

The Story of the 3rd ICBE Consultation

By Ricardo Cuyob, Dominga Webber and Yvonne Belen

The Igorots and Cordillerans in Europe - homesick of the Philippine Cordillera with its mountains, forests and rivers – chose to hold their 3rd Igorot Cordillera [BIMAACK]-Europe (ICBE) consultation in a peaceful corner in Aeschi, Switzerland. Here they saw, for four days, the panorama of the snow-capped mountain tops of the Swiss Alps. Their conference, which started in the evening of 5 May and ended at noon of 8 May 2005, had as its theme, “Our Igorot Cordillera Culture: Heritage and Social Integration.” BIBAK-Switzerland hosted the consultation.

In Europe, the participants came from Austria, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom; overseas, from Israel, Philippines and the USA. The organizations represented were: Igorot Association Austria (Igo Austria), Cordillera Community in Belgium (Cordi-Bel), BIBAK Ireland, BIBAK-Switzerland, Igorot-UK, Association of Igorot Migrant Workers in Israel, BIMAK Washington DC, Igorot Global Organization (IGO) and IGO Philippines. There were 87 participants, of which 56 were first generation Igorots; 20, second generation and 11, supporters.

A Warm Welcome

Upon arrival, the participants immediately noticed the friendly atmosphere. BIBAK- Switzerland welcomed them in different ways. Fred Labfayong met some who flew in at Zurich airport; Julio Monico, Rick Kilongan, Walter Labaya and Bart Aliten fetched those who arrived at Spiez train station; Christa Monico and Juerg Hafner were the mainstay during the registration; Henry Foken and Frederick Baldo carried the luggage to the rooms; and the other members - Lolit Hafner-Monico, Violeta Passerini, Rebecca Riesterer, Sabina Kuenzi, Martin Koller, Claire Koller and Angie Wunderle were at the hotel lobby with their smiling faces. The lobby was filled with laughter as old friends saw each other again.

In the evening, the participants gathered for the opening programme. Claire and Martin Koller formed a team as masters of ceremonies.

The programme began with a turn-over ritual, from the host of the 2nd Igorot European Consultation held in Austria to the host of the 3rd ICBE Consultation. Patrick Bounggick, former president of Igo Austria, chanted an uggayam and handed a shield to Henry Foken, president of BIBAK Switzerland. After Henry accepted the shield, he sang a welcome song he composed in the Bontoc dialect.

Rick Kilongan gave the welcome message and among other things, he said, “For most of us, this time is a unique opportunity to meet and bond with fellow Igorots/Cordillerans in and outside Europe and overseas.”

Then Fred Labfayong delivered a message. Later, the participants from each country introduced themselves. And they had a minute of silence for the late Rex Botengan, president of the IGO, who passed on in December 2004.

Finally, Lolit Hafner-Monico, over-all coordinator of the 3rd ICBE consultation, gave the briefing. Towards the end of her talk, she expressed, “The challenges now are: how do we connect or strengthen our younger generation to the Igorot culture and heritage, how do we emphasize the reinforcement of link to our homeland and what do the youth think of all these challenges?”

Our Culture: Pass It On

With these challenges, the delegates set out on the second day to tackle the question at hand, which was: “What is it in our culture that we want to pass on to the next generation?” They listened to Maria Christina (Mia) Apolinar-Abeya from Bontoc, Mountain Province and now residing in Maryland, USA, who presented her input on culture in a simple and comprehensive manner. She discussed culture in general, presented cultural models and fitted them in to the culture of the Igorot ancestors. She talked on concepts and their applicability to the present generation. And she gave suggestions of what must be passed on.

Mia came out with several questions:

Are the dances and songs the path to our children’s connection to our culture? Can we possibly say that if we taught our children how to beat the gongs and how to dance the *takik* or *balangbang* or other dances, we have passed on the values of our culture to them? What is the significance of these dances and songs? Why does an Igorot mother always carry her young on her back while she continues to work the daily chores? Why do old folks have a solemn look on their faces when they are performing a ritualistic dance? Why does it take so long to weave a native blanket or create a *tapis*? Why does a new widow(er) withdraw from social activities for a whole year? Why must we feed a village during a union of a man and a woman? Why do we even talk to a dead person?”

Then she concluded,

“If we took time to come up with answers to these questions, we will find that almost every ‘why’ is due to a value worth looking into and worth teaching our children.”

Later, the participants listened to Severino (Rhino) Oblas from Benguet, presently living in Germany, who talked on the Kankana-ey’s and Ibaloi’s beliefs and practices. He also spoke on rituals and positive effects of traditional customs, beliefs and rituals. And he presented how the “Mambunongs” (the keepers of the Kankana-ey’s and Ibaloi’s beliefs and who perform the proper rituals for specific belief) are open to acculturation and modification.

After the talks, there were workshop discussions, But before the participants went to their workshops groups, there was a surprise intermission number. Juerg Hafner invited an alphorn player, who did a 15 minute performance. For a while, everyone imagined they were up in the mountains listening to the alphorn player.

During the workshops, the first generation Igorots answered the question, “What are the core values and other aspects of the Igorot culture we hold dear and special, which we want to pass on to the next generation?” And the second generation answered the question, “What are the core values and other aspects of the Igorot culture that we want to have?”

According to the first generation Igorots, the aspects of the Igorot culture they want to pass on are:

1. *Bagbaga* or counselling from elders. This is done during meetings in the *dap-ay*, or during weddings or rituals like *senga*. *Bagbaga* helps promote cooperation like *og-ogbo*.
2. Having family gatherings. Family gatherings like *ag-agong* or *ngilin* are occasions to remember ancestors and relatives. Remembering is significant because it “reawakens” the Igorot identity.
3. Bringing the children home. The goal is for the children to know their roots.
4. The *bodong* or peace pact as a tribal institution to resolve conflicts.
5. Belief that mountains, rivers, forests and trees are gifts from Kabunyan. Village folk take only what they need, which is an effective means to manage natural resources.
6. Respect for customary laws. During *tengaw*, the residents are prohibited to leave the village and visitors are refused entry.
7. Appreciation of indigenous food preparation. *Safeng* was the food cited. A comparison of the advantages of *safeng* and yoghurt as fermented products was made.
8. Rituals that convey meanings like *uggayam*, *ullalim* or *da-ing*.

9. Indigenous knowledge, artefacts and symbols that tell the history and lives of Igorots. Some examples of indigenous knowledge are rice wine making and back strap weaving. It is important to explain that the sharing of the rice wine is a means of binding friendship and the designs in the Igorot costumes have meanings.

As for the second generation, the core values of the Igorot culture they want to have are:

1. instilling the importance of education among the youth;
2. encouraging hard work ethic;
3. instilling the importance of close family values and sanctity of marriage;
4. taking on the community spirit through gatherings and social activities;
5. the traits of caring and concern for fellow Igorots;
6. the trait of respect for elders;
7. values in performing rituals and understanding their value and
8. continuing to learn more dances/music/art forms.

More Workshop Sessions

In the afternoon, there were workshops on specific topics of interest, which were: aging migrants, retirement in the Philippines, Cordillera issues and migrant concerns, and stories of our Igorot culture. The second generation also had their workshop and decided on their topics.

The workshop recommendations of the first generation participants were:

1. further discussion of aging migrants and retirement in future consultations;
2. the conceptualization of an association, which is a legitimate body duly registered, for overseas Filipino workers and their spouses to ensure the protection of the retirees.
3. conduct widespread information on the impact of the 1995 Mining Act and the operations of transnational mining corporations (TNMC) on the livelihood, environment, culture and right to self-determination of the Cordillera people;
4. call on the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) and the provincial officials in the Cordillera to create a **Commission on Migrant Workers and Their Families** to protect and advance migrant rights and
5. to publish stories on Igorot culture to include practices of birth, child rearing, sickness, marriage and daily life practices.

In their workshop group, the second generation Igorots noted there were few of them who attended the consultation.

Their recommendations were:

1. to attract others to attend, there should be activities for younger Igorots like games; outings; workshops on how to play traditional instruments, how to use Igorot tools such as *liga-o*, *lusong (pagbayu-an)* etc., and
2. the leaders of each country should be contacted to get the members or names of the 2nd generation Igorots in each organization.

Other presentations

During the morning session, Cordi-Bel, represented by Ric Cuyob, gave a review of the 2nd Igorot European Consultation held in 2003.

In the afternoon, Caridad Fiar-od moderated the other presentations, which were: updates on the Igorot International Consultation-6 (IIC-6); showing of "Bontoc Eulogy," made by Marlon Fuentes; and the video showing of the IIC-5 held in July 2004 in St. Louis, Missouri, USA.

“Bontoc Eulogy” is a film on the Igorots who were brought to St. Louis, Missouri for exhibition at the 1904 World’s Fair. After the reactions and counter reactions, the participants resolved that the issue on supporting Igorot film producers is brought to the IIC-6 planning committee for consideration, to include the protection of intellectual property rights of Igorots in their creative or literary-arts work.

With the power point presentation, Caridad Fiar-od did an excellent job of promoting the IIC-6 and entertaining the audience with her jokes and punch lines. Paz Awingan-Aptimes, IIC-6 Coordinator, and Claus Nabert collaborated to make the IIC-6 power point presentation.

Aareschlucht (Aare gorge) and Interlaken

The third day, Saturday, was a sightseeing day with Juerg Hafner as the tour guide. While the delegates sat in the bus and viewed the lofty mountain peaks, thick forest, waterfalls and lakes, Juerg kept their minds occupied with information on the places they were passing through.

Earlier, when everyone was seated in the bus, he announced, “There’s going to be a quiz about the tour and there will be a prize.”

Although many listened attentively, few were able to get the correct answers to win a prize, a Swiss knife.

The first stop was a view point, where the mountain peaks, covered with snow, could be seen at a distance and where the delegates could look at Lake Brienz and the city of Interlaken. Second stop was Aareschlucht, a gorge cut by the river Aare. Here they followed the viewing platforms to go deep into the gorge. Finally, the bus parked in Interlaken, where many went shopping for souvenirs. Some bought music boxes; others, cuckoo clocks. While the delegates found many souvenir items expensive, they squeezed their budget and managed to buy attractive and simple souvenirs to remember Switzerland.

A Merging of Cultures at the Gala Night

The Gala Night on Saturday evening was a much awaited event. There were yodellers coming. They were members of a local group from the community of Aeschi, the Jodlergruppe Alpengruss Aeschiried, who were invited by Juerg and Lolit Hafner. The participants thought they would only hear the yodellers yodel. But when the yodellers entered the hall with each one holding a huge cow bell and swaying it, everyone in the hall was in for a surprise. The sound of the cow bells reverberated throughout the hall. The yodellers walked up to the stage, came down and walked back again to the stage. It was a grand entrance.

The Swiss farmers not only yodelled, but also played the accordion.

Afterwards, the Igorots came in, in their full costume, with the men beating the gongs and the women walking beside them. It was an equally grand entrance. They performed a group dance, Balangbang, and a courtship dance, Takik.

The yodellers and their spouses enjoyed the evening’s activity while the Igorot delegates found it as the most exceptional cultural night they ever attended and participated. At a certain point during the program, the yodellers with their cow bells and the Igorots with their gongs tried to blend their two musical instruments and “Hurray”! It was wonderful. In spite of the difficulty of communicating verbally, the yodellers and Igorots managed, through gestures, to make their “cow bells and gongs” produce an extraordinary music.

What the programme committee originally planned as a cultural reaching out turned to be a cultural exchange of sorts, with the yodellers and Igorots showing part of their cultures through their musical instruments “their cow bells and gongs;” their songs, chants and dances; and their beautiful traditional attire. Furthermore, some of the yodellers took the courage to taste jar-fermented rice wine called *tapuy* prepared by the Igorots. The yodellers also ate some Philippine delicacies. The participants would leave the responsibility to BIBAK-Switzerland to pursue and build stronger contact and nurture the good impressions, which were initially exchanged with the yodellers of the Aeschi community.

Her Excellency Rora Navarro-Tolentino, Philippine Ambassador to Switzerland, came and delivered a speech. She appreciated and recommended the efforts of the Igorots wherever they are, to gather and try to do something to promote their dignity as a people and contribute to human prosperity, peace and harmony. She stayed throughout the programme, participated in the cultural dances and joined the picture taking.

Once again, Martin and Claire Koller formed a vibrant team as masters of ceremonies.

In the evaluation, a participant wrote:

The cultural night will be forever remembered and the effort of the BIBAK-Switzerland. Impressive. Rarely to see the Igorot tradition performed side by side with the tradition of the local community, it's once in a lifetime. We could also blend our culture to the other cultures if we try and are willing to.

Farewell and The Future

The last day of the consultation began with a liturgical celebration led by the Rev. Cesar Taguba. The celebration culminated the discussions on Igorot culture and the social issues confronting the Igorots abroad and in the Cordillera. It integrated an aspect of the Igorot culture, which is the belief in a Supernatural Being, "Kabunyan." Throughout the consultation, the religious aspect in the Igorot culture was manifested. Nearly every delegate consciously expressed or acknowledged that "Kabunyan" is present and guiding them in many ways.

A part of the programme was for Lolit Hafner-Monico to turn over the responsibility of hosting the ICBE consultation. After being assured of the participants' support, Judith Balangyao and Jane Gavino of BIBAK Ireland accepted the responsibility to host the 4th ICBE Consultation in 2007 in Ireland.

Like the previous conferences, the 3rd ICBE consultation was self-sufficient.

Violeta Passerini delivered the closing message, and she mentioned, "...let me share the compliments to each and everyone of you who participated because, for what is a party without the guests, be it simple or lavishly prepared."

Finally, the participants listened to Dr. Albert Bacdayan as he chanted his closing message. He thanked ICBE, most especially BIBAK Switzerland, for hosting the consultation.

And he reminded the participants,

A ket sapay koma ta
Adda maysa ken maysa
Ket ayabana didiay
Makuna idiy Kaigorotan
Nga ab-abi-ik
Ta isublina idiy nagapuan na
Ta narigat ti ab-abi-ik nga mapanawan
Ti maysa nga lugar...

And so I hope
that each one
summons
what they call in Igorotland
the soul
and return it where it came from
because it's hard to leave your soul
in a place.

No rumuar kayo idiy
Kuwarto yo a
Ket kunayo yo,
'Intayon amin.'
Intayon amin ta narigat ti mabati
Masapul manen ti adda manok nga maparti...

When you leave
your rooms
Then you say
'Let's all go'
'Let's all go because it's hard to left behind'
You need to butcher a chicken again.

And so ended a conference held at Hotel Friedegg in the Berner Oberland, one of the regions in the Swiss Alps. The word "friedegg" means "peaceful corner." The Igorot and Cordillerans will long remember this peaceful corner for it was here where they shared ideas and experiences on their culture. And it was also here where they blended their culture with the Swiss farmers of Aeschi. They both have a cultural heritage to preserve and pass on to the next generation.