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TRAVEL/CULTURE

ISBN 978-981-4751-61-2



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CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

PHILIPPINES

Alfredo Roces | Grace Roces

For Review only

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ABOUT THE SERIES

This 9th edition published in 2016

Published by Marshall Cavendish Editions
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International
1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196

First published in 1985 by Times Editions Pte Ltd, reprinted 1986, 1988, 1989, 1992, 1993;
2nd edition published in 1994, reprinted 1995 (twice), 1996, 1997, 1998 (twice); 3rd edition
published in 1999, reprinted 2000 (twice); 4th edition published in 2002, reprinted 2003 (twice);
5th edition published in 2004; 6th edition published in 2006, reprinted 2008, 2009; 7th edition
published in 2009, reprinted 2010; 8th edition published in 2013, reprinted 2014.

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addressed to the Publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited,
1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. Tel: (65) 6213 9300, fax: (65) 6285 4871.
E-mail: genref@sg.marshallcavendish.com

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Other Marshall Cavendish Offices:
Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA •
Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd, 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road,
Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd,
Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor
Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Marshall Cavendish is a trademark of Times Publishing Limited

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Name(s): Roces, Alfredo R. | Roces, Grace, author.
Title: Culture shock! Philippines : a survival guide to customs and etiquette / Alfredo Roces,
Grace Roces.
Other Title(s): Philippines : a survival guide to customs and etiquette | Culture shock
Philippines | Culture shock!
Description: 9th edition | Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2016.
Identifier(s): OCN 953492136 | ISBN 978-981-4751-61-2 (paperback)
Subject(s): LCSH: Etiquette--Philippines. | Philippines--Social life and customs. | National
characteristics, Philippine. | Philippines--Description and travel.
Classification: DDC 959.9--dc23

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

Photo Credits:
All black and white photos from Alfredo Roces except pages 27, 29 (Jane Kempe) and
pages 354–355 (Myren Manalaysay) • Cover photo: Bobby Wong

All illustrations by TRIGG

Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, the authors share all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and covers a range of topics that will arm readers with enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book.

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

CONTENTS

For Review only

Introduction	vi	Body Language	139	Newspapers and Magazines	257	Government and Business	284
Acknowledgements	x	Dating Etiquette	148	Travel	258	Business Etiquette	285
Dedication	xi	<i>Compadrazco</i> : God Parenthood	149	Sports and Hobbies	259	Labour and Business	286
Map of the Philippines	xii	Filipino Wedding	154	Chapter 8		The Nationalist Business Credo (1986 Constitution)	287
Chapter 1		View of Foreigners	163	<u>Mind Your Language</u>	260	Volunteer Work	287
<u>First Impressions</u>	1	Alternative Lifestyles	164	The Filipino English Accent	261	Chapter 10	
Cultural Fatigue	5	Chapter 5		Language Reflects Culture	263	<u>Fast Facts about the Philippines</u>	290
Differences in Perception	6	<u>Settling In</u>	166	Filipino English	264	Famous People	295
Two Faces of Sincerity	8	Living in the Philippines	167	The Cultural Factor	265	Topics of Conversation	301
Face-to-Face Situations	9	House Hunting	170	Speak Softly	267	Acronyms	302
The Importance of <i>amor-propio</i>	10	Househelp	178	Filipino 'Yes'	267	Culture Quiz	305
Chapter 2		Health and Hospitals	193	Learning Difficulties for Foreigners	269	Do's and Don'ts	316
<u>Overview and History</u>	12	Schools / Day Care	193	Chapter 9		Glossary	318
Geography	13	Childcare	199	<u>Doing Business in the Philippines</u>	271	Resource Guide	330
History	13	Banking and Taxes	199	The Nationalist Factor	272	Further Reading	346
The Filipino: Product of History	45	Shopping	201	Minding Your Business	274	About the Authors	349
Chapter 3		Transportation	202	The Business of Telling Time	277	Index	356
<u>People</u>	47	Telecommunications	204	The Personalised Business Style	278		
Filipino Women	48	Chapter 6		Dealing with the Bureaucracy	279		
Filipino Men	60	<u>Eating and Entertaining</u>	207	Tips on Graft	281		
Behind Those Spanish Names	69	Filipino Food	208	Don't Get Personally Involved	282		
Start of Urban Life	69	Dining at Home	212	What Makes Filipino Businessmen Tick	283		
Traditions	79	Eating Out	215				
Social Values	96	Favourite Filipino Recipes	220				
Characteristics	113	Chapter 7					
Chapter 4		<u>Culture and Travel</u>	226				
<u>Socialising</u>	131	Festivals	227				
Guide to Social Situations	132	Brief Guide to Fiestas	232				
Social Customs	135	Calendar of Festivals and Holidays	251				
		Art and Media	257				

INTRODUCTION

‘Life is one big road with lots of signs.
So when you’re riding through the ruts,
don’t complicate your mind. Flee from hate,
mischief and jealousy. Don’t bury your thoughts,
put your vision to reality. Wake up and live!’

— **Bob Marley**

Most Westerners who come to the Philippines are pleasantly surprised to find all the trappings of the American lifestyle visible—Hollywood films, an English-speaking media with a press fond of American journalistic expressions, fast-food chains, supermarkets, nightclubs, malls, five-star hotels, cellphones, computers, Christian churches and credit cards. It’s all familiar.

A delayed shock follows soon after. The Western visitor may find he is speaking the same language but not communicating at all. With a sinking feeling he realises he is not in America or England or Canada, but in an entirely different world. Feeling betrayed, the Westerner retreats into his own shell, sharing this grievance with fellow Westerners in the safety of private social clubs of particular nationalities.

In other parts of Asia, language, customs and religions clearly establish the difference. Such Asians make no bones about their alien nature; but Filipinos mislead with a Western veneer. In fact, Asians too find Filipinos enigmatic; sometimes Western, sometimes familiarly Asian, always neither one nor the other. Filipinos themselves, in a quandary about their own identity, employ different time frames for Americans (American time), fellow Filipinos and other strangers.

The differences can seem threatening, as newspaper articles reporting how one man kills another for staring at him suggest. Some aspects of Filipino life will probably always remain strange to non-Filipinos. The Westerner puts on a serious scowl and tone when he wishes to make a very important point, whereas the Filipino delivers his most relaxed smile, or even loudest laugh, with his vital message. Filipino doctors illustrate this point best. Westerners may be distressed when told they have a very serious health problem by a doctor who appears to be enjoying the telling. This is not callousness, but an accepted bedside manner that seeks to ease anxiety and soften a hard blow. The Filipino laughs, literally laughs, at his troubles; it does not mean he is enjoying himself. This seemingly strange culture has its roots in a dim pre-colonial history, and in Spanish and American colonisation. However, the environment becomes less hostile if one can see danger signs, recognise friendly overtures and manage appropriate gestures at the right moments.

In the Philippine setting, Westerners may find sensing correct behaviour complicated because Filipinos, like most Asians, stress public harmony and overt conviviality. The faintest indication of conflict is readily buried. Direct confrontation is frowned upon and regarded in the worst light. Someone will back off or divert the antagonists. Public conflict is taboo as the ensuing loss of face would lead to wider trouble. The belligerent and aggressive may be feared, but never respected. Failing to see any conflict, the Westerner will miss reading long-term repercussions into an incident. In such highly volatile situations, a foreigner may say the wrong thing, make the wrong gesture and trigger a public explosion which, once in the open, requires vindication of honour or face at any cost.

The colonial experience imposed foreign values that Filipinos adapted to or reacted to in their own peculiar fashion. More than three hundred years of Spanish Catholic mores, and 50 years of American free enterprise have reshaped Filipino society, and not necessarily for the better. The contradictions one finds in most societies are therefore more pronounced in Filipino culture.

In the 1960s, Filipinos came to realise the need to learn about their own selves; previously they too had believed themselves to be fully Westernised—the only Christian, English-speaking democracy in Asia. Now Filipinos have taken fresh stock of themselves. Behind the Western façade is a unique society. Many aspects of Western culture have been selectively assimilated, adding a distinct dimension to Filipino culture.

This ambivalent character has served the Filipino expatriate in good stead. Filipinos have worked and settled in such remote environments as Alaskan salmon canneries, Hawaiian sugar plantations, cocktail bars in Chicago, Saudi Arabian construction sites, Papuan banks, Guamanian business houses, Canadian hotels, nightclubs in Bangkok and German hospitals. Unlike most other migrants, who still form little communities, the Filipino blends readily into the foreign landscape. He has been called a 'joker' because, like the standard wild card in the deck, he can be whatever he wants to be. Sociologists and Christian theologians, on the other hand, worry about the contradictory moral values Filipinos profess to live by. A Jesuit psychologist discussed such questions in a study with a self-explanatory title: *Split-Level Christianity*.

The elements that produce cultural shock for the foreign visitor to the Philippines are often extremely subtle and

microscopic. Only upon their accumulation does the full impact reach the bone.

Filipinos are extremely tolerant people, and thus many grievous social blunders will be readily laughed away and graciously dismissed, especially if the offender is a foreigner. Filipinos are generally gregarious, happy, generous people, and it is not difficult to win their friendship. Filipino hospitality is almost limitless, and foreigners, particularly Westerners, are viewed with expansive goodwill. The Filipino has over centuries wrestled with Western culture—its technology, morals, etiquette, organisational systems; he is therefore able and willing to meet a Westerner halfway, perhaps even more than halfway.

The foreigner can remain aloof and an outsider and yet manage to function; but he will be ill at ease. A little understanding and insight will open doors and arms. The expatriate who decides to make this archipelago of more than 100 million people his home should never take the Western part of the Filipino as the whole. To really know the Filipino, to really feel at ease in this country, it is necessary to probe past the Western veneer—and then an entirely different world reveals itself.

Utang na loob (or personal favours) are an important social currency in the Philippines. As for us, we have such a debt of gratitude for all the information and insights of a lifetime of living in the Philippines that it cannot be put down in this page. Many people were interviewed and many published sources scrutinised. For very direct assistance, however, we would be remiss if we failed to mention Doreen Gamboa Fernandez, Ateneo University; Jeremy Beckett, Sydney University; Mrs Gilda Cordero Fernando, GCF Publications, for valuable comments and suggestions throughout the manuscript stage; Jose R. Sarmiento for providing some photographic illustrations; and Joan Pollett for putting into clear type a scribble-riddled final draft.

For the hard data in this revised edition, many thanks to my brother, Marcos Victor Roces, without whose diligent assistance I would still be floundering in the Filipino limbo of vague comments and assurances from all and sundry with no facts and figures at hand; also to Enrique Velasco for advice and comments on the earlier edition of this book; and to business executive Ed Feist for going over the chapter on doing business in the Philippines.

Special thanks to Ben Sanchez for his vital assistance in Chapter 6, Eating and Entertaining, as well as other portions of this updated version; Bobby Wong for the cover photo, Chit and Zeny Pineda; and to Howard Boorman for his help in researching current information on banking, schooling and volunteer work. Jaime and Ana Marie Calero were also helpful.

Our *utang na loob* to all who helped, and *salamat po*.

*To the late Dr Robert B. Fox, one expat who contributed greatly to the understanding of Filipinos.
May his tribe increase.*

This update is dedicated to all the overseas Pinoys lost in diaspora eager to rediscover their Filipino identity.

MAP OF THE PHILIPPINES



CHAPTER 1

FIRST IMPRESSIONS



¶ Though they had eyes to see, they saw to no avail; they had ears but understood not; but like to shape in dreams, throughout their length of days, without purpose, they wrought all things in confusion. ¶

— Aeschylus

After two years in the Philippines, an American Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) wrote to one of his colleagues: 'I remember how quickly I discovered that people didn't understand me. The simplest things to me seemed not at all familiar to them. I tried to explain, but the further I got into an explanation, the sillier I looked; suddenly I felt undermined; the most basic premises, values and understandings were of no help to me with the people here when I first faced them, for these understandings and ways of doing and seeing things just didn't exist even. There was a big gap.

'This gap is a crucial thing. What choices do I have when I see that the most basic things I act on and am comforted by are not understood in the least by someone else I am working or living with? When that queasy feeling of groping and groping uselessly, desperately for a bridge, some tie, something which will make us less separate, will make us feel recognised by the other, begins to make me tremble and feel utterly sealed away from the other, what do I do?' (Albert G. Bradford, in *Cultural Confrontation in the Philippines* by David L. Szanton).

When day-to-day social exchanges fail to meet their expectations, some people become frustrated and antagonistic. These individuals are your cartoon image of the tourists who stand out against the landscape in a curious



mixture of informal hometown wear, outlandish souvenir hats and trinkets made for tourists and sold in hotel lobby shops. As pathetic as it appears, many expatriates live their lives out on foreign soil all over the world, pining for the mother country, miserable about conditions around them and thoroughly mystified that the alien culture behaves contrary to their expectations. Many cultivate a patronising attitude towards the 'natives', developing a protective armour of arrogant superiority.

Nothing can be done for the fossilised psyches; they must have their gin-and-tonics in their private clubs, while bashing the habitat they have themselves chosen to inhabit. They live marching to the beat of a different drummer in a place where there are no drums. They build Little Englands, Little Americas, Little Chinas, light-years away from their motherland, hearts and stomachs living elsewhere.

CULTURAL FATIGUE

Others respond to culture shock by going to the other extreme: they surrender totally to the cultural environment and go native; in the Philippine situation this would mean actually 'becoming Filipino'. Such an option resolves the cultural conflict at the expense of renouncing or losing one's past. These individuals solve the problems of cultural conflict by then assuming the problems of their adopted society, its tensions, anxieties and contradictions.

For the majority of non-Filipinos living in the Philippines, however, neither alternative is satisfactory. What they seek, in the throes of culture shock, is to communicate clearly and to understand the differences between their culture and Filipino society. Such victims of culture shock are not prepared to atrophy their identity or lose it; they want to expand their consciousness and find themselves.

Nevertheless, even after surviving the initial shock and accepting the differences, keeping score between two diverse lifestyles and value systems begins to grate. Despite open-mindedness and enthusiasm for learning about a new cultural environment, cultural fatigue sets in. Writing about the US Peace Corps programme in the Philippines, Szanton in *Cultural Confrontation in the Philippines* notes: 'Cultural fatigue is the physical and emotional exhaustion that almost invariably results from the infinite series of minute adjustments required for long-term survival in an alien culture. Living and working overseas generally requires that one must suspend his automatic evaluations and judgements; that he must supply new interpretations to seemingly familiar behaviour and that he must demand of himself constant alterations in the style and content of his activity. Whether this process is conscious or unconscious, successful or unsuccessful, it consumes an enormous amount of energy, leaving the individual decidedly fatigued....'

One interesting thing about the fatigue of many of the PCVs is that it so closely resembled the fatigue observed by G.M. Guthrie (*Six Perspectives on the Philippines*) in the behaviour of American businessmen and government personnel in Manila. Inter-personal behaviour of the traditional Philippine nature tended to be viewed in the negative light. Strong Philippine family ties came to be seen as 'clannishness', personal sensitivity as 'sulkiness', concern for reciprocity as 'scheming', deference to age and status as 'obsequiousness', ignoring disagreements and avoiding unpleasant subjects as 'dishonesty' and lavish hospitality as 'wastefulness'.



Striking a Balance

Survival of foreigners in the Philippines depends on their knowledge and appreciation of Filipino ways of thought and action while preserving their own cultural identity and sanity. Not easy when you are trying to catch an important meeting and the driver has gone off for a cup of coffee, and rushing back to your office to tell your client you'll be late, you find the telephone has lost its dial tone, and, when you manage to grab a taxi, it crawls (meter not flagged down in a traffic tangle in pouring rain and flooded streets) to your destination at last—to discover the entire building in darkness and your client gone home because of the 'brownout' (power stoppage) in the area.

Trying to see things the Filipino way soon becomes a real threat to one's identity. Szanton viewed it in this light: 'The typical (Peace Corps) Volunteer cherished directness, sincerity, efficiency and quality. Yet all these values were challenged by the foreign culture in which he worked, to the point where pursuit of them could be counter-productive. Realising this, the volunteer was likely to pose for himself some searching questions, such as "If all I do is play a part, adjusting my behaviour to my hosts, then what will I be contributing to the community?" And, "Should I be, and can I be, actor enough to be false to what I value as right and good?" And, ultimately, dormant identity problems were likely to reappear in the form of the question, "Can I not be myself?"—which inexorably led to the unnerving, "Who am I?"'

DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION

There are no easy answers. The very recognition of a different social pattern with a different set of values establishes precisely the premise that there is no black-and-white, right-and-wrong, universal perception for human social etiquette outside the specific culture.

To go back to the questions raised by Szanton, and further compound the dilemma he raises, a set of conflicting

cultural values is not really that easily categorised into simplistic generalisations, although generalisations do throw the differences into focus: many of the avowed values cherished by American Peace Corps Volunteers, of 'sincerity, efficiency and quality', as cited by Szanton, are not totally and necessarily opposed by Filipino culture.

Filipinos also value sincerity, efficiency and quality, but from very different viewpoints. A sincere person to a Filipino is one who fulfils his obligations and is true to what the society perceives as verbal, or better still, written, commitments, not one who 'tells it like it is' regardless of who gets hurt. The difference is in the perception of sincerity. It is certainly not a matter of foreigners being 'sincere' and Filipinos being 'insincere'.

Concessions made to Filipino culture should never be at the cost of contradicting human values. A foreigner's identity crisis does not cut that deep into the bone. What is required is a re-examination of these various human virtues and vices, and an appreciation of the style and form they take in the society. There are indigenous Filipino words for sincerity and insincerity, efficiency and inefficiency, quality and the lack of it—sufficient evidence that these concepts and values do not escape their consciousness.

Szanton points out that PCVs were instructed emphatically with the observation that Filipinos were 'person-oriented' while Americans were 'goal-oriented', that Filipinos were concerned with 'being' while Americans were motivated by 'doing', revealing clearly that the philosophical viewpoints alter perceptions and that cultural conflict lies in this arena and not in a locked battle between irreconcilable moral values. It is the different emphasis given to these values, not absolute opposition to them, that causes conflict.

The key word that provides resolution to what appear to be diametrical opposites is *expectations*. A ‘sincere’ foreigner is not asked to become an ‘insincere’ Filipino. Both cultures value sincerity but perceive this very differently. It is one’s expectation or preconceived idea that clouds one’s judgment concerning such values as sincerity or efficiency or quality. For example, the Western, short-term, goal-oriented, ‘doing’ style places ‘sincerity’ on a literal, factual, no-nonsense priority level; a Filipino’s long-term, person-oriented concern for ‘being’ sublimates outspokenness to absolute necessity.

TWO FACES OF SINCERITY

It is curious to note that throughout the history of Philippine-American relations, the issue of ‘sincerity’ has been constantly and consistently raised by the Filipinos and not by Americans—from the initial negotiations with Admiral Dewey to discussions concerning human rights issues today.

A reading of Philippine-American history will bear this out, as various reputable historians (Leon Wolff in *Little Brown Brother*; Teodoro Agoncillo and Oscar Alfonso in their *History of the Filipino People*, for instance)

bring up the issue. Americans do not hesitate to sugar-coat what they value as ‘sincerity’ in certain perceived cultural situations such as in negotiations with other nations, or in the use of euphemisms in public statements by US State officials and politicians, which turn out to be far from sincere. Americans also accept readily the exaggeration of commercial

Misinterpretations

In the historical context of official state negotiations, Filipino sincerity has been interpreted as naiveté, while American deception regarded as fair tactics applied in the vital expediences of national self-interest by Americans.

advertising which falls short of the strict demands of the term ‘sincerity’, but these have been re-interpreted into American cultural expectations. Americans would consider Filipinos foolish to believe at face value US official negotiators who are out to drive a hard bargain, or door-to-door salesmen and television advertisers.

In this context, Filipino cultural expectations are misled, and Filipinos are ‘taken in’. Americans automatically adjust expectations of sincerity when dealing with used car salesmen, politicians and official press releases. Filipinos are not familiar with this cultural context of sincerity and thus receive false signals and succumb much too readily to hard-sell advertising. One example is the way impoverished Filipina mothers buy powdered or canned milk at great expense, having been deluded by American advertising into thinking this is better, healthier and more socially prestigious than breastfeeding.

FACE-TO-FACE SITUATIONS

On the other hand, Filipinos have an entirely different expectation when it comes to face-to-face ‘sincerity’. In this situation, promises and pleasing half-truths are important tools to avoid wounding *amor-propio*, because smooth interpersonal relations always take precedence over other values. Americans are flabbergasted when a Filipino ‘yes’ turns out to be a ‘maybe’ or when they are given the run-around instead of a straight ‘no’.

One reason Filipinos are not conscientious correspondents (not bothering to reply to RSVP invitations and then showing up, for example) is that for Filipinos the formal written context demands actual commitment and therefore sincerity at its fullest extent. Just as advertising, politics and official

negotiations in the American context call for some suspension of expectations of sincerity, it is the face-to-face situation in the Philippine context that calls for a watered-down reading of expectations of sincerity.

It is safe to say that a non-Filipino should take with a grain of salt what is promised in a face-to-face situation because Filipinos themselves always do. To establish the measure of sincerity, reiterate and obtain reconfirmation of the commitment several times, as well as act immediately to formalise and make irrevocable a verbal commitment. It is at this point that the person's 'sincerity' is tested, because if he hedges or does not act straight away, the promise and the 'yes' have been granted just to please you.

The Westerner is irritated because the Filipino will not come out and say 'no' to end the matter and save time; the Filipino is furious the Westerner cannot take the hint that the answer is 'no'. The Filipino thinks he is being considerate of the Westerner's self-esteem. What is offensive and what is considerate? It is merely a cultural interpretation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AMOR-PROPIO

Why, you may ask, should a Filipino be so concerned about not causing offence? The importance of *amor-propio* (self-esteem) is one reason, but equally important is the kin-group world of Filipinos. Rather than value individualism, each Filipino sees himself at the centre of a kin-group universe: parents, grandparents, children, uncles, aunts, cousins, second cousins, in-laws, compadres and comadres. In an open conflict, one wounds not just an individual but the whole kin group.

A quarrel between two people is not purely one between two individuals. A Filipino quarrel draws both kin groups



into opposing camps. Notes anthropologist Frank Lynch on this point: '... when two Filipinos have a serious fight, there is much more at stake than when two Americans break off relations. That fact is, in my opinion, one reason why smooth interpersonal relations are more highly cultivated in the Philippines than in the United States.'



GRACE ROCES

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