

# Local associations and social services in the rural Philippines, 1565-1964

Research >  
Philippines

The inability of the state to provide social services to the majority of the population is a fact of daily Filipino life that decolonisation did little to alter. In the face of natural and human-induced adversity, rural communities have long had to rely on their own associations. Much of this history, however, has gone unnoticed.



Photo by Greg Bankoff

Community installed pump, SACMA Association, Masantol, Pampanga province 2003

By Greg Bankoff

Evidence of organisations providing relief in rural areas dates back to the late sixteenth century, in the form of religious fraternities known as *cofradías*. While these were primarily religious associations, they also had charitable functions: care of the sick, providing funds, encouraging affiliates 'to engage in social and charitable enterprises and to aid the unfortunate and needy' (AAM).

## Nothing new

Less formal but more prevalent than the *cofradías* was the organisation of extra-familial work rooted in customary village practice. This was sometimes voluntary labour on public works but in other cases entire communities worked together until all houses in a new or relocated *barrio* (neighbourhood) were built. Alternatively, families and groups exchanged labour at the sub-community level. Need or lot determined the order in which a person or family received help, suggested by the Tagalog word *turnuhan* (from the Spanish *turno* meaning 'a turn') by which this form of labour was known.

The association between religion and mutual assistance remains a feature of the organisations associated with the revolutionary period and the early years of US colonial administration. The *Katipunan*, the secret society that instigated the revolt against the Spanish in 1896 was a mutual assistance association and a religious brotherhood as well as a political grouping. Likewise, early trade unions retained many of the

attributes of the *cofradías* and *turnuhans* in which they had their roots.

American colonial authorities were keen on instilling the virtues of Jeffersonian democracy in their outpost of empire. They enacted the Rural Credit Law to organise small farmers into self-help cooperatives and created agricultural credit associations that functioned much as 'village banks'. Again, the question remains whether such associations were altogether new or were, in fact, superimposed on an already existing network of more informal mutual benefit organisations.

## Reliable protection

Apart from these formal organisations, exchanges of a more informal nature continued to be practised in rural areas throughout the latter years of American administration. In particular, the role and function of local Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) needs further elaboration. Though the focus of their activities was on schools, the location of other community services at these sites such as clinics widened their range of activities. As earlier *barrio* organisations under Spanish colonialism had cloaked their activities in religious guise, they now sought official approval as PTAs given the emphasis American authorities placed on educational attainment.

The Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) and the immediate post-war years further encouraged communities faced by adversity to help themselves. After 1946 both the national government and Catholic Church began to emphasize rural development in an effort to thwart

the spread of communist influence; this led to policies aimed at decentralising government and promoting grassroots cooperative organisations.

At the *barrio* level, evidence suggests that formal and informal associations continued to provide communities with their only reliable protection against hazard and misfortune. Fieldwork conducted in the 1950s-60s shows the persistence of labour exchange arrangements for mutual advantage (Hart 1955:431-433; Hollnsteiner 1968:22-31; Lewis 1971:128-138). At least on Luzon, small neighbourhood associations called *puroks* still flourished, concerned with overall municipal improvements (Rivera and McMillan 1952). Many of these activities continued to be accomplished in co-operation with local PTAs (Romani 1956:235).

## Invisibility

Lack of public recognition for these associations does not necessarily originate from their desire to remain hidden. Rather, their invisibility derives more from the outside world choosing to see only what fits its expectations. One can speculate on how this process worked in the past by looking at how it works today, with emphasis on NGOs and the comparative obscurity of People's Organisations (POs). The national state sees the one and not the other, just as its Spanish and American predecessors chose to see only the religious and educational aspects of the associations that existed in their time. Western social scientists, in their preconceived search for single-purpose community organisations, have often failed to recognise the existence of more multi-purpose associations that fulfil many of the same functions.

Nor is the continued existence of these organisations in one form or another meant to suggest that they have remained unchanged over the centuries. On the contrary, they have proven extraordinarily resilient and adaptive, helping integrate Catholicism

and formal education with indigenous concepts of mutual assistance and creating the conditions whereby contemporary POs now successfully compete with NGOs for donor funding (Francisco 1997:93).

The importance placed by Western scholars and their heirs in the nation state on decolonisation as a fundamental transition reflects an overly top-down periodisation of history – one, moreover, that is belied by the continuing dynamics within rural societies. <

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## Decolonizing Societies. The Reorientation of Asian and African Livelihoods under Changing Regimes

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'Decolonisation' has a deceptive clarity. Referring to the formal transfer of power from colonial to national regimes, it leaves little room for misunderstanding. But the simple definition obscures; when we focus on people's livelihoods during the long transition to independence, alternative understandings emerge. The political periodisation sheds little light on such long-term social processes as labour mobilization and urbanization, or, indeed, the life stories of individuals. Within the framework of the research programme *Indonesia across orders*, scholars on Asia and Africa convened in Amsterdam to discuss the impact of decolonisation on livelihoods. It turned out that the effects of power transfer were in many ways small, or only indirectly influenced people's lives. In this issue of the *IIAS Newsletter* two participants at the conference present their views: Karl Hack and Greg Bankoff. Both show that the 'traditional' periodisation, with its emphasis on changing regimes, has little or no value when looking at personal narratives or mutual help organizations in Southeast Asia. <

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