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# Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

November 2004

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## Exploring Cultural Differences

By Anne Coleman

**D**aryl Newton is a brave man. Brave to attempt to explain Filipino culture and provide guidance on maneuvering as a foreigner within that culture; braver still to be the only man at a Manila Women's Forum meeting! But our guest speaker fared well on both fronts, explaining several aspects of Filipino culture and society with humor and ease, and providing ground for discussion about individual experiences as expatriates learning to live in societies guided by different sets of values and customs.

Having worked for multinational companies, as well as in academia, Newton has developed a specialty in corporate training with a cross-cultural focus. He now works in the Philippines with In Touch, an organization started in the 1980s with seed money from the U.S. and Canadian Embassies. In Touch provides counseling and a crisis line that is the longest running in the country. In Touch began to focus on the need for cross-cultural training when many of its volunteers began to note similarities in the types of problems raised by In Touch clients in their day-to-day lives. In Touch employees recognized that these daily frustrations could be helped by a sort of "preventative training," for both expats and Filipinos, that could help to promote understanding across cultural differences. In Touch also serves as a venue for personal development and community issues such as health forums, communication skills training and more.

Newton discussed the idea of Filipino culture having more layers of gradation than is typically found in Western societies. Some aspects of

Filipino interaction can tend towards the very formal, with the use of titles (such as "doctor" or "attorney") or family titles like kuya (big brother), conveying a sense of respect. Some western expats are surprised by the level of formality they experience, especially in the office setting, given the general lack of formality in their home culture. It can take a while to get used to all of the "sir/ma'am" usage. But as much as Filipino society is marked by layers of formality, it also possesses many degrees of informality among close friends, which is expressed by the use of nicknames. When Filipinos call one another by these nicknames, they demonstrate a degree of closeness and intimacy.

Filipino culture, in general, tends to place a larger emphasis on the "collective" identity, rather than the "individual." Instead of focusing on the individual person, and their specific achievement as proof of that one person's accomplishment, one person's success (or lack of it) reflects honor and prestige upon that person's entire neighborhood or village. For example, when a law student in the Philippines passes his or her bar exam, it is not just his or her family, but also the entire village that celebrates the accomplishment. Social and family networks are crucial to understanding Filipino society. Former classmates will stay in touch for years and keep very close connections that stretch into their professional lives and business relationships. The word "family" stretches far beyond parents, children, and siblings to include distant cousins that become part of broader family networks that play an important role within Filipino society.

Newton noted that studies of culture can be controversial. Making statements such as "everyone in

country X" thinks this way or acts this way" is bound to raise arguments. But there is also something to be gained from thinking about our own, and other peoples' cultures, from a broad standpoint, and understanding that we understand other cultures in relation to or compared to another (usually our own). You can learn a lot about your own culture by looking at the way it is perceived by those in different places. For example, American businessmen, when described by Mexican businessmen in a study done in the 1990s, were described as "time-conscious, realistic, reserved, and quality conscious" whereas

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### Next MWF Meeting

**When:** 6:30 p.m., Monday  
November 15, 2004

**What:** Eliza Romualdez-Valtos, writer, archaeologist, and broadcast journalist (on leave) will speak about archaeology in the Philippines, particularly the study of prehistoric decorated earthenware pottery and her personal efforts in heritage conservation. She is set to defend her thesis on the classification of the non-anthropomorphic vessels found in Ayub Cave in Sarangani Province, Southern Philippines.

**Where:** The home of Tricia Hoban, 1416 Campanilla St, Dasmariñas Village, Makati.

**Bring:** A contribution to the potluck dinner.

**December meeting:** 6:30 p.m.,  
Monday December 6, 2004

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 businessmen from Taiwan described the same American businessmen as “easygoing, optimistic, friendly, and output-oriented.” The idea of cultural relativity is not universally accepted, but it gives us a new approach to learning about our own culture in light of others’ reactions to it.

Newton’s remarks helped place our frustrations with the everyday experiences of living in a foreign culture within a broader context, and provided a new way of approaching cultural differences and similarities. All individuals are prone to think of themselves as “normal” and things that are different as “abnormal.” Newton’s conclusion, that “we need to suspend our judgment, some of the time” when faced with unknown customs and value systems, can be a good piece of advice to all those who find themselves living or traveling abroad.

For more information about cross-cultural training or other events at In Touch, call 893-1893. To reach the Crisis Line, call 893-7603/6. The website is [www.in-touch.org](http://www.in-touch.org)

“Why is it that, as a culture, we are more comfortable seeing two men holding guns than holding hands?”  
 - Ernest Gaines

## On Culture

“No culture can live, if it attempts to be exclusive.” —*Mahatma Gandhi*

“Culture is roughly anything we do and the monkeys don’t.”  
 —*Lord Raglan*

The Law of Raspberry Jam: The wider any culture is spread, the thinner it gets. —*Alvin Toffler (The Culture Consumers, 1964)*

“I think music in itself is healing. It’s an explosive expression of humanity. It’s something we are all touched by. No matter what culture we’re from, everyone loves music.” —*Billy Joel*

“If you do not breathe through writing, if you do not cry out in writing, or sing in writing, then don’t write, because our culture has no use for it.” —*Anais Nin*

“I believe that strong and vibrant cultures themselves nurture tolerance and justice. All cultures worth the name protect support and encourage diversity; and justice is the practical mechanism which enables them to do so.

Tolerance and justice are not merely morally desirable ends, but tools which underpin society and enable it to function. In other words, tolerance and justice are not abstract concepts but expressions of culture in practice.” —*Dr. Nafis Sadik, former UNFPA Executive Director*

“Culture is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterizes a society or a group. It includes creative expressions, community practices and material or built forms.” —From *Our Creative Diversity: The UN World Commission on Culture and Development Report*

“Culture is a little like dropping an Alka-Seltzer into a glass-you don’t see it, but somehow it does something.” —*Hans Magnus Enzensberger*

### The Manila Women’s Forum

The Manila Women’s Forum (MWF) is a cross-cultural network for women. It provides opportunities to build friendships, to talk to women of various cultures, and to share information about resources. Our meetings are intended to provide intellectual stimulation and lead to personal and professional development. All women are welcome to join. The current officers are **Lisa Lumbao**, Chair, Programs, Treasurer, and Newsletter. **Susan Nishihira**, Programs. **Heather Davenport**, Database. **Beaulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter, Website.

Cost of membership is P300 per year. Members receive a copy of the current mailing list in addition to the newsletter, which is also sent to non-members. A contribution is collected at each monthly meeting: P20 for members, and P40 for non-members. Please contact Lisa Lumbao at Tel. 812-3932, Tel/Fax 813-0168, or at [lumbao@mozcom.com](mailto:lumbao@mozcom.com) for more information about MWF.

Visit our website – a work in progress  
[www.geocities.com/manilawomensforum](http://www.geocities.com/manilawomensforum)

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