

LESSON 2

Mga Talang Pangkultura People and Places Barangay and Bayan, Part I¹

Tagalog/Filipino language learners, such as you, often ask: what are the English translations of the words **barangay** and **bayan**? Is **barangay** a boat or a village? Is **bayan** a town or a country?

As Damon Woods points out in his essay, “The Evolution of Bayan,” 2011, there are no exact equivalents in some Tagalog terms used for location (such as **barangay** and **bayan**), because of fluidity of meaning, changing definitions of a term, and inaccurate and conflicting historical accounts.

Foreigners and foreign nationals of Filipino descent visiting or living in the Philippines, may have encountered the term **barangay** because the term is used to refer to the “basic political unit of Philippine society.” **Barangays** are headed by an elected **punong barangay** (**barangay** captain), aided by the **sangguniang barangay** (the legislative body). Community disputes are resolved by a **lupong tagapamayapa** (peace-keeping council) first before being brought to court.

The term **barangay**, however, started to be used only as the term for the “basic political unit” in 1974 through “Presidential Decree 557 Declaring All **Barrios** in the Philippines as **Barangays**, and for other Purposes.” Ferdinand Marcos, then President of the Philippines, explained in the decree that “the term **barrio**² is of foreign origin, and consequently, there have been various representations from the **Barangays** all over the country to declare all **barrios** as **Barangays**.”³

But was **barangay** really the smallest political unit in Philippine society? Historian William Henry Scott, in his book on 16th-century Philippines, defined a Tagalog **barangay** as a “group of people ruled over by a **datu**” and was used by the Spanish colonizers for the purpose of collecting tribute through the chiefs of the **barangays**. Scott also clarified that it did not refer to a location or a place, and instead to a group of people belonging to the **barangay** of a certain person, who belonged to the local gentry. In other words, those of the same **barangay**, may not be residing in the same village. This meaning of **barangay**, as used by the Spanish colonial government then spread to other parts of the archipelago where the word meant “boat.” (Scott 1994, 6)

A dictionary manuscript by Francisco Blancas de San Jose at the University of Santo Tomas Archives apparently only mentioned **balangay** as a **navio comun** (common vessel).⁴ However, in the *Vocabolario de la lengua tagala* by Juan Jose de Noceda and Pedro de Sanlucar, 1860, **balangay** has four listed meanings:

¹ Part II of this culture notes can be found in Lesson 9.

² **Barrio** is a Spanish word that refers to a district or a neighborhood. It is used in Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries.

³ Presidential Decree No. 557 Declaring All Barrios in the Philippines As Barangays, and For Other Purposes. Philippine Law Info website. <http://philippinelaw.info/statutes/pd557.html>. Accessed May 2012.

⁴ The manuscript was studied by Woods. This is to distinguish this manuscript from Blancas’s more known *Arte y reglas de la lengua Tagala* first printed in Bataan by Tomas Pinpin in 1610.

BALANGAY⁵. pc nadar boca arriba, Mag.
BALANGAY. navio grande de doce hasta diez y seis hombres; Mag, hacerio.
Namamalangay. pc. Usuario. Nagbabalangay, I. Nananalangay, andar con el.
BALANGAY. complejo, o junta de varios. Maqui, vivir con ellos en su barrio.
Balabalangay, cada barrio por si. *Magbabalangay* pc. Maestro del complejo
o junta para abogar o trabajar. cabalangay. pp. i. Carolohan, vecino de un
mismo barrio. Magca, dos.
BALANGAY. pc. Cabalangay, era uno que tenia un genero de esclavitud
para ser obligado. Aco baga, i, cabalngay mo, at aco, I pipilitin mo? Soy tu
obligado para que a mi me compelas?

But why has there been confusion about the meaning of the word **balangay**, known later as **barangay**? According to Woods, this apparently comes from the report entitled *Las costumbres de los indios Tagalog de Filipinas*, 1589 by the Franciscan friar Juan e Plasencia, which described the **barangay** as “a family of parents and children, relations and slaves,” and further said that there were many **barangays** in each town (Plasencia in Blair and Robertson 7: 173–174). It was from Plasencia’s report that the Spanish colonizers based their “restructuring” of Philippine society, again, in order to make the collection of taxes, easier. Subsequently, Filipino and American historians and writers would quote Plasencia although there would hardly be other early sources mentioning the **barangay** as a term used for a place (Woods 2011, 3–4)

⁵ Please note that in the original manuscript there is a line above the letter G in the word **balangay**.