

DELICADEZA

By Rene Sinco

IN MY grandmother's Antillan house with the big red roof and the *azotea* with the potted palms in Negros, there used to hang in the *sala* a framed piece of cloth on which were embroidered in red thread of silk the names of virtues, such as Patience, Constancy, Charity, and nine or ten others, but the one that puzzled me was the word *Delicadeza*. That one was embroidered in white and done in an exquisitely florid hand. "That," Grandmama used to instruct us, "is an important virtue. Put that into your heads. The virtue that distinguishes the true *hidalgo* (gentleman) from somebody without manners, a barbarian; the mark of a true lady." It was one of those grand words so hard to define, that smack of an age of ritual and

good graces. It could mean a soft-mannered way of speaking, graceful movements, prudence, tact, or a subtle way of putting things. Sometimes it meant all these at the same time. My grandmother, disciplinarian that she was, demanded we observe all of them, most specially when we had visitors. *Delicadeza*—hallmark of a Genteel Tradition, of an age of laces and horse buggies.

But it is still a part of our national character, though we no longer consider ourselves living in a Genteel Age.

One remembers the episode in Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* where the hero, Crisostomo Ibarra, finding himself momentarily friendless in a party, accosts a group of ladies. "'Allow me,' he said, 'to overstep the rules of strict eti-

quette. It has been seven years since I have been in my own country and upon returning to it I cannot suppress my admiration and refrain from paying my respects to its most precious ornaments, the ladies." His boldness, of course, was met by a stony silence by the ladies in question, although Ibarra's manner of approach is described by the author as "simple and natural." But he was not working according to protocol, which required a middle man to do the introduction. This silent refusal to begin an acquaintanceship on the part of the ladies is a good example of lady-like *delicadeza*, which has, in the tradition of Maria Clara, a touch of maidenly coyness that was supposed to be attractive to the males.

Nowadays, such is no longer the case, party-going-wise. But *delicadeza* expresses itself in a dozen or so ways in our relationship with others. Take, for instance, the disconcerting habit of many Filipinos to conceal the truth which Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil mentioned in an article in *Philippines International*. When an employee wants to leave a job for another with better pay, does he approach the boss and tell him that he is quitting for that reason? Oh no. He invents a subterfuge: he has to leave for the province because of a sick or dying relative, or he has to take a vacation in Baguio because of failing health. Behind the subterfuge lies

something that is ingrained in the Filipino psyche, and it is this simply: his inability to offend the other person's feelings. Which is one way of saying that the boss is sure to feel offended if he is told the reason why his employee is leaving. *Delicadeza*—one has to be careful about hurting the other person's feelings. Hence, a spade is not called a spade, and both parties engage all too happily in a grand illusion of sorts.

Many foreigners notice that Filipinos take offense all too easily. Which makes criticism, no matter how legitimate, a difficult thing to do in these parts. One music critic of a metropolitan daily once criticized the faulty performance of an up-and-coming pianist in the most matter-of-fact, unbiased manner possible. In no time, the relatives of this hapless pianist started calling up by phone the critic to ask him if he had anything personal against the pianist in question! One can never be certain whether one has lost the friendship of a writer simply because his books were roundly panned. *Delicadeza—amor proprio*: they go together. It is tough to draw the line between the objective and the subjective, the rational and the emotional, the impersonal and the personal. To criticize a person's wrong is considered by many as an assault on his very person, and so the accepted method to employ is to

handle the situation with kid gloves, as much as possible.

IN HIS BOOK *The Life and Deeds of Admiral Dewey* (1898), Joseph L. Stickney, Dewey's aide, describes this dominating flaw in the Filipino character as follows: "The moral obligation to tell the truth does not weigh heavily upon the Filipino. The civilized natives often like to conceal the most trivial shortcoming, or even without any excuse whatsoever, and the detection of a falsehood brings no regret except chagrin that the practice has not been more dexterously carried out."

A careful study of Philippine history will provide an explanation for Stickney's comment: colonialism is, at least partially, to blame. Centuries of Spanish domination has brought about injustices that caused all kinds of psychological torment on the *Indios*. Somehow the Filipino, as a defense mechanism of sorts, has devised a way of covering up shortcoming in order not to incur the superciliousness of his white mas-

ters and also as a means of "saving face." It is all emotional, certainly, and colonialism is in a way responsible for the emotionalism of the Filipinos, who, for decades and decades, have not been oriented in rationalizing things coolly, detachedly. Suddenly, freedom burst wildly in the horizon and, with the American regime, mass education enabled the Filipino to partake of matter-of-fact attitudes and practicality, a sense of objectivity and impartiality. The Filipino soul began to break away from the cocoon of complacency, timidity, and moral isolation, to assert its own moral integrity. In governing the state, *delicadeza* is definitely a drawback; emotionalism and hypersensitivity to criticism have characterized many government administrations and often the results have been loud politicking, character-assassination, noisy internal squabbles (*delicadeza* clouding the real issues), rather than quiet deliberation, dispassionate discussion, and prompt action.—*Philippines International*.

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Drop tear for the poor lady who reduced 65 pounds and then found out that it was her face people disliked.

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