The men and women of Barrio Canderia described themselves in the early 1950s as being closely tied, that they were ‘bound as one, moved as one’. The same sentiments were expressed in Puncan, the adjacent barrio (neighbourhood) where the whole population was said to possess ‘a spirit of cooperation for the good of the barrio’ (HDP, Puncan, Nueva Ecija Roll 47:5). People in small rural communities across the Philippines are usually tied to one another either through descent, marriage, or fictive bonds of kinship, so it is not surprising that they tend to help one another. Yet this sense of neighbourliness extends well beyond the family to encompass a wider, mainly territorially defined group. There is a long history at the local level of formal and informal associations and networks committed to individual and extrafamilial welfare that enhance people’s capacity to withstand the magnitude and frequency of hardship as experienced in their daily lives. Moreover, the attainment of nationhood did not significantly alter the situation for most rural people to whom the state often represents more of a threat than a source of benefaction.

The relative lack of state presence at the village (barangay) or subvillage level across the archipelago has existed for most of the historical period and still persists in varying degrees today. If, as James Scott contends, the state ‘sees’ in its own particular way, that certain forms of knowledge and control require a narrowing of vision that ‘brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality’ (1998:11), so the barrio ‘sees’ in its own way, too, with a look that often bears little relation to the march of grand events on the national scale. To premise the notion of change based around political benchmarks such as decolonization, therefore, may have little immediate relevance to rural communities. People are not necessarily unaware of the larger picture, but it may make little difference to their everyday lives and the way in which they face adversity and cope with misfortune whether personal or from external causes. Moreover, the whole question of independence is one characterized by a great deal of ambiguity.

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1 HDP, Canderia, Nueva Ecija Roll 47:31. Research for this chapter was partly funded by the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) as a fellowship-in-residence 2003/2004.
over when the event actually took place and so what period actually constitutes decolonization. The Philippines has formally declared its independence at least three times: from the Spanish on 12 June 1898, under Japanese tutelage on 14 October 1943, and by American fiat on 4 July 1946. According to the implied assumptions of the modern state, the whole period of U.S. administration is often represented in national historiography as part of a gradual process of ‘tutelage’ towards decolonization. As the principal argument of this chapter stresses continuity more than change (though without overstressing the importance of the former or denying the existence of the latter), its temporal framework encompasses roughly a thirty-year period from the inauguration of internal self-rule under the Commonwealth government in 1935 to the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos in 1965, who was to dominate Filipino politics until his flight in 1986. It should be noted, however, that while these dates may constitute significant yardsticks in the history of the nation, they are far less noteworthy in the narrative of the community. To the latter, the real milestone during this period was the Japanese occupation (1941-1945) and the disruption to lives and livelihoods caused by constant low-intensity conflict, widespread migration, and the permanent abandonment of some settlements. Throughout these years, rural people mainly relied on their communities and the various forms of associations that operated within them for the extrafamilial services that they required to provide food, shelter, and support. While the political complexion of the state may have changed according to the fortunes of war or the advent of nationhood, the socioeconomic nature of the barrio did not or did so only according to its own internal logic and rhythm.

Associations and rural communities

The Philippines sit at a geographical and cultural crossroads that through its Hispanic legacy link Asia across the Pacific to the Americas. It also shares with its neighbours a rich history of community associations that reflects its ‘Malay’ heritage. The prevalence of ‘traditional’ self-help organizations has

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2 Ambeth Ocampo argues that there have actually been a further three declarations of Philippine independence in addition to the ones already mentioned: by Andres Bonifacio in the Pamitinan Caves on 12-4-1895, the ‘Cry of Pugad Lawin’ on 23-8-1896, and in the decrees of the Revolutionary Committee signed by Emilio Aguinaldo on 31-10-1896 (1993:74-5).

3 On the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, see Agoncillo 2001. On the wartime experience of communities, however, it is necessary to look through the relevant entries in the national oral history project instigated in the early 1950s and known as the Historical Data Papers held in the Philippine National Library.

4 The term ‘Malay’ is used in this sense to denote a commonality of cultures between people who predominantly share an Austronesian linguistic heritage and who inhabit maritime Southeast Asia.