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Philippine Culture and Social Values*

MIGUEL A. BERNAD, S.J.

When you pick up the telephone in Manila and ask to speak to someone, the person at the other end of the line would probably ask you who you are. If they are speaking in English they would say, "Who is this, please?" If in Spanish, "De parte de quien?" ("On whose behalf?"). But if they are speaking in Tagalog, they would say, "Sino po ba sila?" Literally, "Who, sir, are they?"

They could of course use a more direct approach. They could say, "Sino ka ba?" ("Who are you?") But that would be rude. If they are properly educated, they would prefer to use the third person plural: "Sino po ba sila?" — "Who, sir, are they?"

Sila — "they" — is expressive of the highest respect. It is used in deference not only to persons of high station, but to all others who, in the Philippine scale of values, merit deep respect. This includes parents, elders, teachers, religious persons, and many others — even including the unknown caller over the telephone.

This courtesy and politeness is of course not unique to the Philippines. It is part of the common heritage of all civilized peoples. In European languages, the second person plural, or the third person singular, is used as an expression of respect. *Vuestra excelencia; vuestra majestad; como esta usted* — where the *usted* is a contraction for *vuestra merced*, which one might translate as "Your gracious self." It might be correct to ask a child "Como te llamas?" ("How do you call yourself?") But to persons of

*A lecture delivered before the Smithsonian Cultural Group, at the Philippine Embassy, Washington, D.C., 4 June 1974.

dignity they would say "Como es su gracia?" — just as in Chinese they would say "Gwei sing?" — "What is the precious name?"

We in the Philippines share these expressions of politeness with other people. But we go further than that. In many places in the Philippines it is not considered good form to refer to an older brother simply by his name, Pedro. They prefer to use a respectful handle: *Kuya* Pedro, or *Manong* Pedro (the *manong* being derived from the Spanish word *hermano*). An older sister is *Ate* Juana, or *Manang* Juana. An elderly woman is *Aling* Teria, or *Tandang* Sora (the *tandang* being a contraction of *matanda*, old). I notice that among our Embassy personnel, the butler in the Ambassador's residence is not referred to simply as Cosme — which is his name. He is spoken of as *Mang* Cosme, which is a title of respect given to older persons.

Such forms of expression are not mere conventions. They are external manifestations of an interior attitude of respect: respect for persons of dignity. And in the Philippine scale of social values, any older person, no matter how lowly his occupation or his social status, simply because he is older, is entitled to respect.

The advertising agencies in Manila (following the example of the Western world) keep reminding us that youth, and only youth, is desirable. "Keep that schoolgirl complexion." "Keep that youthful figure." And indeed youth is a desirable quality which, alas (as Bernard Shaw reminds us) is wasted on the young. But, the advertising agencies to the contrary, we still reserve our greater veneration for age. Age implies wisdom, acquired through experience. Age means having been around for some time, and therefore implies acquaintance with the blessings and vicissitudes of life.

This respect for elders has certain practical implications. In the Western world, there are many homes for the aged. (I notice they are now called "Adult Homes"). In the Philippines we have very few homes for the aged. We really do not need them, except for those who no longer have younger relatives to take care of them.

There is a story by Camus, called *The Stranger*, in which a

middle-aged man is called away from work to attend his mother's funeral. She had spent her declining years in a home for the aged where her son seldom saw her. There is a similar story by Graham Greene, called *Travels with My Aunt*, where a man attends the cremation of his mother's body and leaves her ashes casually about. Such things of course happen anywhere; but they are not likely to happen often in the Philippines. It would offend our sense of reverence to put away our older relatives in an old age home. We would, if possible, prefer to keep them with us. We are willing, if necessary, to put up with their tantrums and their infirmities, until it should please God to take them away. And then we would lay them to rest with reverence, and often with affection.

Social psychologists would see in this reverence for elders an indication of a conservative cast of mind. And indeed, Filipinos as a rule are conservative. We preserve old customs and traditions, and are often resistant to change — except of course in certain superficial areas, like the style of dress or the style of hairdo, where Filipinos are apt to be only too ready to embrace the latest fashion. The latest song-hits, the latest dance-steps, the latest cut of dress, the latest style of haircut (or lack of haircut) are found quickly in many Philippine towns and cities. But you will notice that the teen-age boy in tight-fitting trousers and long flowing hair, or the teen-age girl in mini-skirt, will go home and greet father and mother by kissing their hand — as our ancestors have been doing for the past four hundred years. The reason is that, beneath the modernity of dress and hair, there is an ancient reverence for elders, which is a manifestation of a more profound reverence for life and for those from whom (directly or indirectly) we have received it.

This reverence and respect is so ingrained that when a person rebels against it, he is likely to exceed all bounds of moderation and become thoroughly violent. This may explain the violence and the bitterness in our strikes and our student demonstrations.

CLASHING VALUES

Values, of course, do change. They vary from nation to

nation, from place to place, from person to person. The invitation to give this lecture was transmitted to me in Manila by cablegram from Ambassador Romualdez in Washington. By coincidence, I got the cable when I was on my way to the tailor's — and it was there that I saw an example (trifling but dramatic) of how values differ from person to person.

A few weeks earlier, on my birthday, the staff of Operation Brotherhood had presented me with a very generous gift. It was a bolt of suiting material, sufficient for one coat and three pairs of trousers. Included in the gift was the tailoring cost. And so, while the girls in the office went back to their typewriters, the men (or such of them as could get away with it) went in a body and brought me to the tailor's, one of the fashionable tailoring establishments in Greater Manila, and also one of the more expensive. It was a very kind thought that prompted my friends to bring me there, but it gave rise to an amusing difficulty. The tailor was an expert in the latest styles, and he proposed to deck me out in an up-to-date suit, cut in the current fashion. In Manila, this meant flaired trousers, very tight at the top and bell-shaped at the bottom. It also meant a flaired coat, tight-fitting, with tapered waist. It took some time and three fittings before the tailor could be persuaded that what was wanted was not an up-to-date suit for a smart teenager, but a more sedate costume for an aging man in a style reminiscent of the nineteen-twenties.

Reflecting upon this incident afterwards, I thought to myself: why is it that, instead of choosing to dress comfortably in loose-fitting garments, so many people in Manila prefer tight-fitting clothes that must be uncomfortable? Do they really wish to be uncomfortable? Probably not. But they are willing to put up with physical discomfort in order to keep in step with the latest style. In other words, in their scale of values, conformity is more important than comfort.

That is perhaps as good an example as any of what is meant by values. Values are those things which we consider important. And the more important we consider them, the higher they are in our scale. Conformity ranks very high in the scale of values of

young people, in almost all countries, not least in the United States.

Long ago, when I was a graduate student at one of the great American universities, it used to amuse me to observe how the young undergraduates adjusted themselves to the prevailing usages of their fellow students. The freshmen, for instance, would come dressed at first in smart suits. But it was not long before those suits would be discarded and their owners would go to school, dressed in non-matching jackets and slacks: because at that time in that great institution of learning, a matching suit was OUT and a non-matching suit was IN.

There was also the matter of footwear. The freshmen would come from almost every state of the American Union wearing black or brown shoes. Very soon these would be discarded. The freshmen would go into the shoeshops to buy themselves a new pair of white shoes. Then they would go out looking for mud to smear over the white leather — because white muddy shoes were the “in-thing” among the undergraduates.

There was also the matter of notebooks. And here, even the graduate students were infected by the current fashion. I used to carry a small notebook which I could slip into my pocket. But a friend of mine took me aside and told me the facts of life. “You can’t go around with a tiny notebook like that,” he said. “A large notebook is the proper thing to have.”

There is the key word: proper. The proper thing. But what is the proper thing? What determines its propriety? The proper thing in 1950 is not the proper thing in 1974. What causes the change? A change in fashion; a change in people’s tastes; a change in usage. The important thing is to keep in step with what is proper at the moment; to conform to the prevailing fashion — whether in clothes, in notebooks, in cars, or in the style of living. To conform, to be like everyone else; that is a social value. It takes courage — or perhaps eccentricity — to go against the current and to refuse to conform.

DIFFERING VALUES

Just as fashions — or the proper thing — can vary from year to

year, so also can they vary from place to place. What is considered important in London or Paris may not be so important in Java or Kenya. Each place, each nation, has its own set of values.

In England (as in many other places) privacy is greatly treasured. "An Englishman's house is his castle." But in the Philippines (as in some other Asian countries), although we also value privacy, yet we are willing to sacrifice it in favor of other things which are more important in our scale of values. For instance, hospitality.

My brother is the mayor of a small city. He has his office in a rather large city hall which he himself has built. But it is not in his office that people go to see him. Everyone in the city seems to feel that it is his or her right, at any hour of the day or night, to go to the mayor's home and demand to see him on any problem in which they might need his help. Naturally, this works havoc on the privacy of the mayor's family. But in the people's estimation, the mayor's privacy is worth little, the mayor is their servant, and he must serve them at all times. In their scale of values, accessibility ranks higher than personal privacy.

Because values change from place to place, we sometimes have a clash of values between native residents and foreign visitors. This is not only true of West versus East. It is true even among Orientals themselves. For instance, in the Philippines, there are unpleasant incidents involving not only Americans or Europeans, but sometimes also other Asians, notably the Japanese. The Japanese come to the Philippines expecting to find things as they are in Japan. But Manila is not Tokyo. Cebu is not Yokohama. The resulting misunderstanding could easily be avoided if the visitors were to remember that they are in a country different from their own.

This conflict of values sometimes affects missionary work. Missionaries, by reason of their calling, are in essence agents of change. The very purpose of their going to a mission is to try to help a community of people to improve themselves: and improvement implies change — a change for the better. Cannibals,

for instance, have to be persuaded to change their dietary habits. But to effect such changes requires great ingenuity, great statesmanship, and great patience.

Let us take a trifling example: punctuality. Punctuality is greatly valued in the West. An American missionary therefore has ingrained in him a habit of punctuality. He comes from cities where trains run on time, and where airplanes (hopefully) fly on schedule. He goes into the interior of an Asian country where the hill-people have no time-piece but the sun, the moon, and the stars. They also are punctual, but their concept of punctuality is less precise than that of the New Yorker or the Washingtonian. "Mass tomorrow is at ten o'clock," announces the missionary. But ten o'clock in the hills means "sometime in mid-morning"; three o'clock means "sometime in mid-afternoon"; six a.m. is "early morning"; six p.m. is "sometime after sundown."

Now, it is necessary to run a parish on schedule and in good order. But remember that a provincial parish in the interior of my native island of Mindanao is different from a parish in Washington or New York. Here, a parish comprises a few city blocks in which all the people live. But in Mindanao, a parish is an immense territory. It consists of a *centro* or town proper, and some thirty or forty *barrios* or villages, scattered over many square miles broken up by rivers and mountains. The priest assigned to such a parish must serve not only the central church in the town, but also the many chapels which the barrio-people have built. He must therefore divide his time wisely, in order to cover territory. And therefore, among other things, has to issue regulations like: "No baptisms will be performed in the central church except on Saturday mornings between nine and twelve o'clock." That is a good and a necessary regulation. But suppose some Friday afternoon a farmer and his wife come down from some distant barrio in the hills. They have been walking for four hours. They have brought their little child to be baptized. What is the missionary to do? Should he say: "Baptisms on Saturday mornings; come back tomorrow"?

If he does, he has lost the people in the hills. On the other hand,

if he makes an exception of all comers, he has lost his schedule and his parish life is threatened with chaos. What is he to do?

Frankly, I don't know. But perhaps something like this might be said: "Ordinarily, we have no baptisms here except on Saturday mornings. Therefore, next time, come on Saturdays. However, you have walked many hours from the hills to have your baby baptized. This means that baptism means a great deal to you: you are willing to make sacrifices for it. Therefore I cannot send you back to the hills without giving you what you came for. I will baptize your child."

Punctuality and good order are high on the missionary's scale of values: but there are times when these must yield to other things more important — like preserving the people's faith

SOCIAL VALUES AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The Filipino doctors, nurses, social workers and nutritionists who worked in Viet-Nam in Operation Brotherhood from 1954 to 1956 encountered several instances where great ingenuity was required to persuade people to some kind of change. One of them involved powdered milk.

Operation Brotherhood, as you know, was started by the Philippine Jaycees and it received the support of many civic, religious and educational institutions in the Philippines. Later, it received international support — from the United States, Canada, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, England, Scotland, France, Latin America, Lebanon, Israel, and from many countries of Asia. Medicines, food, farm implements, clothing, and other relief goods poured upon Viet-Nam by the tons. Among these relief goods — chiefly from New Zealand and the United States — were huge quantities of powdered milk.

Now, milk is a commodity highly valued in the West but not fully appreciated in Asia. It is hard enough to get people to drink milk coming directly from the dairy farm: you can imagine how hard it was to persuade people that powdered stuff mixed with water was the same thing as what came from cow or carabao or goat. Some people in the remote villages thought that

the powdered milk was an inferior kind of soap. Others, more appreciative of its nutritional qualities, fed the milk to their pigs: at least they could eat the pig.

The Filipina girls, however, were equal to this situation. Many of them had learned at home to make those tasty confections which we call in Spanish *pastillas de leche* — milk candy. These they made, and the demand was enormous. They taught the secret of making them to the Vietnamese housewives. Milk and sugar were now in demand — and the children and adults who desperately needed the nutritional value of milk, were finally eating it. Thus, a cultural barrier had been hurdled. As Oscar Arellano, world chairman of Operation Brotherhood remarked, "If we can't get people to drink milk, we can make them eat it."

Operation Brotherhood, incidentally, was the internationally supported movement that later gave the pattern to other international volunteer groups, like the American Peace Corps, the Japanese Peace Corps, and Tom Dooley's "Medico."

THE GENERATION GAP

It is therefore possible to effect changes in people's ways of acting, and even in their attitudes and their social and moral standards. Indeed changes are forever taking place, and this fact gives rise to a double difficulty. One difficulty arises from the desire of some to get rid of anything old, to embrace what is new because it is new; because it is the in-thing of the moment. Part of the so-called generation gap is due to the fact that the younger generation have embraced a set of values unacceptable to the older generation. This generation gap is visible particularly in immigrant communities. The children and grandchildren of immigrants have embraced ways of acting and standards of judgment which their immigrant forbears found difficult to adjust to.

But there is also the opposite difficulty: that of the romantics who desire to go back to a bygone era. This type of romanticism rejects anything new, and treasures the old simply because of its

antiquity. There are examples of this romanticism in every nation, but it is particularly common in countries where there is a resurgence of nationalism, like my own country, the Philippines. I have known young Filipinos, for instance, who refuse to sleep on beds because their forbears — four hundred years ago — slept on the floor. And you will find some who refuse to use spoon and fork, because their forbears in ancient times ate with their bare hands.

If these people were right, then by the same logic they should not ride in automobiles or airplanes, because such contraptions were not known to Lapulapu or Lakandula. They should not use any vehicle except the carabao-drawn sled or the hammock carried on men's shoulders. By the same logic, they should not play basketball or pelota, but only sipa and such games as were known to Raja Soliman.

This is false romanticism, that denies the possibility of progress. I have sometimes been in conversation with such persons, and I have told them: "If you really wish to preserve the old traditional Philippine values, don't focus your attention on such trivialities as sleeping on the floor and eating with bare hands. Raise your eyes, rather, to the nobler and higher things which our forefathers valued. For instance, honor; loyalty; honesty; hospitality; modesty — both masculine and feminine. Also certain types of *hiya*; certain types of delicadeza; respect for elders; consideration for the unfortunate; gratitude, or *utang na loob* veneration for religious persons and sacred things. These are the substantial values which are worth preserving, and which are in danger of disappearing.

It is a part of wisdom to distinguish between the substantial and the accidental, between what is worth preserving and what may be safely discarded. It is our uncertainty as to which is really important that causes all the anguish and the conflict in an age of transition like the present.

A CHOICE OF VALUES

There are times when we have to make a choice between conflicting values. We may have to give up the things we love

because there are other things we value more. In this respect we might perhaps learn a lesson from the example of our neighbors in Viet-Nam. In 1954 nearly a million Vietnamese migrated from North to South, marching in procession behind their parish banners and chanting their parish hymns. With only a bundle and the clothes on their back they were willing to leave behind their homes, their lands, and whatever possessions they had. But they carried with them what they valued more: their freedom and their Faith.

We might also learn from our own Philippine heroes. Jose Rizal was a brilliant intellectual who could have lived comfortably as a physician. He chose to work for reform and was rewarded with exile, imprisonment, and the firing squad. In his *Ultimo Adios* — his farewell poem — he speaks of his love for life, for beauty, for his dear ones. These things he had to give up at the young age of 35. Gregorio del Pilar was in his middle 20's when he died defending a narrow mountain pass at Tirad.

There are times when we have to make a choice, not between what is bad and what is good, but between what we love and what we love more.

Everyone knows the parable in the Gospel about the farmer who was digging in another man's field and who came upon a treasure, a pearl of great price. He sold all he had — all his possessions — and with the money he bought that field, and with it he got what he wanted most, the pearl of great price.

It is up to each person — and to each nation, and to each generation — to decide what it is, in their scale of values, that they value most highly as the pearl of greatest price.