

“Mama, am I a Filipino or Dutch?”

Parenting in a Mixed Culture

By Maya Butalid

(Note: The first part of this article was written in December 1992 and appeared in the `Ang Tambuli'(18 Taon,Blg.20.1993), a publication of the Diozesan Caritasverband fur das Erzbistum Koln, e.V. Philippinischer Sozialdienst. The article was eight years later, in 2000, continued for publication in a book entitled “Trans Euro Express” edited by Mary Lou U. Hardillo-Werning. And finally, the concluding part was added in 2007, prior to posting the article in the form of an e-book in the Kalayaan website.)

I’m a mother of two children (eight and three years old). Perhaps unlike most Filipinas in the Netherlands, I am married to a Pinoy. My husband and I came to the Netherlands nine years ago. Our daughters were born here. Since both of us are Cebuanos, we talk in Cebuano at home. We were in the Philippines when my first daughter was just learning to speak, and so her first language is also Cebuano.

However, when we went back to the Netherlands, my daughter had difficulties expressing herself with other Dutch children in the crèche (nursery). This worried us, and for a while we considered the idea of talking in Dutch with her at home. Fortunately, the crèche *leidsters* (caretakers) and other Dutch parents encouraged us to continue speaking our own language at home. They assured us that soon enough Ligaya, our daughter, will pick up the Dutch language. And true enough, she did! So at home our daughter spoke Cebuano and in the crèche Dutch. I thought that raising children in a mixed culture was only a question of language...until one day.

We were on our way to the crèche when Ligaya (she was then around three years old) asked me *Mama, am I a Filipino or Dutch?* For a while I didn’t know what to say. I first had to search my own feelings. With uncertainty, I answered her, *Well, you are, of course, a Filipino because we, your parents, are Filipinos, and we try to live as Filipinos. But an important part of you is also Dutch because you were born here, live here and most of your friends are Dutch.* And my daughter responded happily, *Oh, how nice! I am “two”!* (i.e. Filipino and Dutch) *You and Papa are only “one”, he? And Ember (her Dutch friend) is also only “one”. But I am “two”!* And with more certainty I answered her back, *yes, and you are lucky to be “two”.*

This conversation with my daughter made me realize that living in a mixed culture need not be problematic – or rather, it can be very enriching to one’s life. Also, I learned that as parents trying to raise our children in two cultures, it is important to find out how our children perceive and experience their life in these two cultures.

Of course, the lessons learned are easier said than done. One day, when Ligaya was about four years old (she was then at *kleuterklas* or kindergarten), she asked me, *Mama, could we not just talk in Dutch, so I don’t need to think always in Cebuano and then in Dutch?* Hearing this made me very angry. *Okay, don’t learn Cebuano anymore. And when I go back to the Philippines, you may not come with me and you stay here alone!* My surprised daughter calmly asked me, *Mama, why are you angry?* Indeed, why am I angry? I thought. I said, *I’m sorry, I got angry. I was just hurt because it is important for me that you know my language. This is the language of your family, your roots. And I just want you to be able to communicate with the rest of your family back home. Of course, I understand that you will prefer to speak more in Dutch. But please, don’t forget our language.* Then she said, *Okay.*

That evening I kept thinking about that conversation. While part of me was telling me not to impose my own thinking and feelings on my daughter, another part of me wanted to ensure her Filipino identity. My husband and I thought that perhaps we should make a compromise. The following day we told our Ligaya that she may talk to us in Dutch while we continue to speak to her in Cebuano. She was pleased with the arrangement. Then she told us, *Mama, Papa, don’t worry, if ever we go to the Philippines, in a few days time I think I can already speak in Cebuano because I will store Cebuano in my head.* And I thought *I really hope so.* The language question was settled.

At the age between five and six years, my daughter continued to grapple with her own identity. There was a time when she wished her hair were blond, or that she had lighter skin color, or that she were a little bit taller, etc. Patiently, we dealt with every question but there were times when I also lost my temper, especially if she complained about the food.

Fortunately, Ligaya also received positive remarks from her social environment such as how nice her hair was because it’s black and thick; how lucky she was to have such a skin color the whole year round without having to bathe in the sun, etc.

When Ligaya was seven years old, she told me about a conversation she had with her classmate. She said, *you know Mama, my classmate said that I am black. But I told her No, I am brown, Joyce (a Srilankan) is also brown but a bit darker, and Tatiana is black.* Then she asked me, *Am I right, Mama?* And I told her, *yes, there are many colors in this world, just as there are many languages, many ways of doing things and many kinds of food. These things*

precisely make the world an interesting place to live. Not one is better than the other, but it's more a question of preference and of what one is used to. And I added, what is important, and which you should remember, is that you should always try to be fair and just. When you choose your friends, don't choose them because of their color, or because they have nice and expensive toys. But choose your friends because you like them as they are and they like you as you are.

When Ligaya was seven years old, I felt she was beginning to get hold of her own identity.

When somebody told her that she's small, she would answer with confidence, *Yes, I'm small here, but in the Philippines I'm just average.* She also seemed to have accepted the fact that I will always be her “*kleine moeder*” (small mother). Once I overheard her teaching her classmate some Cebuano words. And when her classmate stayed with us for the weekend, she was so happy because her classmate especially enjoyed our meals. And proudly she told her, *That's Filipino food. That's what we always eat for dinner.*

Raising children in a mixed culture is a long process. From my experience, it was a process of constant dialogue and interaction with my daughter – trying to find out and understand her own thinking and feelings while also making her aware of my own. As parents we cannot impose ourselves upon our children. We can only interact with them, explain to them as much as we can, and build a relationship of mutual respect. We should give our children space to discover their own identity. We cannot define that identity for them, but we can only guide them and try to give answers. Children are capable of understanding things better than we think they can.

Now I'm quite confident that my daughter has already discovered a substantial part of her identity. And what especially makes me happy is that I've seen how confident she is of that “Filipino part” in her identity. But I know this will continue to be a process. And the process of discovering and rediscovering one's identity in a mixed culture will not always be a smooth one.

Epilogue

In the summer of 1991, I took my two children to Sweden to visit a family friend. Since we had Philippine passports, we needed to get visas for Sweden and transit visas for Germany and Denmark (since we were traveling by train). While we were packing our things, Ligaya asked why we need to have a stamp in our passports. I answered her, *Well, these are called visas. Each country makes its own rules and one of these rules says that visitors should ask*

permission to enter a particular country. So, that's what we need visas for. Then my daughter said, So if my classmates will go to Sweden, they will also have to get visas. And I automatically answered, No, they don't have to. Why? She asked. I started to get nervous, anticipating where the discussion was leading to. Well, because your classmates have Dutch passports and those with Dutch passports don't need to get visas for Sweden. Why? Asked my daughter again. And I answered, Well, as I had told you, each country makes its own rules and that's one of those rules. Oh, said my daughter, can we not just get Dutch passports? After all, we're living in the Netherlands just like my classmates. At that point, I felt something I could not really describe. It was a mixture of many feelings – pain, anger, sadness, uncertainty, homesickness, groping for some strength. Calmly I told her, Oh my child, you ask so many questions. Sometimes you'll have to wait until you're a bit older. And you will understand these things better. And quickly I asked her Have you packed all the toys and things you want to take along? And she answered, Yes.

Part 2 (written in 2000)

Developing one's values in a mixed culture: The dialogue continues.

In 1994 we decided to acquire the Dutch citizenship. While my husband and I still feel and consider ourselves as Filipinos, we have also realized that as overseas Filipinos residing in the Netherlands for more than ten years now, we have also become a part of the Dutch society. We felt the need to participate actively, find our roles, and establish our place both in the Philippine and Dutch societies. And for our children, too. This would enable us to better support and guide them in securing their rights and place as members of the society where they live while helping them maintain their Filipino identity.

My two daughters are now 15 and 10 years old. This period brings with it another dimension of parenting. At this age, establishing one's identity becomes even more important. Being conscious of one's identity goes deeper than just knowing 'Who you are' or 'Where you come from'. Questions such as 'What do I want?' and 'What is important to me?' take more of our children's concerns. As parents we also begin to realize that our children are on their way to becoming young adults. We start to be conscious of these questions like 'What kind of adults will they become?' 'What kind of adults do we want them to be?' And these questions influence the way we view their behavior and our expectations of them. Developing one's values, thus, becomes an important dimension in our children's identity.

Values are shaped by our experiences and expectations from our environment. Children in a mixed culture are often confronted with differing and sometimes conflicting experiences and expectations from their environment. Such a situation makes the process of developing one's values extra difficult for our children. And I think, as parents we should bear this in mind in our efforts at guiding and supporting our children in the formation of their own values.

What are these differing and sometimes conflicting experiences and expectations?

As Filipino parents, for example, it is only understandable that we want to instill Filipino values in our children while at the same time our children also learn the values of the Western culture. One such Filipino value which I find important for my children to acquire is *pakikiramdam*. *Pakikiramdam* refers to heightened awareness and sensitivity for the other by paying attention to subtle cues and non-verbal behavior. When my daughter was about 11 or 12 years old, there were times when I would scold her when she came to me for favors while I was pre-occupied. *Can't you see that I'm already having a hectic time?* Is what I would tell her. To which she would react, *Why are you so upset? You don't have to say 'yes' anyway. You can just say 'no', you know. Is that too much of a problem for you?* And I would explain to her (sometimes impatiently), *You see, you should realize that I always try to meet all your needs as your mother. My children are high in my priorities. So when you come to me with requests, you should assume that I always take them seriously. So on your part, I also expect you to have already processed your requests. That is, ask yourself if it's the right time to come to me with those requests, are they that urgent for me to drop the other things I'm doing to attend to your requests, or can you do them yourself so your mother won't be stressed. That's consideration.* Such conversation happened many times, and it was quite obvious that my daughter didn't really get the point. After all, they were taught at school to be assertive by (verbally) expressing their needs and opinions. And that you yourself as a person are responsible for your own well-being.

It was only when we went to the Philippines when my daughter understood and felt what *pakikiramdam* was all about. My daughter was so surprised when my father packed all the mangoes he had and gave them to her after eating dinner at his house. She asked me later, *How did Lolo guess that I like mangoes very much?* And I told her, *Well, he probably saw how much you enjoyed eating them.* Also my daughter felt very guilty when my sister offered her own bed with mattress after she overheard my daughter asking me, *Are we sleeping here in this bed without mattress?* So I told her, *That's why you just don't say things without*

processing them first. Always think what it can mean for the other person. There are numerous other incidents when my daughter experienced what *pakikiramdam* was all about. In the plane, on our way back to the Netherlands, my daughter told me, *I guess I now understand what you always tell me about processing first my requests.* It was then when I realized how important our Philippine trips were for our children. It was the only way for them to experience, understand and feel the Filipino culture, so that they may integrate elements of this in their own identity and set of values.

Another important concern of Filipino mothers is sexual relationship of their teen-age daughters. The difference in values between the Filipino and the Dutch culture on this matter is enormous. This difference is further accentuated by generation gap. For example, Filipino girls (at least, in my time and social circles) were taught to wait for the boys to court them, or to be discreet in showing their feelings for and attraction to the boy of their liking. It is not proper for girls to run after the boys, so we were taught to behave in our time. In fact, girls were encouraged to play “hard to get”. When I told my daughter about this, she found it amusing. And I would tease her, *Well, at least, I enjoyed more the courtships then, which you no longer experience nowadays.* And she would just shrug her shoulders, not having the slightest idea why I found courtship so exciting. Understandably, my daughter lives in a culture and generation where it is no big deal for a girl to ask a boy to be her steady boyfriend. This doesn’t really bother me. After all, I wasn’t the type who played “hard-to-get”, anyway. My husband had to ask me only once, and I immediately said yes.

A more serious matter for me, however, is pre-marital sex and “live-in” relationships. Pre-marital sex is normal now in Dutch society. Dutch youth don’t talk about whether or not they will have pre-marital sex, but rather at which age they should have it. Once, we were watching a talk show on TV about young pregnancies. Reacting to a 16-year old mother, my daughter commented, *Well, I find 16 too young to have sex with your boyfriend.* To which I responded, *Which age are you then planning to have sex with your boyfriend?* (This was only a theoretical question as my daughter has no boyfriend yet.) To which she nonchalantly answered, *Eighteen, maybe?* I frowned at her. She asked, *Why? At what age then?* And I said, *The longer you wait, the better.*

Live-in (samenwonen) relationship is accepted and is even officially recognized by the Dutch government as a legitimate type of serious long-term relationship, just like marriage. Once I overheard my two daughters’ conversation. Both of them said that they will probably first have a live-in relationship before getting married. Then my youngest said, *Well, I think, I’ll marry first before I start to have children of my own...*

Having lived in the Netherlands for more than 16 years now, I have already learned to view (sexual) relationships from various perspectives. Within the context of the Dutch society, I have seen that pre-marital sex could very well be a part of the normal, healthy process of establishing a relationship with one's partner. And live-in relationship, like marriage, is just another form of serious long-term relationship with one's partner. I think I can accept this when my daughters will reach this stage in their (sexual) relationships.

However, I think it's almost impossible for our families in the Philippines to understand the practice of pre-marital sex and live-in relationships. As Filipino parents, raising our children in the Dutch society has always been a question of finding a good balance between the two cultures. Also, as parents, we try to bridge the cultural gap between our families in the Philippines and our children so that they may be able to communicate and understand each other despite the existing cultural gap. Up to now, we are quite successful in getting a good mix and balance between the two cultures. For example, we have always encouraged our children to be assertive and to go for things they want to achieve. At the same time, we have also taught them to feel responsible not only towards themselves as individuals, but also to their (extended) families.

But there are, of course, also cultural gaps which are almost impossible to bridge. I am referring to those aspects pertaining to the nature and practice of (sexual) relationships in these two cultures. All we can do as parents is to explain as much as we can, both to our families in the Philippines and to our children. They don't have to agree with each other, they only need to know and respect each other's different perspective.

Ligaya asked me once, *What if in the future I have a partner with whom I'm having a live-in relationship? How can I introduce him to my families in the Philippines? Of course, I want him to come along with me and we will be staying there together as couple. Would that be possible?* And I told her, *Well, just consider that they may not be able to accept your relationship. But just remember that we, your parents, will be there to support you.* And I added, jokingly, *Well, that's a problem in the future. I guess your immediate problem now is finding a nice guy to be your steady boyfriend.* And we both laughed.

Concluding part (written in 2007)

Both my daughters are now young adults, the eldest 23 and the youngest 18. Looking at my daughters, I could clearly see that both were able to imbibe a significant "Filipinoness" in their probably more dominant "Dutchness". While the process of identity development of my

eldest daughter was much more explicit, as illustrated in my many conversations with her, that of my youngest daughter was more implicit, not readily observable from the surface. At first glance, my youngest daughter, Elena, seem to appear very “Dutch” in her manner and behavior. I remember we used to kid her as a “Dutch trapped in a Filipino body”.

Until one day, she surprised us with a very Filipino value, when she decided to help her cousin fulfill his dream of becoming a doctor by committing to save money for his Medical education. Somehow, despite her very limited contacts with her family in the Philippines, limited to the few visits we could make, she was able to imbibe one of the most important value of Filipino culture – that of having a strong sense of family life and the value of taking care of each other. Her sense of taking personal responsibility for her family seems to be extraordinarily strong, for somebody who did not grow inside the Philippines. Once we got news from my sister that she was in big financial problem, Elena was the first to respond by asking how much she should contribute. When she heard that her cousin was reconsidering his plan to pursue Medicine because of the huge expenses involved, she was so concerned and requested me to talk to my nephew and assure him that we will all help financially with his Medical education. In fact, one of the things she wants to do during our next Philippine visit is to have a serious talk with her cousin about pursuing his dream of becoming a doctor. Somehow, in her “Dutchness”, she developed a significant level of connectedness with her family in the Philippines. Somehow, she realized that her family is not only our core family unit, but is an extended family typical of Filipino culture.

From her example, I saw that the process of developing one’s identity can also be a “silent” process, picking up things from her environment and processing them herself.

In conclusion, I could say that children find their own way at arriving at their own cultural identity, definitely also picking up, consciously or unconsciously, values from their parents. So, when your children come to you with questions, just be patient and especially be yourself in dealing with them. And when they don’t come to you with questions, don’t worry; just let yourself be surprised with what they have become. I’m pretty much sure that you can say “she has it”.