

The Challenge of Cultures

Cross-cultural Relationships, Conflicts, Inculturation

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Definition of Culture

We may dispute what the most revolutionary discovery of our age has been. Was it the Atom, or the Computer, or the Fax, or any other gadget or equipment? An outstanding Anthropologist has said that the most important discovery of our times was the concept of CULTURE.

When we hear of culture, we are inclined to think primarily of fine arts, literature and philosophy and other similar areas of human interest. This is an elitist understanding of culture and is in keeping with our classical training. Culture rather is the total manner in which a human society responds to an environment. It includes customs characterizing a social group; social heredity of a particular community; meanings, values, norms, their actions and relationships; beliefs, laws, traditions and institutions; religion, ritual, language, song, dance, feast, living habits, crafts, equipments.

Culture, therefore, is a complex of factors that make a person what he/she is as an individual and as a member of a community. It is acquired after birth and through it a person inserts him- self/herself into the human universe. He/she is programmed, educated and "indoctrinated" into one way, and only one way, of being a human person, whether he be a Chinese or a Chakma, a Swede or a Zulu.

Communal Tensions:

Clash of economic interests, or of cultural perceptions?

We, in South Asia, have always lived in a multi-cultural situation. We have, through centuries, worked out various formulae of compromise for living and working together. These formulae are far from being infallible. In fact, they are highly fragile, and their fragility becomes evident when major clashes take place, riots occur, hutments are torched, many lives are lost and much property destroyed. Social tensions are generally attributed to economic and political reasons. That they may have been occasioned by *psychological distances* between communities and aggravated by cultural differences, is rarely given a thought.

Even if certain social disturbances may have had their origin in other causes than cultural, the fact that they can be heightened by a clash of cultural perceptions, and that they can be led in new directions from the collective memories of aggrieved communities, and again that every attempt at dialogue can fail when there is no one to bridge the meaning systems of the two concerned ethnic or social groups, is totally ignored.

There has not been much reflection along these lines, nor adequate open discussion. For the Rightist or Leftist, the economy and related politics are all that matters. That the human person has other dimensions in his inner being and in his communal identity, is blissfully forgotten.

Does Our Social Analysis Take Culture into Consideration?

In Church circles too, the implications of cultural differences or the requirements of transcultural services have not received the attention they deserve. It is too readily taken for granted that social groups think and feel alike, have the same ambitions and aversions, keep to the same pace of life and respond in the same way to services and sanctions. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

The Latin American model of social analysis and conscientization has crowded out all other possible social thinking and creative applications. That has happened, despite *Paulo Freire's* own affirmation that social philosophies cannot easily be transported across the oceans. What applies in a chiefly Roman Catholic, clergy-dominated, culturally homogenized society, may not find a ready application in a country like ours which is different in so many ways, and in which the Church's historic role and present position show little similarity.

In fact, we have lost an opportunity to do some creative thinking in the area of analyzing South Asian society along cultural lines. Aside from making a few pacifist proclamations during communal troubles, our contribution to reflection on intercultural relationships has been insignificant.

It can easily be noticed that most grievances, in our countries are of one community against another. All effort to divide the South Asian society along lines of classes and income groups has met with limited success. All important perceived injustices and all major clashes are between communities, in North-East India or Sri Lanka and Bhutan or in any other part of India. The same is true in our neighbourhood beyond the borders, whether it be in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, or on the Western frontier of Pakistan, or on the Tamil Eelam coastline of Sri Lanka.

When all of a sudden clashes took place on a big scale at the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, when the Letts, Lithuanians, Estonians and Ukrainians claimed their own separate identities, when Slovenia broke away from Yugoslavia and Bosnia went up in flames, when the Azerbaijan tensions with Armenia increased, when the Slovaks parted ways with the Czechs, when Inter-ethnic brutalities in Rwanda hit the headlines, when the claims of the Basques, Welsh, Catalans and French Canadians grew louder, the world began to take note of the force of ethnicity and culture. But we have a long way to go before we can give an intelligible explanation to these and similar social phenomena.

A "cultural analysis" of society and a reflection on its findings would be most timely today.

Reflection on Culture and Community: a Challenging Task

With our long history of cultural pluralism and inter-community interaction in South Asia, could we initiate some reflection on how communities seek, quite unconsciously, to develop a collective identity, gradually grow conscious of it, try to preserve and enhance their heritage, respond to perceived threats, use and misuse their strengths, and step by step learn to relate with other communities in a healthy manner, come to accept complementary roles and try to build up a collaborative atmosphere?

Economic globalization is bringing together people of every culture. There is a compromise culture that prevails at international airports and five-star hotels (we often call it "Modern Culture"). Travellers and businessmen read about each other's countries and cultures and try to accommodate to each other's ways and tastes. They bow profoundly in Tokyo, offer a Namaste in Delhi and shake hands or hug in Rome. They will readily renounce pork in the Muslim countries and beef in Brahmin hotels. But when their contacts get closer and they begin to live and work together difficulties begin to arise. And forthwith

the "compromise-culture" totally fails.

Earlier anthropologists limited their interest solely to the study of isolated tribes and delighted in presenting the rare and the bizarre in their cultures. In spite of such evident limitations, it was found educative to read about other cultures and see how other societies solved their problems. For example, some tribal societies prevented the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few, by rewarding with special honours persons who were extraordinarily generous, e.g. the Angami Nagas allowed a man who lavishly fed the entire village to erect a stone monument. The Western society attempted to solve the same problem on a massive scale by the French and Russian revolutions!

One understands one's own culture better by watching alternative expressions in another culture. Some scholars have occasionally taken undue advantage of their research to argue their own pet theories with regard to, e.g.: premarital sex or priestly exploitation of society. But gradually scholarship is becoming more objective and more mature.

Ethnocentrism

Early researchers mainly suffered from Ethnocentrism (considering their own culture as the absolute standard), taking undue pleasure in pointing out where other cultures fell short or looked strange. But enlightened modern scholarship recognizes every culture as equal, and does not concede superiority to anyone even when its material products (e.g. technically produced goods) are more advanced. Thus, the Americans have come to admit that the Blacks are not merely underdeveloped Whites, but have a rich culture of their own. In the same way, we in South Asia must begin to understand that tribals are not just backward non-tribals and that Dalits are not diminutive caste-Hindus, and that their condition will not be best when they will be more Sanskritized (the process of being introduced to the Hindu hierarchy) and able to climb the social ladder. They all have a right to develop their own culture.

However, the habit of using one's own culture as a point of reference for judging other cultures is deeply rooted in man. Ethnocentrism continues. From childhood we learn what is good, moral, civilized and normal. There is no cultural superiority in abstaining from dogs which the Koreans and many tribes in North- East India find delicious, or from toasted grasshoppers and raw fish which most Japanese enjoy, or from mice which the Dahomey of West Africa and many ethnic groups in India find appetizing; or in drinking milk which the Chinese consider fit only for babies, or in eating cheese which many Asians and Africans find smelly and unpleasant.

Despite this generally recognized view, we thoughtlessly criticize others' habits and hastily evaluate them according to the criteria drawn from our own culture. In an intercultural situation, before we can even think of Inculturation, we must be aware of the power of Ethnocentrism in ourselves, and grow conscious of our cultural prejudices and learn to lift our cultural glasses from time to time.

Material Culture and Inculturation

Earlier Anthropologists heavily concentrated on the study of material culture (eg. all kinds of physical objects produced by humans like baskets and knives, cooking pots and living houses, carved images and woven cloth). No wonder, too often Inculturation has limited itself to a few 'visibles' like liturgical vestments and vessels, decorations and dances, occasionally going as far as composing a few songs and prayers. Much of the literature on Inculturation confines itself to emphasizing its importance, lamenting past mistakes and insisting that a proposed form (usually an external detail) be accepted by authorities.

All these are legitimate. But after an initial thrust forward, Inculturation seems to be caught in stagnant waters. Even discussion on the matter is reduced to stereotypes. The reason is not far to seek. A construction cannot come up on weak premises. Experience has clearly exposed their weaknesses. The supposition was: we need a few people who know theology well; we need a few experts in a particular culture; we need the required permission from the Church authorities. With these, what was impossible? Like the rabbit out of a magician's hat, Inculturation would be an accomplished fact! No wonder, we remain where we were four decays ago.

It is important to remember that no society ever surrenders its cultural processes into the hands of a few. If poets and artists have influenced these processes, it is only because they were giving utterance to the very processes that were taking place in and around them. They were neither outsiders nor uprooted individuals (as many professional Inculturators are), and were aware of the inner stirrings in their community. Because they allowed themselves to be shaped by their own culture, they were able to make their contribution to shaping their culture in turn. They were effective not by appointment, but because they vibrated with the community.

Cultural Awareness

Ethnocentrism cannot be transcended without some degree of cultural self-awareness. This is all the more important because so much of what we do is governed by the unconscious. Carl Jung posited the existence of a Collective Unconscious shared by all mankind. Anthropologists will find it easier to presuppose a Cultural Unconscious that governs the human behavior of a particular ethnic group.

Such a Cultural Unconscious has developed over generations and down the centuries. People's systems are organized according to the principles of negative feedback hurts. They are most part unaware of their own pattern of behaviour, eg. Utterances, actions, postures, gestures, tones of voice, facial expressions, use of time, or organization of daily life. Some scholars believe that the proportional contribution of the Unconscious and the Conscious in controlling human behaviour may be put as a thousand to one! What is often understood as 'Mind' is, in fact, internalized culture.

Cultural self-awareness (and of inadequacy too) is often occasioned by trans-cultural encounters. You may be attending a seminar on development at Kuala Lumpur, or teaching at Lagos, or serving as a technical expert at Dubai, or selling scooters at Mauritius or conducting a Youth Centre at Dhaka. What surprises you is not merely differences in dress and food habits, but diversity in etiquette, organization, perception of time, judgment of values; in fact, in the entire "meaning system".

It is difficult for us to accept another's meaning system when it differs totally from ours. It can look frightfully threatening. Nothing seems to make sense in your relationships with your colleagues of the other culture. Are they unfriendly? Are they unintelligent? It is not that they are hostile, uncooperative, cold or slow. Two systems of Cultural Unconscious are colliding. You have to redefine the boundaries of your own culture through self-awareness, translate your colleagues' meanings into your own meaning-system and help them to understand your meaning through intelligible explanations. Many political problems, economic threats, operational deadlocks and personal clashes can be averted, purposeful dialogue initiated and cordial relationships maintained, merely by people learning to transcend their culture.

Cultural self-awareness is extremely important if any work of Inculturation is to be undertaken. You should not think that you are an expert in your own culture just because you have grown with it. A person may live to be ninety without knowing physiology, or may handle a computer with dexterity with no knowledge of its inner mechanism. Only constant observation, discussion with others, self-awareness, reflection, and comparative study will help you to acquire some measure of competence in your own culture.

A multi-cultural situation makes such reflection necessary. As you begin to understand many things in your personality only in interaction with others, you will discover many aspects of your own culture only in the context of cultural encounters. A situation of cultural pluralism is most educative. However, you have to give up your narcissism and cultural stereotypes, if you wish to profit by such a situation. The first thing to *do* is to admit that there is such a thing as a meaning-system to which you unconsciously adhere, and recognise the hidden axioms in your own culture. The second is to agree that other communities too have their own independent meaning-systems and recognise their legitimacy.

Cultural Differences

Apparently no one seems to quarrel over racial differences. (Race is determined by physical measurements, Ethnicity by cultural similarities). But the fact is that any trifle is enough to spark off a tussle when signals are misread and communications break down. In a world where trans-cultural clashes are ever on the increase, whether they be at Imphal or in Belfast, at Kokrajhar or at Jaffna, what needs to be asked is not who is the criminal and who is the victim, but how can such negative encounters be prevented. Some of the cultural differences mentioned below may look harmless enough; but what takes to start a quarrel is hard to define. One does not easily wage a World War over knocking down a cow or running over a chicken. But woe to the one who ignores what such a thing can mean to people.

American sociologists have pointed out that while American children would shout in triumph after defeating their competitors since competition is a great value in their culture, Hopi Indian children would be reluctant to embarrass their companions by defeating them, much less raising their voices in victory. Pueblo Indians think in communities, as most tribals do, which makes it difficult for them to make individual decisions, as though to say not "Cogito ergo sum", but "Sumus, ergo sum". That explains why tribal people cohere together strongly in times of trouble. Tribal solidarity was always essential for their very survival. Non-tribal society is individualistic and finds it hard to understand tribal cohesion. In the 70's individualism in America had become so strong it was called the "me decade".

Westerners are amazed when they see Japanese tourists moving round their country in herds, showing too little of individual tastes and interests; in Asia it would not be considered unusual. For most people nodding means YES and shaking the head means NO; the Bulgarians have directly the opposite meaning. The Ainus of Japan do not use their head for such communication, but use their hands. Arabs sit very close when they discuss serious matters, Latin Americans a little less close; Americans, North Europeans and Asians sit further apart. In the United States, the Whites accuse the Blacks of never looking them in the eye, while the Blacks feel that the whites are staring. In the West, a person warmly congratulated for his excellent performance will thank exuberantly his admirers; in the East, he is likely to plead that he has not done well enough and thank them for their forbearance. One will need to be attentive to local Customs before patting people on the back, offering hands to ladies and speaking freely with women.

In many tribal societies the spoken word is more binding than a signed document, and one has to be careful in making hasty and thoughtless promises. Similarly in tribal societies persons are accustomed to be treated as equals even when they are poor, and will feel greatly humiliated if treated otherwise.

Western educated persons will find bewildering when time-schedules are not kept, appointments are not respected, promises are forgotten, persons drop in unannounced, invitees come too early or too late or stay on too long, or if they are made to wait in parlours for an interview.

A cross-cultural social worker must always be learner And the process is not merely a matter of a week or two, or even few months. Going into the Eskimo country, Peter

Freuchen thought he could become an expert in Eskimo culture in one or two years. After fifteen years he found that what he thought were problems were becoming mysteries. And the longer he lived among the Eskimos the clearer it became that their souls had such depths that were impossible to penetrate.

A good way to learn is to watch out for a negative feedback. Rather than be upset and annoyed when you are hurt, look closer. Do not be satisfied with finding that a particular way will not go. Ask why. Trace things to a value in the culture or an attitude in the community you are studying, and see whether you can reach some sort of generally applicable conclusions. Keep observing, evaluating, correcting. You may get closer, step by step, to the values that are cherished most in the culture and get a glimpse of the 'soul of the community'. Today's anthropologists give greater importance to the study of values and mental makeup than merely to the material culture. Discussion has hardly begun on Inculturation from within.

Perception of Time

An interesting instance of an area where misunderstandings arise between people of different cultures is the area of different people's perception of time.

The pace of life is faster in industrialized societies than in agricultural communities. World war II memoirs tell us how German officers found Iranian workers regularly unpunctual and fired them in droves. There was little effort to understand the cultural aspect of the problem and work out a mutually agreed solution. Many transcultural workers make similar mistakes.

Man's understanding of time is closely associated with his internal rhythm. From childhood he has developed a durational expectancy of every event, process or relationship. When it takes longer, he becomes restless, impatient and angry. You may have seen people fuming behind a slow moving vehicle. Durational expectancies in rural areas are long. If a faster pace is imposed on the rural population they come under strain. It is not fair to say e.g. that the Santals are slow. For they are perfectly in pace with the rhythm of life they are used to. Of course, in today's society they will need to move faster. But a change is possible only if the legitimacy of the earlier pace is recognised first. Those who are quick to think and act may overdo and hurt others by rushing them, concluding matters before the participants have had time to understand and express their views. Quick retorts, hasty comparisons and outsmarting people with cynical remarks, hurt.

In the same way, it is unfair to say that tribal people are lazy after the harvest has come in. In their tradition, their exertions were needed again only during the next working season. May be, an accelerated pace is necessary in modern times. But people have to take off from where they are now, and the legitimacy of their present perception of time will first need to be accepted.

Cultural Relationships

Culture is an organic whole. It is not the product of the artificial combination of much heterogeneous material. Any change in one area affects the whole organism. The story is told of a group of young students who wanted to tease Darwin. They put together the limbs, feelers and tail of different insects and brought the odd creature to him asking, "What bug is this?" With a quick eye, Darwin replied, "A humbug". Our Inculturation effort should not end up in a mystifying product like that. Limiting our Inculturation interest to individual items of material culture independent of their context may result in a negative response from the community. Inculturation is for the community. And not the community for arbitrary Inculturation experiments. It has to do with meanings and symbols, and therefore the sensibility of the community should influence all decisions.

When communities come in contact with each other, much cultural borrowing takes place. If the borrowing is spontaneous and in keeping with the organic structure of the two cultures concerned, it contributes to growth. If the sharing is unbalanced and one dominant culture bulldozes another, the feebler culture can be hurt and even destroyed. History holds out too many instances of this taking place. Latin Americans feel that this was what was done to their cultures.

One may occasionally notice a cultural nearness between two communities that cherish similar values, though geographically they live far apart. Likewise it can happen that two neighbouring communities live by traditions that are totally different and therefore are emotionally distant from one another. Tribal communities with their democratic orientation, sense of equality, absence of inhibitions and complexes, habit of open and frank discussion, simplicity and directness, honesty and reliability feel distant from and threatened by a society loaded with caste-hierarchy and honorific titles, social distances, cultural taboos and food prohibitions, sophisticated conventions and unexplainable social subtleties. One may need to keep this fact in mind when one hears that some of the tribes of South Asia are westernized.

No culture is perfect or fully integrated. There are contradictory and dehumanizing elements in every culture in some measure or the other. Studying alternatives in another culture can stimulate change and growth. But if the changes are introduced forgetting the organic nature of a culture, it may rather be a disservice than an assistance to social growth.

When the races or ethnic groups come in contact with each other, there may be a relationship of acceptance or of rejection. In the past, acceptance usually found expression in the assimilation of the minority by the dominant group. With the passage of time, even small groups have been allowed separate existence and guaranteed protection in most countries.

Historically, however, we know that rejection of minorities and of weaker groups was the usual norm anywhere in the world. Segregation was one form of rejection. The caste-segregation prevalent in parts of India in earlier days and the practice of apartheid in South Africa in recent history are clear enough examples. Expulsion was another mode of rejection. The expulsion of the Jews from Russia, or of the Asians from Uganda during the 70's, or of the Chinese from Vietnam in the 80s are instances of this manner of physical riddance.

But the hardest of all forms of rejection was extermination (genocide). In the last century Colonialists in South Africa wiped out the Bushmen and Hottentots. Many groups of American Indians in the far West and the aborigines on Tasmania Island were exterminated by settlers. The red road of history is long. A minority group may have recourse to submission (e.g. accepting a lower status in the caste-hierarchy), or build up cultural islands (e.g. a ghetto or a Chinatown), or withdraw into more inaccessible places. Many tribals in India withdrew to the mountains and forests to preserve their identity and ensure their survival. Fighting back, of course, is the last resort against perceived threat to a community's collective existence and interests. Are some instances of violence in North-East India due to this, or are they manipulations of vested interests, and facilitated by easy access to arms? Shakespeare said, "How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds, makes deeds ill done!"

Terrorism is a growing phenomenon in the world today. There are not only anti-British Irish or anti-Turkish Armenians, or anti-Yugoslav Croatians, there are more than a hundred known terrorist groups in the world in our times. And the number is increasing. It is interesting to note that majority of them are in their early twenties, from middle or upper class families, and college graduates. But they get nowhere.

When cultural pluralism is respected not only in law but in reality, there is little need to take to such radical measures of self-defense

Collective Self-awareness, Growth, Flowering

Most communities in their infancy and isolation were inadequately aware of their collective existence. People responded to the environment and external provocations guided by their cultural unconscious. But a stage comes for each society, mostly in contact with other cultures and communities, especially those in which cultural reflection has made some headway, to grow conscious of its collective identity. As a little child grows conscious of itself, of its bodily parts and of its spiritual powers, and gradually comes to be aware of its identity and its separate existence, a community too, led by its thinking and dynamic minority (philosophers, poets, teachers, youth) comes to understand its collective identity, its chief traits and characteristics, its strong and weak points.

When, for the first time, a community's self-consciousness awakens, it feels itself like a young adult. It is lost for a while in its own self, in its past glories and inherited cultural wealth, its rights and privileges and future destiny. If a threat to its existence persists in its perception, it hardly emerges from its concern for itself and quite rightly too. But given a chance to grow to adulthood, the same community learns to take its place among other communities as a person growing to adulthood does, begins to recognise the cultural values of other communities, their rights, privileges and interests and learn to live and work together with others.

This period of transition is stormy and troublesome. An air of uncertainty hangs over the community. It can on its own choice, take a positive direction, or be led by interested groups, both outsiders and even self-oriented individuals of the community itself. But without moving to adulthood no flowering of culture is possible. With swords drawn, mere survival is the law. Subsistence is plenty.

Isolation is stagnation. Only conscious adulthood paves the way to a Golden Era. And it can never happen without an external stimulus. History bears abundant witness to this fact.

Bridge-builders

As inter-cultural interactions multiply on the globe, varying from intense hostility to intimate cordiality the urgent need for bridge-builders has increased. Those that have accepted to work permanently in inter-cultural situations like a missionary, have taken on the responsibility of entering into a new world of the Cultural Unconscious of another community.

A process of 'ex-culturation' is necessary (though it can be very costly) before he can give effective assistance to the process of Inculturation. Christ emptied Himself. Kenosis. He made Himself like unto us (fully like a Jewish person of His own days) in everything but sin.

But the hardest to give up is the irrational in one's own culture. Every culture has its own share of conventions and presuppositions that follow no rules of logic. We are generally blind to the insanity of our own community and age (e.g. the consumerism and all-pervasiveness of sex in the Western culture today, or caste distances in the Indian society). Even if we do not accept the prejudices of the cultural world we are entering, there should be an effort to understand them in their context. No change can be suggested without sympathetic understanding.

The above norms are more easily discussed than tried out and lived. The strength and persistence of habitual behaviours is beyond belief. When we are faced with other ways of understanding what is good and what is bad, we are shaken to the foundations of our being. All of a sudden we feel incompetent, ignorant and infantile. It is like trying to babble a foreign tongue during an international tour. We become children again. How many Peace

Corps men in Kennedy's days felt helpless in the Countries where they went to serve! Rarely does the inter-cultural assistant say to himself, 'The trouble is with me'.

Will Cultural Pluralism survive in a Technological Age?

Speaking of the future is not an easy task. It is not given to everyone to "look into the seeds of time and say which grain will grow and which will not" (Shakespeare). There is always an intellectual blindspot in our vision of things ahead, so that either we fall into a pit that we have never foreseen, or a massive event overtakes us in such a way that things work out far better than we had feared. Population forecasts and universal famine predictions have repeatedly proved false. New problems have arisen, so too new power structures. In the 60's there was little perception of the changed trend that oil crisis would precipitate, or of the proximate emergence of Islamic power, or of the sudden appearance of a scourge like AIDS, or of the mounting concern for environment. But look to the future, we must.

Some time ago Zbigniew Brzezinski proposed the Convergence Theory suggesting that with the progress of science and technology, supersonic aircraft, satellite communications, multi-national corporations, the world would witness a cultural convergence, and a single culture would ensue. All available evidence points in another direction.

Selig Harrington's studies show that cultural divisions are only hardening, and that people are only reinforcing their cultural identities. Cultural nationalism is on the rise, some even going to the point of 'cultural fundamentalism'. While in absolute terms, the number of people who travel or study abroad or enter into international commerce is steadily on the increase, they merely make a pragmatic use of the facilities of 'Modern Culture' and return to their own cultural nests. They are greatly influenced, no doubt, but not carried off their feet.

Mahatma Gandhi had said over half a century ago, "I don't want my house to be walled on all sides and that windows be blinded. I want all cultures of all countries to come into my house. But I refuse to be wiped away by any culture whatsoever". Others have not been willing to concede as much. They feel insecure unless their house is walled in all sides and their windows closed. Myanmar considers sending foreign books and cassettes to citizens a cultural invasion. Saudi Arabia is intolerant of any religious work, literature or symbol, except those of Islam.

Not only do cultural majorities sometimes try to keep out alien influences, but even minorities defend tooth and nail their separate existence and identities. Culture, and ethnicity also are behind the secessionist movements in Tyrol, Brittany, Alsace, Flanders, and Catalonia. The Hungarians in Romania, the Turks in Bulgaria, the Croats and Albanians in Ex-Yugoslavia and the Koreans and the Filipinos in Japan refuse to be absorbed into the majority community. While it is true that in the New World, settlers gradually move into the main stream, when we hear that Los Angeles alone has over 75 ethnic publications, and that good business in advanced countries seeks to diversify products to cater to different ethnic tastes, we understand what a formidable force culture is.

The Salman Rushdie affair and the Fatwa of Khoimani Ayatollah reveal at least one thing: the rest of the world is not merely an extension of the secularised West. Millions of Muslims do not identify progress with secularisation. For them, openness to technology has not necessarily meant godlessness. Asians may have another understanding the "Sacred". If emotions can be built around human rights issues and freedom of expression, they can also surround religious symbols.

After a period of intense drive for modernisation in Singapore, Lee Kwan Yew urged the people to speak Mandarin and return to "the old values". He was referring to Confucian ethics, the family values and the spiritual traditions of the Chinese. Evidently Modern Culture does not offer everything! Even in a "culture of poverty" in the middle of the urban

agglomerations of Africa, e.g. in shanty towns, tin can cities, and squatter settlements of rural migrants, you will notice people falling back on kinship and ethnic solidarity and preserving a sense of belonging. Cultural re-assertion can be seen at every level. It is a human need.

Cultural Relativism versus Ethnocentrism

We may look at the cultural phenomenon from another angle. Dictators and ruling cliques have exploited their fellow-citizens and sought to prevent outside interference invoking their culture. The army rulers in Myanmar and Vietnam wave the flag of culture to defend their isolationist policies. Certain Governments in Asia take protection behind their culture every time they come under criticism for ignoring democratic institutions. So do many regimes in West Asia. So do many African potentates.

If Ethnocentrism is wrong, absolute Cultural Relativism is also equally wrong. Could we say, for example, that Nazi ruling style was in keeping with the German character, or that Soviet totalitarianism suited the Russian culture? Or that Communist dictatorship was best for the Chinese people, or that Marcos absolutism was just what the Filipinos needed. If these aberrations could be excused in the name of culture, how could we ever raise our voices against cannibalism, female infanticide or elimination of the aged in certain cultures?

We spoke earlier about the need to understand a culture from within (an emic view). An outside view (an etic view) is also important. That is why correctives come only through interaction of cultures. Such encounters can turn disastrous too. That is the human tragedy. But they need not. If the carrier of a culture is respectful of and attentive to another, a mutual enrichment can be the result.

Make Culture Your Ally

All have been learning. Missionaries too. No missionary today will think of imposing the syntax of Indo-European languages on Chinese or Japanese. Missionaries in Africa have become more creative in speaking of the Good Shepherd in certain countries where the sheep is considered a dirty animal. When the Bible was translated into the tongue of the Zanakis near Lake Victoria, Rev. 3: 20 was put as "Behold, I stand at the door and call". Only a brigand would 'knock'. White is not everywhere the sign of rejoicing, nor black of grief. For the Chinese, Tibetans and Bhutanese, the dragon is the symbol of heavenly protection not of evil; for them, the idea of crushing the head of the dragon would be something terrible. It is wonderful that the world is not just a drab, monotonous reality, but rich, colourful and various.

The need tomorrow will be not so much for language-translators as for culture-translators to interpret one to another.

Culture can be your best ally in getting things done. Cultural influence on motivation for learning and working has not been sufficiently studied. The point of view that Max Weber took in his "The Protestant ethic and the spirit of Capitalism" can provoke further thought. Modernisation, for many, is linked with the Western culture should it necessarily be? It is surprising to see how Asian the Japanese have remained in spite of the advance they have made in industrialization. Family bonds are strong in Japanese society. The Japanese mother gives herself to the child and to his studies with singular devotion. With her 'don't disappoint the formula', she is the most important educational agent in society. Relationship counts. Her appeal to feelings is a compelling motive. Western children's experience in a single-parent family, or in a family where both parents are working would be different.

In the same way, Japanese companies are collective organizations that run like large families. Every aspect of the workers' life is looked after, e.g. low-cost housing, or medical care. The workers sing the companies' anthem say the company's creed, and recite slogans

of devotion to the company. The glory of the company is their pride. There is common concern for group achievement not merely for individual success. Members are equal. They stand for consensus than for conflict, for deference to authority than for disrespect, for collaboration than for contention. They have not outgrown their appreciation of traditional values like obedience and sacrifice. Their security is not merely financial security but a collective self-assurance grounded in cultural traditions and shared meaning.

Even in the West industrial Psychologist Elton Mayo had reached conclusions in the 20's that were most revealing. He had argued that industrial output was not in proportion to the physical capacity, but to the 'social capacity', e.g. pace of work acceptable to the fellow workers. Individuals would find it too difficult to take on a faster pace. He also held that financial remuneration was not everything. Non-economic rewards, friendship with co-workers, respect from management, etc. provide motivation and happiness. Workers respond to rewards not as individuals but as members of a group. In certain circumstances they reject an offer of high pay and refuse to work harder than they have decided. Mayo further held the view that extreme specialization made coordination difficult.

The recent economic success of the Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea and Taiwan) has been attributed also to their work ethic. A reformed China will rather go the Japanese and the Tigers' way than the American way.

It is wise to build on the base of culture. And we have seen that culture is not concerned only with a few externals, but more specially with things like relationships, inner structuring of the mind, reasons that urge, persuade, motivate and commit. Make it your ally and you can achieve anything.

Inculturation

Inculturation, of course, will have to go further than picking up some broken pieces of culture. Here we can merely point the direction. Mahatma Gandhi once said. "I must follow them. For, I am their leader". If someone wishes to take leadership in any cultural process, he must keep close to the cultural group, which he is trying to serve. He must listen and learn. He must think with the people and look at things the way they do. He must catch their inner rhythm, acquire their manner of expressing their thoughts and feelings, their love, loyalty and religious devotion. He must discover the "beautiful" and the "great" in the ordinariness of their lives. He must learn to pray with them and make his own their way of giving a concrete form to their invisible world of faith. He will greatly benefit from watching carefully what is known as 'popular religiosity'.

Creativity of the believing community finds expression in popular religiosity. People's religious sense is not always over-concerned about de-mythologizations, rationalizations and argumentations. It goes more by global meanings, significations and symbolisms. Colours and figures speak to their Unconscious. Will we ever know why a community has preference for red-bordered saris, or for yellow and green doknas (Bodo breastpieces)?

It is said that Einstein did not think in words or in mathematical language; he had physical and visual images that stood for complete entities (systems), which had then to be separated and translated into mathematics and words. Should we wonder that communities think in myths and legends (which are called symbolic theology), and try to get a grip of the invisible by imitating the Archetypes in their subconscious? Carl Jung has convincingly shown that things in the Unconscious are not unrealities.

On the one hand, a total surrender to the figments of fantasy can lead one into the world of magic and superstition. On the other, even from a world of omens and charms and fetishes, one can lead people to a healthy use of symbolism. What are hills and trees, water and fire, springs and rivulets, birds and animals, oil and ashes? Are they only objects to be seen and used? Are they not also objects of wonder and companions in mystery? They are

all pointers to the world beyond. From this point of view, all objects, places and times are holy. The very air is charged with the spiritual. Alex Haley in his book "Roots" shows us an African father introducing to his son three categories of beings that inhabit the world: the living, the dead, the unborn. It is interesting to look at the world with the eyes of the average man in whom the culture of his community is alive. He is the educator of the Inculturator.

The church of our Lady of Guadalupe was built in the 1770's. Amidst many Christian decorations, the Zuni artists painted on the walls of the church the traditional symbols of the gods of wind, rain, lightning, sunlight, tempest and war with the emblems of the Corn Maiden, and hid Zuni medicine feathers and fetishes under the altar. The Churchmen themselves may not have realized what all this meant. But it is impossible to describe the popularity of the shrine that had become doubly sacred with so many sacred presences.

Let us return to another point that we had made earlier: taking note of the "beautiful" and the "great" in the ordinary situations of people's lives. An Ao song compares a young man to the "finest beads on the neck of all the men of all the world". A Garo song compares a young woman's eyes to the bamboo leaves, and her lips to the flowers of the mandal tree. In the same way you discover profundity of thought in unexpected places. There is a stanza in the song of the (Garo) Warlgala dance, which says: "Though in the dark forest of Tura the bad tree grows, the good trees are there too. Though in the midst of the Brahmaputra sand there is bad water, good water is there too". And an Angami Naga line says: "Seeds fall to the ground, they spring up. If a man dies, he does not rise again". Likewise, we should not be blind to local art. If African art could inspire Epstein, Moore and Picasso, could Konyak carvings leave people with artistic tastes untouched?

Henri Poincare is said to have asked whether the naturalist who had studied elephants only under the microscope would think he knew enough of the animals? Studying culture in parts is useful only if one tries to have an integrated view at a later stage. Any living being is much more than all its parts. So is a living culture. When from handicrafts and art products, from poetic wisdom and social relationships you move to values, you are finally reaching the central threads that hold a culture and a community together. One author has listed African tribal values as community-centredness, patience in waiting, family-loyalty, sharing, joint responsibility faith, and unity in action. You may add honesty, equality and solidarity that are common to all tribal societies. But when someone says that tribal worldview is essentially "life-affirming" you have come to the central theme of tribal culture. They believe in a philosophy of vitalism, dynamism and an eagerness to live life with an enviable intensity".

But this life-affirming philosophy itself has a soul in religious faith. Tribal people are in the words of an author "incurably religious". There is no room for secularization in their society, no separation of the sacred and the profane. They perceive a cosmic harmony in the universe, and a Great Power behind everything.

Inculturation is an on-going process. As long as life lasts, it must go on. It is the community that inculturates; experts may assist it in the processes. But it is the community that constantly seeks to express its faith and its love in renewed ways. If you are a leader follow its lead.

Q UESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION // Second day

1. Do we think we are making some mistakes in the area of culture? How can we avoid them?
2. Identify certain strong points (core-values) in the cultures of the communities we are working with, (e.g. community solidarity, family loyalty,...etc). How can we promote them and make use of these resources for the common good.
3. Do you feel certain dimensions of our cultures can be oppressive of individuals? Identify certain areas of specific cultures that need healing. How can we bring the power of the Gospel to those areas of cultures?
4. How can we help smaller ethnic groups (various tribal communities) in their legitimate self-assertion (without leading them to aggressiveness) when the majority community ignores their interests?
5. How can we remain learners of each others' cultures and profit by the growth of a multi-cultural church? Point to possible dangers and suggest remedies.
