

A Review of the 2nd Igorot European Consultation

By Ricardo Cuyob

The second Igorot European Consultation held in Vienna, Austria from May 29 to June 1, 2003 was hosted by the IGO-Austria. The theme was, "Our Cordillera People's Culture: Our Heritage" and the objectives were:

1. To know the current issues affecting Igorot migrants in Europe.
2. To enable Igorots in Europe to have a cultural exchange.
3. To address the issues of second generation Igorots.

What has been done during the 2nd Igorot European Consultation is very well documented in the proceedings.

General Overview

The three days spent in the second consultation went as follows :

- a) In the evening of May 29, IGO-Austria opened the consultation with a welcome program. As a background, we listened to Susan Kilakil read, "How the Idea of Gathering the Igorots/Cordillerans in Europe Came About." Later, Nicole Lani Abeya-Barnabas presented an update of the 5th Igorot International Consultation (IIC-5).
- b) In the morning of the second day, May 30, we listened to the IGO president, the late Mr. Rex Botengan's keynote address, which was read by Miss Linda Khensay, Igorot-UK president. Then His Excellency, the Philippine Ambassador to Austria, Victor Garcia III, delivered his message. Later, there was a panel discussion with panellists: Severino (Rhino) Oblas, who spoke on, "The Beliefs and Home Rituals of Benguet" and Maria Cristina (Mia) Abeya, who talked on, "The Role of Women among the Igorots." In the afternoon, we continued with the panel discussion about our situation as migrants in Europe. Conchita Pooten talked "On Migration from the Igorot land – Past, Present and Future: An Igorot migrant's perspective," followed by Lolit Hafner-Monico who spoke on " Challenges in a Bicultural Marriage." Afterwards, we had workshop group discussions. Later in the afternoon, we listened to the " Story of the IGO" prepared by the late Mr. Rex Botengan and read by Nicole Lani Abeya-Barnabas. The whole evening was spent as Igorot Cultural Night.
- c) On the third day, May 31, we decided on our group's name. We also made plans for 2005, especially the venue of our next gathering. After lunch, we went sightseeing. And in the evening, we were invited to the thanksgiving dinner offered by the Olat-Bounggick family with the full support of the IGO-Austria.
- d) On June 1, Sunday morning, we went our separate ways. Many went home, some went for more sightseeing and others went for a picnic.

What were taken up

1. There were speeches: a) About the Background, b) On the Theme, c) Panel discussions on the Igorot Migrants in Europe, d) A message from the Representative of the Philippine Government, and e) Information and updates on our Links :
 - a) As a background to the second Igorot European Consultation, Cordi-Bel told the story of how the idea of gathering Igorots/Cordillerans in Europe came about. They pointed out the favourable factors that pushed the idea. These were: the full support of the local organizations of Belgians due to the first celebration of a Cordillera Day in the City of Gent in Belgium, the positive response of the Igorots in Europe who were invited to form a preparatory committee

and the timely 4th Igorot International Consultation (IIC-4) that will be hosted by the Igorot-U.K. on June 28 – 30, 2002 in London.

- b) On the theme, we had “Igorot Cultural Heritage,” “Beliefs and Home Rituals of Benguet” and “The Role of Women among the Igorots.”
 - i) On the “Igorot Cultural Heritage” the late Mr. Rex Botengan, differentiated the term Cordillera and Igorots. According to him, the term Cordillera is a political identity whereas, the term Igorot describes the “people of the mountains,” and reveals a specific image of a people. He suggested some ways to preserve our Igorot culture, which are: using the term Igorot to describe our culture, conducting informal sessions with the youth about the elements of our culture, teaching them some of our common dances and rituals, orienting them with some of our socio-political institutions or oral traditions, teaching them few words in Igorots and letting them know that there are several Igorot languages, setting up a mobile mini-museums, collecting and preserving photos and printed literatures about the Igorot cultures and reviewing them to the youths.
 - ii) On the “Beliefs and Home Rituals of Benguet,” Rhino Oblas outlined the belief system of the Kankanaeys and Iballoys of Benguet, how the spirits they believed in are classified or categorized, and their perception on this belief and its effect to the living. The presentation by Mr. Oblas is a living example of our Igorot cultural heritage still being practiced by the people of Benguet today though it’s becoming limited.
 - iii) On the “Role of Women among the Igorots,” Mia Apolinar-Abeya expounded the role of the Igorot women in the family, in the village and also in today’s modern Igorot family. She pointed out that as bearers of life, the Igorot women pass on to the children the values of “patience, moral strength, fidelity, hard work, respect for nature, as well as humankind.”
- c) On the panel discussion about the Igorot migrants in Europe, Conchita Pooten talked on, “On Migration from the Igorotland: Past, Present and Future: An Igorot Migrant’s Perspective.” The issue she raised that needs to be addressed is the protection of elderly migrants. Then Lolit Hafner-Monico spoke on the “Challenges in a Bicultural Marriage,” where she presented a well-balanced view of the challenges/problems in a bicultural marriage and also its promises and joys. She also suggested at least eight practical recommendations on how to overcome the obstacles and confront the challenges to maintain a balance and happy bicultural marriage.
- d) In keeping with the theme of the consultation, the Philippine Ambassador to Austria, His Excellency Victor Garcia III mentioned in his message some evidences of the unique character of the Cordillera peoples, like the world famous Ifugao rice terraces, the ancient burial caves in Sagada, the well preserved sacred mummies of the ancient peoples of Benguet, the enlightening political story of the Chico river and the pristine mountain forests of the Cordillera. Then he recalled the dream of the Cordillera people for autonomy of which several referenda had been conducted but with no visible results yet. The centre of his message was a call for all Igorot associations or chapters throughout Europe as well as all Filipinos abroad to participate in the overseas absentee voting. He urged us, “to take advantage of this first-ever chance to select our country’s leaders...”
- e) For information and update, we had the “Story of the IGO” and the “5th Igorot International Consultation,” respectively. On the “Story of the IGO,” the late Mr. Rex Botengan pointed out how the name Igorot Global Organization (IGO) came about, its vision, mission statement, projects/programs, organizational status, membership, the membership fees and the present officers. The mission of the IGO is “to preserve for future generations the diverse heritage of the Igorot people and proactively promote their well-being, advancement and interests and

those of related people.” The vision is “to be the advocate of Igorot rights and causes – linking Igorots and related people worldwide.”

- f) Nicole Lani Abeya-Barnabas delivered the update on the 5th Igorot International Consultation (IIC-5), which was to be held in St. Louis, Missouri, USA from July 1 to 4 of 2004 and sponsored by the Igorot Global Organization. The objectives were:
- to learn from the 1904 journey of Igorots in the St. Louis World fair and how it brought us to the present day.
 - to expand our horizons by partnering with the people of St. Louis.
 - to forge the pathways that lead to enlightenment, never forgetting our dignity.

The theme was, “Igorots: St. Louis to the World.” The IIC-5 was intended to celebrate the challenges and accomplishments of Igorots since their participation at the St. Louis World Fair in 1904.

2. On the workshops, the topics were: Second generation Igorots, Cordillera migrant’s situation in Europe, Aging migrants and Bicultural Marriage. Each group came up with important recommendations for the Igorot European consultation and future consultations.
3. On the cultural activities:
 - a) We played our gangsas and danced our native dances especially during the Igorot night.
 - b) We relived our cultural heritage as we listened to the welcome and closing remarks delivered in an oggayam style.
 - c) We learned some Igorot folksongs and did their rhythmical steps.
 - d) During the Igorot cultural night, we witnessed one of our Igorot traditional wedding ceremony performed by the IGO-Austria.
 - e) Still considered a cultural activity was the thanksgiving dinner prepared by the IGO-Austria on the occasion of Cristabel (Dono) Olat-Bounggick’s 50th birthday anniversary.
4. On the guided sightseeing, Mr. Klemens Hruska made a very good guide. He gave valuable information on the historical, political as well as the socio-economic importance of the areas we visited in relation to the city of Vienna.
5. On the evaluation, each participant filled an evaluation form. As collated by Yvonne Belen, we saw the openness of the participant to express their honest feelings, likes and dislikes on some aspects of and on the overall consultation. However, there were only 28 evaluation sheets submitted in spite of the 90 recorded adult participants belonging to the first and second generation Igorots.

What we have reached so far

- A. From the workshops:
1. The recommendation to set up a residential home for the elderly Igorot migrants, which will be experimented in the U.K. The Igorot-UK will make a concept paper to be circulated and presented during the IIC-5.
 2. It was also noted to draft a declaration and programme of action to address the issues of Igorot migrants in Europe. The draft concept paper shall be circulated for comments and to be presented during the IIC-5.
 3. Encourage back to roots program for the youths, include camping for them in the future consultations and deal on the question of values and culture.

4. On the bicultural marriage, five practical recommendations were enumerated such as learning the language of the partner, how to help those victimized, immersing the foreign partner to the daily life in the ili, how to raise the children, and campaigning to reduce the number of years for waiting before being legalized.
- B. We came up with our group's name - "Igorot Cordillera (BIMAAK)-Europe" (ICBE). The term Cordillera recognizes the political and geographical concept as presently understood. The term Igorot refers to the indigenous peoples of the Cordillera while BIMAAK refers to the provinces that comprise the Cordillera region. Europe indicates the continent where we now live.
- C. Included in the proceedings is the article, "Igorot Values: Some Personal Thoughts," by Mr. Edmund Bugnosen Sr. (Ayban). The points he forwarded were:
1. It is difficult to talk of "Igorot Values" in a collective sense due to the many distinct differences in traditions, practices and values of each tribe in the Igorotland.
 2. In his reflection, the term " 'Igorot value' is used in the broadest sense which could mean Igorot tradition, belief and practices or mainly Igorot ways of life."
 3. Since the word "value" can either have bad or good implications, he enumerated some examples classifying them as bad, something in between, and good ones.
 4. Examples of the bad or not-so-good Igorot values are :
 - a) Baes (Revenge) – the "life-for-a-life" practice of some Igorot tribes in settling tribal disputes have contributed to some extent the historical head hunting stigma that Igorots carry today. This is also institutionalized in other tribes with the presence of some people who do the tala, sapo, pad-padya, and kedet.
 - b) Baos (curse) is more than just uttering bad words because it is ritually done with deep conviction accompanied animal sacrifice.
 - c) Ungos is the parental way of saying "no" to the prospective son or daughter-in-law.
 5. Examples of values that are something in-between good and bad :
 - d) Ba-in literally signifies shame but could be best interpreted as shyness or dishonourable.
 - e) Inayan is translated as the "be careful" attitude and the fear of the unknown.
 6. Examples of the good values (of which many are disappearing):
 - f) Respect for elders, which is common to all Filipinos in general but to the Igorot mentality it points more to obeying elders.
 - g) The Urbana (a unifying community holiday) but it is no longer totally observed in some communities.
 - h) The Senga - butchering animals for various reasons/occasions.
 - i) The Daw-es - a cleansing ceremony with animal sacrifice.
 - j) The Dap-ay practice where the members of the dap-ay come together to appreciate and invoke blessings to the donor of the gift or to reject the gift, if suspected unclean.
 - k) The practice of "unity and solidarity" (of which he has no appropriate Igorot term). This is clearly demonstrated by the holding of meetings as well as the past and future Igorot consultations.
 - l) Our natural tendency to help as Igorots which has its firm institutional foundation in the form of ob-obbo, supon, and sagaok.

m) And the foremost example of the good value is the Igorot's strong belief in "life after death." This belief has been held dear by the Igorots long before the Christian belief and teachings were introduced in the Igorotland.

D. The participants nominated Switzerland as the site of the next consultation and BIBAK Switzerland accepted.

What were left unanswered

During the plenary session on May 30, two questions were raised but due to limited time, were left unanswered. But it was agreed that these will be tackled in the next consultation. The questions were :

1. What values and rituals do we want to be preserved?
2. What is it in our culture that we want to pass on to our children?

Final Remarks

1. As recorded in the proceedings, there were 102 participants who attended of which 71 belonged to the first generation, 19 were from the second generation and 12 were supporters. The consultation was not limited to lectures, debates or discussions. There were cultural activities and a guided sightseeing around the city. The consultation was carried out on a self-reliant basis. But is there something worth remembering and cherishing in the 2nd consultation? Some answers from the written evaluation state, "Everything will be remembered – the host, the venue, all guests and participants are worth cherishing." And, "The exchange of experiences among the participants and their willingness to go on and preserve their culture and adapt to the culture of their host country."
2. Finally, as part of the review of this second consultation, let us not forget the intention of the late Mr. Rex Botengan to attend and be with us in our future consultations. Unfortunately, neither he nor anyone knows what his future would be. But let us pray that his spirit will guide us all throughout our consultation. What he has been doing to boost our identity as Igorots will serve as our inspiration to do well in our consultation and in the future consultations.

Thank you.