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Time: 18.30-20.00
Interviewer: Maup van de Kerkhof (**Ma**)
Interviewee: Myra Colis (My)

Ma: Thank you for participating in this interview in the build up to Indigenous Liberation day on the 12th of October. First of all, could you maybe elaborate on your background and what you identify with in terms of culture and just as a person?

My: Well, first and foremost my name is Myra and I'm originally from the Philippines, specifically the northern part of the Philippines. There I come from a region, we call it the Cordillera administrative region of the Philippines, and here the Indigenous people are called the Igorots. When it comes to Indigenous people and where I associate with, that's my roots and what I associate with. They call me Igorot or Cordillera or a combined Igorot Cordillera. In the Philippines we have more than 7000 islands and we have three regions, the Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao and we are basically the Northern people. In the region that I'm talking about, the Cordillera administrative region, it's made up of six provinces and the Igorot live in all these provinces. We are really native Indigenous peoples, so although we are often referred to with the more general term of Igorot Cordillera, all the different provinces also have their own practices and habits. So it's a really diverse group. To be called an Igorot simply goes by bloodline, so you're biologically born into it.

Ma: So to clarify, the different provinces have different Igorot, like you said. Why are these seen as different?

My: Well it really is bounded to the geographical location someone finds itself in, so while there are different cultural practices the Igorot are called different names because of the area they find themselves in.

Ma: Okay, perfect. So if I understand correctly you're located in the Netherlands right now, can you maybe elaborate on the activities that you engage with surrounding the Igorot identity, like activities that contribute to enable its expression? Can you elaborate a bit more?

My: Yes. So I came here as a migrant to join my family and my husband. Before I came to the Netherlands I also went to China first and I was there for like ten years. Then I came here, and when I came here it's a lot different because you come here and everything has to start from zero again. Apart from getting to know the culture and language, I felt like I was pretty lost and I was looking for a group of people with which I could identify. I looked for different Philippine organizations from here, so I did find some groups of Filipinos but I was still missing the genuine connection with my roots and identity. I wasn't able to express my being, so I started wondering if there were many other Igorots here that moved to the Netherlands. I was so happy when I met one because it immediately felt like I met a family member. Even though she came from a different province, a different area, knowing that she was an Igorot I felt immediately that she was my family. And then the ball started rolling, so I met 2, I met 5, I met 8 and I could create a whole group! BUt there was really no place or organization that we could go to with regards to meeting up. So I asked others how they were doing and if they felt the freedom to connect with their identities and to connect with the

culture. Of course everyone said no, because things are different here. We have to go on with our lives and pay the bills. But it was very evident that everyone was missing their roots so that's how MABIKAs foundation came about. It was really just the initiative and a starting point to organize community sessions together, but we also felt that we couldn't just organize something without a purpose or a goal. So after the Indigenous Liberation day and some talking we came up with our organization. The activities that we do help me with actually being in touch with my roots and it's the same with other Igorots here in the Netherlands. It is our way of experiencing and to re-perceive what we are and we identify with. We organize dances, talks, we can talk about our Indigenous background.

Ma: So there wasn't really a space to express the identity of to 'own' it in a way, so you had to provide it for yourself it feels like. So the individuals you were in touch with felt like they couldn't express themselves because they had little time and had to work to pay the bills etc. So at this point, do you also feel like there are still obstacles to express your identity and to stay close to yourself?

My: Yes definitely, there are still obstacles, even starting with meeting together physically in one place. It is very challenging. Everyone is busy in their own personal lives and I thought it was interesting that, I lived in China and that it is very big but it was easy for us to meet up. Obviously, the Netherlands isn't as big as China but it's so difficult to meet up. People see a trip from Rotterdam to Amsterdam as a huge distance for meeting up, because it takes too much time off the ability to work for your practical needs. It seems like the pressure is higher.

Ma: Indeed, that seems to be it, right. People are too busy working to meet their practical needs so the cultural aspect is something that can't be paid attention to.

My: Yeah so for example, I have to work at this time or I have to go to a Dutch class or I have other priorities, have to look after my kids, things like that.

Ma: And that's acceptable to some extent, but it's a bit strange that you're impeded on doing the things that you love and contribute to your identity.

My: Yeah even when we do agree on a time and date, the question remains where do we meet up? Maybe we can go to the park, but when it's winter you can't really do that so it really depends on the weather too. So it's like, if there is a place where we can meet up, like a communal place where everyone is free to go and express your cultural background, that would be nice. But we do believe that there is still a challenge that we have to pay to rent a place and everything, and since the organization is not aimed at generating money this is a hard thing to do.

Ma: Right! I meant to ask this at a later point, but it just runs smoothly into it. Within the Century of the Indigenous Liberation project there is also some talk on a communal house, or a culture house or place. For example, christianity has churches, muslims have a mosque, and that is not to say that the Indigenous house would be a religious thing but more so a spiritual thing. It seems like this would help with doing ceremonies and just getting together. Do you have any views on how to design such a place, both physically and socially. So would it be possible to have one place where different cultures come together?

My: Well, ideally, it would be really nice to have a common place or an infrastructure or building or anything where we could practice our things. It would be nice to have a common place to go to, but the thing is that obviously Indigenous people differ in many ways. For example, Igorot when compared to Kalinya or Mapuche differ in many ways. We are not aware of or don't know each other's practices and what this means. But therefore it could also be a place where we get to understand each other and share each others practices and do these together. I'm very sure that, even though we differ in many ways, as soon as we understand e.g. the Mapuche ceremony and what it means we can easily relate to it. So if there is like a place where we could do these things, that would be great. And it's like a communal property where everybody can access.

Ma: That would be the idea, through the municipality of any place, maybe Amsterdam or maybe somewhere else. That it would be a communal space where people will be able to drop in. There are so many different groups but in a sense it is not really possible to create separate communal spaces for different communal groups. And on top of that, a synergy might emerge.

My: I would like to add something, because I think Indigenous people are ourselves and we have this very strong identity which we would like to stick to. Sometimes it is so strong that we're not actually welcoming to others. That is one thing that I see, so when we think about this common place, maybe a challenge would be to feel welcome for all the different groups. Especially because we are in the Netherlands and the language that we are using is Dutch. So maybe people go there and they don't speak Dutch, so they start speaking English. But this is also removing us from our roots and some might want to speak their own language. When I meet with my Igorot friends we also speak our local dialect. So I think when we have this common place that you're talking about, the language could be one of the challenges. Just the difference in language and that you cannot be easily in solidarity when there is a language barrier, in case people speak their own language.

Ma: That makes sense, and would definitely be an obstacle. So grabbing back to the how the interview was set-up, past - present - future, like you said you speak your local dialect when you talk to other Igorot. Are there things resulting from colonization and continuous marginalization with regards to language use, sharing of knowledge or anything else that has changed?

My: I think in the Igorot tribe we do still experience national oppression. When the Spanish colonized the Philippines, they tried to go to the mountains to extract gold and all that. But when the Indigenous people, the Igorot, resisted at the time, they saw that the Igorot couldn't really be conquered. Colonization wasn't really possible, so there was a divide made between the Filipinos in the lowlands and Igorot. So they said that the Filipinos in the lowlands were good, but the Igorot were savage and barbaric. So we still feel this today in some sense. And since many also are Christianised Filipinos, they say that the Indigenous people from the mountains are enemies of God. That is the tactic that the colonizers use. So as we were divided, from that we became a minority if we look at the history and how Indigenous people in general in the Philippines are oppressed from the very beginning of colonization and throughout history. Even now, it is actually eminent because in the books we still get discriminated and just all the 'civilized' people are so ignorant about our history

and they just straight up discriminate us in the textbooks. For example, in primary they describe people who are Igorot as people with dark skin, curly hair, sleeping in bad places, it's just pure ignorance. And it is just not being checked or reviewed so these are now the textbooks that are used in the primary schools in the Philippines. What kind of education do you have in such a case? It is just now raising your children in a way that you want them to be raised. In a way that is past to present.

Ma: Okay, so it seems like at least back home but also here are still not talked about in many debates surrounding the deterioration of nature for example. But also in racism debates, there is this whole Black Lives Matters movement, which is great, but it also excludes a lot of people. So I was just wondering how is your view of how Indigenous people should function in society, is it mere recognition and let us do our things as we want to, or does it also have something to do with transferring knowledge?

My: I would go on the latter one that you mentioned. It wouldn't be enough to just recognize us. And that is not even for us ourselves, if you don't recognize us but if we can just live our lives without being impeded in doing so it's okay. But then again, it is also important to recognize the rights of Indigenous people. In a way we are a definite minority in society. And as a minority some rights could be overlooked easily. This also means that our identity is oftentimes not recognized enough for the simple fact that we sometimes don't even have the same rights as others. But also, like you said, we want the recognition of our identity and the acknowledgement that we can play a vital role in the society. We carry the wisdom of the past and the wisdom of our ancestors, the wisdom passed from one generation to the other. You can't really find this in scientific books or even in academia. I would like to see that we are more incorporated and integrated into society because we have a lot to contribute, we would love to share our knowledge. For example, when we talk about climate change, there is so much talk about this but we aren't involved. Why is this the case? We know better about the treatment for nature and the world that we live in. But where do you find that? Maybe we have to insist that we or I have to be part of the dialogue, but if you don't do that you're not invited or recognized to take part. So that's the thing, yes we want to be involved and that's what we want. Make us be involved so we can help out, it's not just for us but it can help a lot to solve problems in the society. So for example, this week we have this seminar on integrating Indigenous knowledge in the academia talking about why it is pure scientific knowledge that matters at this point, why can't we just blend them and search for ways to solve problems by integrating these different knowledges together. So that would be my view on it.

Ma: Definitely, I struggle with the idea of the academia `asking` other types of knowledges to be integrated in their curriculum, which makes it still like the other knowledges have to move towards the academe. The other way around is seldom talked about. But, on a bit more practical note, can you maybe give some examples of how you or the Igorot relate to nature and how it can be of value for the wider debate?

My: I think first and foremost we have to think about the values of the Igorot, or Indigenous people in general. The idea of connectivity and living according to the cosmivision has to be emphasized and shared, so it is really our mindset or how we are even brought up. We are connected with nature, without the other we will die. So if you don't take care of the environment you live in you also don't take care of yourself. So we have to take care of

nature from that standpoint. From that perspective it's like, you could see, like the interconnectivity with nature is bound and tight into how you think in sustainable ways. If you think about solving problems with regards to climate change, this is really valuable. So your questions is more about how we 'solve' these problems?

Ma: I wouldn't say solve per se, but more like, Indigenous people have very different values and the way in which these climate problems are approached at this point is all through institutions and it has to go through all these layers. So maybe you can take it a bit more wider as how we approach the problem: do you feel like the approach that we are taking now is fitting, and if not can you elaborate on how a different approach would look like from an Indigenous perspective?

My: Right, how we are approaching it now is just politics. It doesn't really go into the problem itself. The decisions are made based on: what is the best interest of country A versus what is the best interest of country B, but that's not in the best interest of protecting the earth. An example could be in relation to that. When they build dams, for example, they say oh we need these dams to have electricity which is good for economic progress and everything. Sure, we are also for development, why not. But then, if you don't consult the local people that are living in the community and start displacing them, destroying the trees, without even consulting the local people and asking for their consent. That is already, like, why? Who decided that this would be a good plan. If they would be consulted instead and opinions were asked, maybe a more sustainable way of building dams would arise which could benefit the rest. Another thing is like, when they for example make use of Indigenous knowledge. One example, when they go to the community of Indigenous people and they see only natural resources to exploit but also the knowledge is exploited. They go there to interview, conduct research, or pharma companies that are searching for traditional medicine to explore and make a product out of it. But there is nothing that they give back. If you think about it, if you really think good, the connectivity with everything, wouldn't it be nice to also consider how you can give back and not only think how can I get something from them? These kinds of things will help.

Ma: Interesting, that was exactly what I was aiming for. The question really is how can you give back to nature and how do you engage in a reciprocal relationship with nature and treat it with respect.

My: Another thing that that reminds me of, also my elders, my grandfather and grandmother, they used to teach us that, if you take something from nature you should only take enough for what you need. We should be able to see what is good enough for us, because if you just take things out of need you will not be acting sustainably to begin with. For example, when you want to build a house and, let's say, you take 2 trees. What we were brought up to do is to plant at least 2-3 trees so that the relationship is sustainable. Also when you go fishing, you don't go fishing and use dynamite so that you have a lot of fish but at the end of the day others do not buy your fish. Take what you need, because if you take more to sell it it is unpredictable whether it is actually of use or if you throw it away after. If so, you are not acting sustainably. This is definitely one of the values that could help the Western society and the capitalistic and greed-based society.

Ma: Yes, just the whole idea of making as much money as you can is at the roots of

this problem. So also in terms of values, you said you learned them from your parents and elders, and it seems like with MABIKAs there is a resurgence of some sort within the people of the community with regards to the knowledge and knowledge sharing. So how do you see the knowledge shared within the community but also for future generations?

My: Back home where we came from, there is this practice we call [.....] which is a local language. When translated into English it talks of the community and chatter with each other. Once you have the time to gather and sit down across generations, the elders are able to tell stories and share knowledge. We also try to create this with MABIKAs and we call it [TuTuman Ti MABIKAs ?] which we now call IP talks, Indigenous Peoples talks. We meet on a regular basis, reminisce and tell stories. Storytelling will keep our stories alive and the more you find time and platforms to share and remember the past, that's how we pass on knowledge and keep it alive or viable. Both here, the Igorot in the Netherlands but also with our children. For example, the first IP talks we were talking about when we were children about climbing Baobab trees and the differences with now when we only use cell phones etc. So those stories are very interesting to look back on, the stories and the values that they bring and that were taught to us by our elders. Also when we have a disagreement, we have this practice we call Budun, for example when one nature hurts another, we don't directly go to the police but we go to our elders and try to mediate ourselves. And these kinds of practices we try to remember and pass on to our children, because abroad we don't have the means to really be with elders and be with the community as we could back home. This reminded us of who we are, but here in the Netherlands we don't have that. So what we can only do is to find a way to talk, to remember and to share with each other. That's what we do now and that's why we have had the IP talks during the pandemic. This actually made it a bit easier because now it is normal to meet online, so we could plan a meeting every month. It's really nice and it is working. It would be nice if this could also be expanded in case we go to the communal place as you mentioned earlier. That would be very fitting.

Ma: Okay so, just to clarify, you said 'it's working', so when exactly would you consider it to be working?

My: It's working in a way that we have a platform to talk and to tell stories, because if we don't organize this on a monthly basis you wouldn't have the infrastructure to talk about it, because e-mailing wouldn't be an option. But it's just that we have a type of place where we can talk. And it's working because every time we meet and try to talk about a certain topic, after that we feel really alive and uplifted. It feels like: I'm back and I'm feeling like myself again. It's me, the Igorot Myra and not the migrant Myra living in the Netherlands and trying to fit in with the culture here.

Ma: Good to hear that it's possible to achieve such a thing through such talks and transferring knowledge and all.

My: Yeah and also, the young generation nowadays don't know that much about the culture. Even those who are 40 and who came to the Netherlands and are here abroad, they actually don't know that much about the practices and kind of forgotten the things. When you don't have the means you tend to forget it, and that's what is happening now. That's why we also try to invite the elder Igorot here in the Netherlands, or from Europe in general. They can be

in the same time zone as us. In that way, it's from them that we could also get some more wisdom because they love sharing a lot. They are already in their 70s or 80s but they really love sharing and telling stories, they talk a lot. It's so good to listen to them and learn from each other.

Ma: And also that links with the youth

My: Yes youth, but like I said also the ones in the 40s that has been taken a long time ago.

Ma: So, for the Igorot diaspora, you said you wanted to expand your network etcetera. Do you have an idea about how a fully accepted Igorot would look like in the Dutch society. You said you relate closer to your identity and it feels like that is something to strive for on a more regular basis. So is there an aim to organize other things that contribute to this?

My: Right, actually one of our goals is not only to relive our Indigenous identity within ourselves and among our community, but also to be able to share it with the Dutch community. Especially the Netherlands is becoming more and more diversified and there is a recognition of this, and in that sense we would also like to contribute to that and function in the society. If we could expand our type of activities and dialogues that would definitely help to understand this multicultural society better. If there is a way in which we could help with merging knowledge and have a dialogue with academics or even political dialogues, that would help with spreading our type of knowledge.

Ma: As a quick addition, is this just limited to the Dutch society?

My: There are also people from outside of the Netherlands

Ma: So you already knew them or got to know them during conversations?

My: Well that's the interesting thing because you know who is Igorot when they are in a room. So you get to talk and you find the connections that you already have with each other, so for example through knowing family members of the other or Igorot friends. So here in Europe we had one big conference where all the Igorot came together here in the Netherlands, which was a really nice experience. That's definitely something we want to do more often. In a way we share each other's adventures and struggles, how we survive and thrive here in Europe. Just by the fact that we're Indigenous people from the mountains in the Philippines. By the way, the Indigenous people from the Cordillera as compared to the rest of the Indigenous people in the Philippines, we value education a lot. So actually a lot of Igorot in Europe and here in the Netherlands, a lot of them have enjoyed a high education.

Ma: Is there a specific reason why that is the case?

My: It really is probably because of the American colonizers. That might be the single positive thing that the colonizers gave us. When they went to the Philippines and went to the Cordillera, where we live, they imported the books and mentioned the importance of schools. They opened up schools and the Igorot saw that as very vital, to learn how to read for example. I hear stories from our elders about this. Also, interestingly, that's why the Igorots

of all the Filipinos speak the best English in the Philippines. But the history was really that the Americans introduced that and the Igorot saw the value. They took advantage of the value of going to school and being educated. From that time on it involved generations of putting a high value on getting educated.

Ma: Well, that's one thing that has turned out to be beneficial. [...] All and all I think I covered most of the questions. Is there anything else that you want to add or elaborate on?

My: I want to return to the question of justice to our people, which I haven't really talked about yet. One of the challenges nowadays is, well, for example before it was easy to be yourself and be within your community and work within your community and culture. The thing now is that because of globalization, every different society has become intertwined or interconnected. So what we do in our community also affects other communities. The challenge of integrating your own culture in another place is very hard because of that. Being Igorot here in the Netherlands is very tricky because you don't want to leave your identity behind, but it's really hard to stick to that point. It's hard to just say, hey! Recognize our culture. Because of this interconnection between societies and the changes surrounding it make it more difficult to apply our ideas from our own cultures. There are a lot of practices and knowledge that could be used over here. So when it comes to the topic of justice, I think that what we really need to do is break the prejudice in our globalized society. Because we can also experience discrimination like you mentioned earlier. But the problem is that there is a lack of understanding of the other people, the people that are different from us. I'm not sure if breaking the prejudice should start at home or in the schools, the media or policies and regulations, or really just start from everywhere and give incentives to initiatives that promote eradicating prejudices. That could minimize the risks of injustices in society. When you think of these injustices and discrimination, they are just based on a lack of understanding of who the people are.

Ma: I think it's interesting what you say, everything is globalized and interconnected to which you have to adapt. This goes back to what I said earlier about the universities and everything has to come to them, not the other way around. This way other cultures have to work to be integrated, the structure is not like everybody can express and we find a way to coexist. This still carries a marginalizing mechanism in it. That's a big topic that we have to work on. And I think that everything you touched upon definitely contributes to that. It probably begins with education, re-writing history books and these type of things. Widening it to the ways in which we get educated. Just the idea that the Netherlands, specifically, is so small and we have so many cultures, yet we try to fit it into this one mold or identity. It just doesn't feel right.

My: The main point is like we have to work together rather than bring more tension to the situation and widen the gap between the groups. These issues are not really talked about, is it because it is not important or because no one knows anything about it? If it's the latter it is probably time to raise awareness and provide immediate education on what Indigenous people can contribute to the society. Open the platform for us to make us part of the society.