

# Becoming a Filipino Tilburger<sup>1</sup>

by Maya Echavez Butalid

On the early morning of August 13, 1983, I stepped out of Schiphol airport in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. It was still in the middle of summer, and not just an ordinary summer day. There was supposed to be a heat wave. But I felt the cold penetrating even up to the core of my bones. What a cold country! I had never felt such coldness before. Ever.

With just a half-full *maleta*, Carlo, my husband and I went towards the buses which would take us to Utrecht. There, we would be fetched by comrades of the European department of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). This was the start of what we thought was temporary : our stay in Europe.

Coming from the youth section of the CPP we were deployed to Europe to help out CPP's international work. Carlo did solidarity work for the Philippines, while I was assigned to help build the diplomatic relations of the CPP and the National Democratic Front (NDF). In the course of our stay in The Netherlands, we also inter-acted with the overseas Filipino communities and became active in their various organizations.

Now after 23 years, as I look back, much has changed in our lives. For one, both Carlo and I have stepped out of the movement<sup>2</sup> in 1993. Without elaborating further on the reasons, I would just say that we no longer agreed on the policies and ways of conduct of the movement as pushed forward by its leaders. Of course, this went not uneventful.

On the 20th anniversary of the NDF in April 1993, the Executive Committee of the European Department of both the CPP and NDF formally dissociated itself from the CPP / NDF. While most of those who dissociated from the CPP / NDF continued to do solidarity work for the Philippines, I decided to totally stop my political involvement with regards the Philippines. And since I had two growing daughters I decided to work seriously towards my integration into Dutch society. To be able to raise my daughters effectively, I felt the need to also take roots in the society where they are. Then I can understand the context where they are growing up, which is very much different from mine. And as my two daughters continued to grow up, so did my integration into the Dutch society continue to broaden and deepen.

## **Being a migrant does not automatically mean being at the bottom of the social ladder.**

This was my first realization when I started “immersing” myself into the Dutch society. During my first ten years in The Netherlands, my social circles were limited to those active in the solidarity work for the Philippines, the overseas Filipinos, and those relevant to the care of my children such as our family doctor, their dentist, children's day care personnel, their babysitter and teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> Tilburg is the name of a city in The Netherlands, where the author currently resides. Residents of this city are referred to as Tilburgers.

<sup>2</sup> The term “movement” refers to the CPP / NDF (Communist Party of the Philippines/National Democratic Front).

My first real encounter with the Dutch *massa*<sup>3</sup> was when I started to work in several disadvantaged communities of Tilburg. In a way, this marked my real immersion into the Dutch society. All along I have always assumed that migrants are the worst-off group in society – that because of discrimination and racism, and also due to language and cultural barriers, they are only able to take on the very low-paying and odd jobs. But in those disadvantaged communities where I worked, I saw that even as a native Dutch, one can also live in utmost poverty<sup>4</sup>. I then realized that class differences exist in all societies. The problems faced by many ethnic communities (i.e. non-Dutch) here are mainly because they are poor, and not because of their ethnicity per se. And that they share many problems with poor locals. I started to develop an affinity for the less-privileged people of the Dutch society, both migrants and native Dutch alike. I guess this was the point in my life when my perspective gradually changed from that of just a migrant to that of being a Tilburger.

### **Pitfalls of welfare states**

When I came to The Netherlands, one of the things I was very much impressed with is how the government “takes good care of its people”. Everybody has, for example, a medical insurance with a standard coverage for all basic and necessary health care. When one has no income from work, the government provides income from social security. Primary and secondary education is a right as well as an obligation. There is a system of student financing which gives every young person the opportunity to obtain a diploma. There is a system of housing subsidy, and many more.

For me, coming from a country where the government is “neglectful” in taking care of its people, a welfare state as The Netherlands seems the “perfect place to be”. After immersing myself in Dutch society, I realized quickly enough that a welfare state system can have some pitfalls. Because the government takes care of almost everything, practically nobody needs anybody. Social isolation is therefore a very real possibility, something which is unimaginable in the Philippines.

In our study sessions inside the movement we used to talk about “alienation from society” as inherent to capitalist states. To me then, this was totally a theoretical concept. Only after having integrated into the Dutch society did I understand and see how “alienation from society” could actually happen. This term is to me no longer a theoretical concept, but something which is very real, happening to actual people, people I come across in my work. In fact, the core objective of our community work is to facilitate and promote people’s participation in society so as to prevent them from social isolation and alienation. In a country where a lot of things are not taken care of by the government, like in the Philippines, people naturally take care of each other. This is one aspect of our culture that I learned to appreciate and take pride in, more and more, as my integration into the Dutch society progressed.

Since the government in the Netherlands takes care of practically everything, there are also rules for almost everything. Understanding the rules and figuring out which rule is applicable to which situation seems like a “national sport” in this country. Surviving is therefore a

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<sup>3</sup> The term “massa” is used here to mean that part of the Dutch population belonging to the lower social class. The term “massa” is used in this article interchangeably with the term “masses”.

<sup>4</sup> Poverty is a relative term. Poverty in a so-called Third World country like the Philippines is of a different sort which is not to be compared to poverty in a developed country as The Netherlands.

question of being able to “play the sport”, that is being able to avail as much as possible of the services provided for by the state.

In a way, the many rules set by the government have served as a framework by which people address their problems. In the Philippines, while surviving literally means finding food and shelter, it however has another dimension, one of being able to pursue one’s dreams and ambitions. This is perhaps one of the “charms” of a country like the Philippines where *ad hoc* and flexibility is more the rule. People are not confined to a set of rules, and therefore have to rely a lot on their “creativity” and “resourcefulness”, thus giving more room for dreams and ambitions. Many, if not most, of the people living in poverty in The Netherlands have already forgotten to dream. In their own words, “they are only surviving”. In the Philippines, many, if not most, of the people living in poverty are also trying to survive but have still kept their dreams and ambitions. If I were to choose where I would live if I were poor, then I’d rather be in the Philippines. But if I were poor and sick, then I’d rather be in The Netherlands.

In my present public function as elected City Councilor of Tilburg, I am currently actively involved in addressing the problem of poverty. We have defined poverty not only as a lack of money but also a lack of social network and lack of perspectives for the future. To me, a bigger challenge in addressing poverty is that of creating a “civil society” in which people take care of each other and making people dream again about their future, two things which are abundant in the Philippines.

### **Once political always political**

The level of my political involvement in the Dutch society is not an accident, but rather a logical course of my life. There’s a saying in the movement that goes “*ang matang namulat na ay mahirap nang muling ipikit*” (eyes that are already open will be difficult to close). This means that a person who has become politically conscious will always remain politically conscious. Though my political consciousness started in the Philippine context, I have always carried with me and put to use the political analytical skills I had learned during the years that I have been in the movement.

Migrants in The Netherlands with five years of residency in this country have the right to vote in the local elections. As a Filipino migrant I have always made use of my right to vote in local elections. What I admire in the electoral system in this country is how campaigns are conducted on the basis of issues so people vote not on the basis of personalities, as in the case of the Philippines, but really on the basis of what the political parties stand for.

Coming from the Philippine political left, my logical choice of party to vote for was the Socialist Party (SP). As an opposition party, SP is known for its sharp critique of the ruling coalition government<sup>5</sup>. Giving critique, which almost everybody can do, is one thing. But coming up with viable alternatives is another thing, and more difficult to do. And I missed this from the Socialist Party. For this reason I shifted to voting for the Green Left. The Green Left, though having a good program, appeals more to the highly educated and the intellectuals in Dutch society.

Although being highly educated myself, I have always learned to identify with the *massa*. One of the principles I learned from the movement is to be close to the masses. Meaning, to

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<sup>5</sup> Having a single ruling party hardly ever occurs in The Netherlands. The ruling government is almost always a coalition of two or three parties forming together a majority of the seats in Parliament.

know what their problems are, and to be with them in their struggle to resolve their problems. A political party that claims to fight for the welfare and betterment of the common masses should therefore be a party which the masses can identify themselves with. And to me, this was not the Green Left.

So, I looked further and finally decided to shift to voting for the Dutch Labor Party (PvdA). I saw that the PvdA was a party which the common masses could identify with, but was also a party which many migrants could identify with. I saw that the PvdA was already far ahead than the other left parties in its efforts at integrating the migrants into their political party, far beyond than being just symbols to garner votes from the migrant communities as in the case by the other left parties. Later I felt the need to know more about the Dutch political system. And I thought the best way to do this was to become a member of one of its political parties. And this is how I became a member of the PvdA.

Perhaps the most valuable principle I learned from my years of experience in the movement in the Philippines is to believe in the strength of the masses. That every person, no matter how poor, has an inherent strength. In my work in the disadvantaged communities of Tilburg I have always held this principle as my framework in relating with the people. And I have always considered my work not just a job to earn my keep, but more a way to pursue the ideals I have always held. And somehow my dedication to work for the welfare of the less-privileged groups of society caught the attention of a prominent member of the Executive City Council of Tilburg, who happens to also be a PvdA member. This prompted him to ask me whether I wanted to be more active in the PvdA, by applying to be in its candidate list for the coming local elections. I became a member of the City Council of Tilburg in June 2003<sup>6</sup>.

#### Integration is an on-going conscious process

I have just narrated above my integration process in the Dutch society, specifically the political aspect of my integration. My integration process has been an on-going process of gaining insights on the new culture I am in (the Dutch culture in this case) - taking on a critical attitude and integrating the positive aspects of the new culture. On the other hand, I continue to be conscious of, and take pride in my being a Filipino.

Before going further into the topic of integration I would like to make a distinction between the terms **integration** and **assimilation**. Individuals and groups entering another country, as in the case of (Filipino) migrants, are confronted with a distinctly different dominant culture, that of the host country. How these individuals and groups respond to this “meeting of two cultures” (acculturation) can be conceptualized in two central issues.

The *first* issue is whether cultural identity and characteristics (in this case the Filipino culture) are of value and should be maintained. The second issue is whether relationships with other groups (in this case the Dutch culture) are of value and should be sought. In assimilation, one’s original cultural identity is relinquished and the individual opts to move into the larger, dominant society. In integration, on the other hand, one opts to maintain his/her cultural identity while moving to become an integral part of the larger, dominant society.

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<sup>6</sup> In March 2006 I was again reelected for a term which will end in 2010.

In a study I made in connection with my Master's degree in Cross-cultural psychology<sup>7</sup> integration appeared to be the most preferred acculturation strategy of overseas Filipinos in Belgium, Germany and The Netherlands. A more interesting outcome of the study is that overseas Filipinos seem to find the first issue (whether the Filipino culture is of value and should be maintained) more important than the second issue (whether relationships with the culture of the host country are of value and should be sought).

Contrary to what many may think, that holding on to one's culture is a hindrance to one's integration in the host country, the study shows that an important condition for a successful integration in the host country is precisely giving value to one's own culture. This seems to lay a stable basis for one to explore the other culture, integrating the positive aspects of that culture and becoming an integral part of that larger, dominant society. For one to be integrated in the host country, one doesn't have to be less Filipino. In fact the study shows that there is only a slight difference between those who feel assimilated and those who feel marginalized (that is, not belonging to any culture). This may indicate that those who decided to relinquish one's Filipino culture and adopt the host country's culture may have been unsuccessful in their process of assimilation and thus have the feeling of becoming marginalized instead.

At this point I would like to share an example of another Filipina in The Netherlands, Ruby Langeveld-Cumba, who in my opinion is very successful in her integration into Dutch society, but who remains very Filipino in her identity. Ruby has always maintained her Philippine passport even if she can easily acquire a Dutch passport. Her reason for this is that she made a promise to her father that she will always remain a Filipino, no matter what. And that her allegiance to the Philippine flag remains to be very strong despite the many years that she has lived in The Netherlands. In her free time she is very active in a Dutch organization promoting partnership between her city, Haarlemmermeer, and Cebu City in The Philippines. Through this, she hopes to do her share in the pursuit of improving the quality of life of her fellow Cebuanos, even if it is just a fraction of what needs to be done.

In her daily life, she works as an operating nurse in one of the hospitals in The Netherlands, highly respected by her colleagues. To achieve this, she invested a lot of time and energy in gaining the necessary knowledge and skills required in her profession. Being professional in one's field of work is a universal thing and has nothing to do with one's cultural identity. Being able to master the Dutch language to be able to function at this level is of course very essential. But again, one can master the Dutch language, or any other language, and still maintain one's Filipino cultural identity. The point is, when one is secure and confident about one's being Filipino, one will not hesitate to explore the other culture and do what it takes to be able to function in that culture.

Integration is therefore a conscious decision to function in the new host country and culture while maintaining one's (Filipino) culture. To have a high quality of life we need to function in the societies where we find ourselves in. Integration is therefore a necessary process we have to undergo. And being integrated does not happen overnight but it is rather an on-going process. For one, it can take the form of getting the necessary knowledge and skills to practice one's profession or acquire a new one. For the other, it can also take the form of acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to function effectively as a parent of one's children growing up in the new culture. And for another, it can take the form of acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills and network to pursue one's ideals.

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<sup>7</sup> Butalid-Echaves, M.O. (1999). The acculturation of overseas Filipinos in Belgium, Germany and The Netherlands.

I started in 1983 as a Philippine political activist who came to Europe to help broaden the movement's international support. In the process I became aware of the problems faced by Filipino and other migrants, and thus developed the consciousness of a Filipino migrant. Also I saw that the problems in the Philippines are similar to many countries and many peoples of the world. Being in solidarity with the struggles of other countries and peoples of the world was for me a natural thing to do, wherein I developed the consciousness of a "world citizen".

And now that I'm deeply rooted in the Dutch society, specifically in Tilburg where I live, I guess this makes me a Tilburger. But being a Tilburger doesn't make me less of a Filipino. In fact, it was my confidence and pride in being a Filipino that prompted me to participate actively in the Dutch society where I am in. Being a Filipino will always be a part of me, even if I have become an integral part of the Dutch society. I am therefore a Filipino Tilburger.