Looking at Four Dimensions of Culture:  
A Formation Perspective

by Paz H. Baquiran, M.A.

In the book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (McGraw-Hill, 1991), Geert Hofstede identifies two definitions of culture. One refers to civilization or a “refinement of the mind,” the results of which are education, works of art, literature, etc. The other is used more broadly as “mental software… a collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group of people from another.” As human beings, we have common feelings of anger, fear, and sadness, as well as shared needs of association, play, and rest. What we do with these feelings and needs are determined by the values held by our particular culture. This definition of culture deals with “the things that hurt,” with what holds meaning and value when challenged or disregarded.

Religious formation in a multicultural community calls forth the need to address “the things that hurt,” to deal with what matters for its diverse members. Four dimensions of culture – as defined by Hofstede and discussed here within a formation context – encapsulate this experience:

1. **Power Difference Index.** This refers to “the emotional distance between a person of authority and the subordinates.” When the power distance is greater, the level of dependency on authority is higher. Seen from a formation perspective, this would include looking at the differences of members from varying cultures in terms of understanding how they regard power, how they relate and react to authority figures.

2. **Collectivism versus Individualism.** This refers to “how much the interest/influence of the group prevails over the interest of the individual.” When the level of collectivism is higher, the individual is more disposed to having the group as a source of identity. In exchange for a sense of belonging, the individual’s loyalty is given to the group. When the level of individualism is higher, the sense of connectedness of the individual with other individuals or with the group is weaker. In the formation context, one would look at the capacities for independence and interdependence essential to community living. Does the individual have a healthy level of need for affiliation necessary for community life? Or, is the level of individualism so high that identification with the congregation’s identity and interdependence in community prove difficult?

3. **Masculinity/Femininity.** This refers to two aspects. One is the implication of being male or female in a particular culture manifested in the individual’s self-concept and role definition. The other is the degree to which a culture, as a group, manifests dispositions of masculinity or femininity. The formative implications are significant given that clergy and religious live in same-gender communities. How comfortable is the individual in taking on both masculine and feminine roles? More fundamentally, how has one been “programmed” to consider roles to be gender-specific? How comfortable is one in taking on differing roles?

4. **Uncertainty Avoidance.** This refers to the “extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations, expressed by a need for predictability and written/unwritten rules.” When the level of uncertainty avoidance is higher, the predisposition to seek clarity or resolution of whatever is unknown is greater. One implication is that cultures with higher uncertainty avoidance may tend towards increasing rigidity of structures as this lessens the anxiety level brought about by unpredictability. In a formation context, the dispositions of anxiety-tolerance, flexibility, and resilience as manifested in the capacity to deal with the different and the unknown, to adjust to the uncertainty of new assignments and communities as well as to the complexity of personalities and cultures, must be assessed. On the spiritual plane, one looks for the disposition to be able to live with Mystery as well as the patience to allow the gradual unfolding of answers in the ongoing process of discernment.
Some Considerations in Doing Formation Work in Multicultural Communities

by Brother Raymond D. Callo, SDB and Francisca Gloria C. Bustamante

In recent years, we have witnessed a significant increase in multicultural formation communities in the Philippines. This article will list important considerations in doing initial religious formation in these communities.

1. **The Nature of the Religious Congregation.** The formation of candidates for international or missionary life has to happen in a multicultural setting. With diminishing vocations and limited resources, religious congregations are also establishing multicultural communities to ensure that formation continues to occur in a communitarian context, with formators providing the necessary formative modeling and interventions. Thus, many congregations set up regional formation centers, as in the Philippines.

2. **Formation: At the Service of the Congregation’s Charism, Not of the Culture of the Place of Formation.** While formation of personal and religious identity ideally takes place in the home country, the initial formation of candidates can happen outside their culture. Even if religious formation occurs in a foreign country, it must remain dedicated to the formation of the candidates’ religious identity. The candidates are inculturated into the congregational charism in initial formation; for example, the Salesian charism is inculcated in their candidates, notwithstanding the country and cultural context in which they undergo formation.

3. **Preparing the Formator for the Multicultural Community.** A solid religious identity and experience are essential for a formator. In addition: Does the formator know what it is like to reside in a foreign country and/or live in an international community? Is the formator familiar with multicultural dynamics? Does the formator have the dispositions necessary for such a task, i.e. patience, sensitivity to varying cultural mentalities and expressions, and acceptance of personal limitations? If the formator is not native-born, have enough time and support been devoted to becoming oriented to the culture of the country where formation is being done?

4. **Preparing the Candidates for the Multicultural Community.** Candidates need to learn the language used in communicating the processes of formation. In the Philippines, they need to have some mastery of the English language. They need to be reverently oriented to the country so they can find their way around while undergoing formation. They need support towards growing in greater openness to a new culture, to new ways of thinking and doing.

5. **Having Formators from the Candidates’ Countries of Origin.** The regional formation center can make this request of the sending provinces. In this way, candidates can be accompanied by formators who speak their language and understand their culture. If this is not possible, exposure to the culture of the candidates’ country of origin is necessary. A formator might be helped by visiting a candidate’s family to have deeper knowledge and appreciation of the candidate’s cultural background and familial story.

Francisca Gloria Bustamante is a senior center associate, counselor, and spiritual director of Emmaus Center. Brother Raymond Callo, SDB is a program associate.

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