City could serve to further highlight and celebrate Cordilleran culture, encouraging greater community engagement and a stronger connection among residents to their cultural heritage. It is hoped that continued scholarly attention will explore how the Panagbenga Festival influences younger generations in valuing and sustaining their unique Cordilleran identity, ensuring that this vibrant cultural legacy continues to thrive into the future.

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