

# The Evolution of *Bayan*

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Much of what has been written about the Philippines, particularly its history, has been produced either by outsiders, or for outsiders—using their categories, their languages, their terms and often informed by their own agenda, specifically economic and/or political. Unwilling or unable to appreciate the fluid, even ambiguous nature of Tagalog social structure before and after the Spanish intrusion, several writers of Philippine history have presented a deeply flawed vision of that society. The desire to view pre-hispanic and early Spanish Philippine societies in primarily institutional and political terms has resulted in a static and consequently mistaken representation of that society as is demonstrated in the concept of *barangay*. Beginning with institutional reports for the Spanish government and continuing to the present with theoretically based reconstructions, the *barangay* is presented as the basic unit in early Tagalog society and is constructed as containing various aspects of Western society, including class structure and entrenched leadership. Few have bothered to ask how it is that *baranggay*, a Spanish corruption of the Tagalog *balangay*,<sup>1</sup> described the basic unit in that society. In the project of rewriting Philippine history, *baranggay* is representative of the problem and *bayan* the solution; *baranggay* as an imagined and imposed view—based on a report from an outsider, and *bayan* as a fluid and evolving basis of Tagalog identity—found in Tagalog sources.

The myth of the *barangay* had its genesis in a single source: *Las costumbres de los indios Tagalos de Filipinas*, submitted in 1589 by the Franciscan Juan de Plasencia. Commissioned by Spanish

civil authorities,<sup>2</sup> the report was based on Plasencia's apparent attempts to collect and analyze information regarding the Tagalogs.<sup>3</sup> The influence of Plasencia's report cannot be overstated. This report became *the* basis for Spanish laws and policies in the Philippines, allowing the Spaniards to not only govern, but also to reconfigure and reconstruct Philippine society.<sup>4</sup> And it has continued to serve as *the* basis for historical reconstructions of Tagalog society. As John Phelan noted: "The overwhelming bulk of our knowledge about the character of prequest Tagalog society comes from a study of Tagalog customs composed by a Franciscan friar, Juan de Plasencia (Phelan 1959, 178). Plasencia's report reads, in part:

These chiefs rule over few people; sometimes as many as a hundred houses, sometimes even less than thirty. This tribal gathering is called in Tagalo a barangay. It is inferred that the reason for giving themselves this name arose from the fact (as they are classed, by their language, among the Malay nations) that when they came to this land, the head of the barangay, which is a boat, thus called, became a dato. And so, even at the present day, it is ascertained that this barangay in its origin was a family of parents and children, relations and slaves. There were many of these barangays in each town, or, at least, on account of wars, they did not settle far from one another. They were not, however, subject to one another, except in friendship and relationship. Their chiefs, in their various wars, helped one another with their respective barangays<sup>5</sup> (BR 7: 173-174).

The significance of Plasencia's work is all the more striking in light of the fact that not all Spanish accounts, reports, and other materials agreed with his reconstruction of Tagalog society. There were those who also wrote of the *baranggay* in the same vein as Plasencia. But as Carlos Quirino and Mauro Garcia have explained: "After Loarca's and Plasencia's the originality of the rest, insofar as the information on the subject is concerned, may be doubted"