

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC – SAMPLING THE CARIBBEAN CULTURE

Alexandra Mărginean*

Abstract

This analysis starts from an instance of relaxation tourism in the Dominican Republic, interpreting some facts and realities that I had immediate, direct contact with about this country and bearing on Caribbean leisure culture at large. In this, I am resorting to notions from intercultural theory, both from what are considered to be traditional insights, such as Florence Kluckhohn and Geert Hofstede's, and to more modern ones from Fons Trompenaars. The study takes into account aspects regarding the weather and climate, accommodation units, eating habits and activities, i.e. Edgar Schein's artifacts, interpreted through an intercultural criticism lens. Hence, the Dominican culture appears to be a "being" and affective one, prone to indulgence, having a low uncertainty avoidance index, a relaxed attitude to time, short term orientation and an external locus of control. The coupling of these features relies on examples and illustrations. The conclusions sum up the Dominican and Caribbean profile.

Keywords: *tourism, Caribbean culture, indulgence, synchronicity, external locus of control*

JEL Classification: Z10

This paper is based on a firsthand encounter with the culture of the Dominican Republic, which I had as a result of relaxation tourism in the area, more precisely an exotic holiday I went on in the spring of 2016 to a five-star lodging unit in Punta Cana. It was an eleven-day, all-inclusive package to a hotel located on the beach. The idea of this study is to analyze the Dominican experience and culture taking into account the intercultural dimensions introduced by Fons Trompenaars, drawing, as well, on Florence Kluckhohn and Geert Hofstede, as well as minding the layered model of a culture put forth by Edgar Schein's definitions. The analysis will also reveal the main characteristics of the leisure Caribbean culture at large, supported with examples and illustrations from the realities that I have noticed.

In Schein's model, the outer, most easily noticeable stratum of a culture is made of its artifacts, such as elements of the physical environment (architecture and art), "technology and products", in other words, the palpable realities, including "clothing, manners of address, emotional displays [...] myths and stories [...] observable rituals and ceremonies" etc. (Schein, 2004: 26). We shall primarily discuss some of these and the first impressions that I had once I made contact with them. The pleasant aspect about the weather, more precisely the tropical rainforest climate there, is that it maintains around 28 degrees average during the day, which for those Europeans visiting it in spring or early

* Alexandra Mărginean is at the Romanian American University in Bucharest.

autumn makes a pleasant change, avoiding the extremely high temperatures of hot summer days as well as the low ones in their countries of origin, which the tourists searching for a relaxation holiday go there with the thought of avoiding in the first place. The increased air humidity is something that a portion of the European tourists might need adjusting to, as some people complain that it induces a state of sleepiness or even fatigue and difficulty breathing, rendering the impression that the air is denser than the one we are accustomed to. However, we need to say that the extra dampness of the air is mild and quite bearable, being far from the jungle-like atmosphere that it is sometimes exaggeratedly presented as, and displays the benefits brought by hydration to one's skin. The sudden rains in the February – March – April season clear the air without disturbing the beach activities due to their fleeting nature. The typical beach scape is a narrower strip of sand than the one we usually encounter in our country or Europe in general, as it is closely lined with a clump of palm trees. The sand itself is cream white and much smoother, resulting from ground-up limestone known under the name of coral sand (*The White Sands of Punta Cana*, 2007).

The bungalow system of accommodation units is popular in the Dominican Republic, a proneness to simplicity which makes the five-star hotels a bit less luxurious than one would expect in terms of in-room provisions, if one looks at certain aspects. The space is as generous as it should be, with tall ceilings, huge king-size beds, a large bathroom with a sizeable bathtub with Jacuzzi, toiletries, two sinks etc. for the best type of premium suites. The balcony is a bit smaller than anticipated, though, there is no elevator, as the buildings are typically not taller than four or five floors, there is no carpeting on the floor, either inside or outside the rooms, and the door is rather old wood poorly repainted.

The Dominicans are relaxed and that is visible firstly in their typical walk, which is slow, almost lazy – I have seldom seen a Dominican hurry, not even when lower rank and about to deliver a service. Overall, their gestures and bodily movements are performed at a slower speed than the Europeans', and with a certain smoothness, as if one gesture were not clearly delimited from the other, but they were connected in a continuum, which sometimes makes the people look as if they were engaged in a dance. They prefer colorful clothes, which look merry and vibrant on their skin that is usually of various shades of brown or black. Their stress-free attitude is also manifest in the way they smile, widely, showing their teeth, not merely with their lips as Europeans tend to do. Thus, the broad smiles do not appear to be only about marketing, but are part of a lifestyle and attitude to living. In the evening, especially, we could see on the resort premises that, while the locals were listening, next to the tourists, to bands performing, they were singing along with the visitors, or even moving to the music to encourage them to dance as well. Inside the restaurants, waiters sometimes brought water or cutlery and dish items waltzing, pirouetting around, trying to engage the tourists standing up from the tables after having eaten, or merely to make them smile. I saw one or two instances when the waiters took pictures with the tourists. Overall, they were getting involved and helpful with children at the table above and beyond their basic job responsibilities (like seating and serving): they asked the children their name, tossed their hair etc. When they met or talked to each other they did so in an open, sometimes loud manner, acknowledging the

interlocutor enthusiastically. The general feel was that of people coming from an affective culture, showing their emotions overtly: “Members of cultures which are affectively neutral do not telegraph their feelings but keep them carefully controlled and subdued. In contrast, in cultures high on affectivity people show their feelings plainly by laughing, smiling, grimacing, scowling and gesturing; they attempt to find immediate outlets for their feelings” (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997: 69).

Concerning the cuisine, we may say that the Dominicans eat healthily, mostly salads, vegetables (especially beans) fruits, cereals (mostly rice and corn), cheeses, fish and meats. One ingredient that is used extensively and is unlike what Europe is accustomed to is the plantains, a type of less-sweet bananas that they use as either a vegetarian main course or a side dish – especially mashed, in *mangú*, or doubly fried, as in *tostones – plátano frito*. An interesting food-related aspect, which differs from European perception, is that eating is guilt-free. The Dominicans expect one to eat well, and regard food interest, especially while one is on this type of relaxation, exotic vacation, as natural and welcome. They even encourage tourists to sample everything and expect the ingestion of significant amounts, which in Europe would be frowned upon. There is, I would say, a respect for this activity which should be dedicated a fair interval of time, be enjoyed and even relished, which is the normal attitude to it. Women enjoy their meals as thoroughly as men, there is no expectation that they had better mind what and how much they eat. There is also, in connection with food rather than any other service, an attitude of not only benevolence and attention, but also empathy and tacit understanding and agreement, to cater for the needs of the customers by going the extra mile. It may as well stem, unfortunately, from the poverty of regular people in the country, but it is also a trait of the leisure cultures. The hotel provided a variety of five types of restaurants, the diversity and prominence of which shows the important part played by this particular satisfaction of the senses in the Caribbean. These were the following: an Asian-inspired one (Himitsu), the Italian Portofino, the Mexican El Patio, a French one (Bordeaux), two Grills – a Seaside and a Barefoot, with, respectively, seafood and snacks of all kinds – and, my favorite, the World Café. The first four offered dinner, whereas the Grills and the World Café were open for meals almost any time of the day (with short breaks destined for cleaning and food preparation and display). Also, at the Coco Café coffee shop, one could enjoy various assortments of coffee-based drinks and sweets around the clock. The Preferred Club members – the guests who stayed in Preferred Club rooms, the most luxurious from the resort – enjoyed some extra facilities and services, such as, for instance, the possibility of serving breakfast and lunch at the Seaside Grill, a reserved swimming-pool and beach area with more qualitative towels, of a different shade and texture, and more comfortable beach long chairs etc.

The available services and attitudes that we have mentioned above (and the realities that we are still about to look into) correlate with Florence Kluckhohn’s “being” cultures, oriented more on welfare and positive affect, whose representatives work in order to be able to enjoy the pleasures of life, rather than with the “doing” cultures, in which people tend to be workaholics (Nunez, Nunez and Popma, 2014: 49-51). Also, taking into account what we have said so far, from Minkov’s indulgence-restraint pair of concepts used to classify cultures, the indulgence profile, i.e. “enjoying life and having

fun” (Hofstede and Minkov, 2010: 281) clearly suits the Dominican stance in particular, and the Caribbean one in general, as it is moreover visible from the table showing the high indulgence indexes displayed by countries such as Venezuela (100), Mexico (97), Puerto Rico (90) and El Salvador (89) (*ibidem*: 282). The index of 20 for Romania (*ibidem*: 284) would make the indulgence of the Dominican Republic striking to us, as it did to me. Also, “Happiness, subjective health, and optimism about the future [...]” (*ibidem*: 289) are better in indulgent cultures, and, we find out from the study *Cultures and Organizations. Software of the Mind*, indulgence combines with an enhanced “perception of personal life control”, “higher importance of leisure”, of having friends and bonding, with positivity, a loose and less hierarchized society, extroversion and a less rigid discipline (*ibidem*: 291).

The leisure culture sees its effects everywhere, starting from the organization of services to the activities available and people’s attitude and mentality. Some of this mentality is manifest in the way that the Dominicans smile all the time or envisage food consumption and primary needs, as discussed above. It is also visible in the destination management services, i.e. the activities that could be purchased onsite, in the resort, at a special desk. These offer various active pastimes, either inside the resort or outside it. For a certain fee, one can enjoy trips to various islands, to natural pools, snorkeling and diving, rides on boats or catamarans, to caves, which may all include open bars and lunches on lobster or traditional food, tastings of traditional products such as coffee or cocoa, beach horseback riding, contact with sea life such as stingrays and sharks (which have been made inoffensive), parties or organized events. Another type are the spa ocean trips, which may include massages and specific treatments, or floating on an air bed pushed by someone about. For the adventurous tourists, there is the zip line or the boogies, and for those who like spending time in the middle of nature there is the *hacienda* experience or the visits to the natural reserves. Finally, the party people can have a night in the city of Santo Domingo at a concert or what is known as the *Coco Bongo* – a night show of colorful lights, music and acrobatics in the air above the crowd. Inside the resort, tourists could enjoy massages, of which there are a lot of types, as well as shopping in the boutiques on the precinct, not to mention making up a scrapbook with pictures taken by a professional in various spots over the area.

On this vacation, the smiling and the lighthearted attitude was the norm, which made us feel at ease, being able to disconnect from the tight schedules and busy life that we came from. However, the difference between our initially preoccupied air and their relaxation was something that they immediately noticed and labeled as foreign to them. Upon our arrival, we spoke very politely with the bellboy and the reception staff, but we were kind of anxious to get to the room to leave our luggage and change into lighter, more suitable clothes. While we were waiting at the second reception, for the Preferred Club members, I overheard the young man who helped us with the bags tell the young female receptionist in Spanish that he found our attitude “*como no se, como dura*”. His tone was not disrespectful, he was rather pensive and, most of all, surprised. I realized that his (and perhaps their) perception of our state – the fact that we were tired and a bit less relaxed than they had expected, given our prolonged airplane time (a three hour flight to Paris followed by a nine-hour transatlantic flight), and the twenty-minute ride in the

van with clothes on that were too heavy for the climate we had arrived in – caused him to perceive our energy as “harsh”. In other words, what for a European or American would have seemed exactly what it was – exhaustion – was to him a potential sign of dissatisfaction from our part or, at the extreme, of a too demanding or unpleasant personality. This difference arose precisely from the culture gap between a people who are used to smiling all the time, refusing to be pressed for anything, in comparison with a less relaxed one, accustomed to be on the clock, depend on schedules and worry about solving the practical matters first. We were also a bit late at the hotel check-in, which we were aware of, unlike, however, the hotel staff, who seemed oblivious to the matter, as if the notion of a schedule did not exist at all.

The Dominicans’ lax perception of time was apparent in other circumstances as well, even more clearly. Upon our arrival, we arranged an appointment with the hotel destination management guide for nine o’clock the next morning. During this meeting, he would present the activities and trips available, and we could plan, schedule and purchase some or all of them for our stay. As opposed to us, who were there ten minutes before nine, he came a quarter of an hour past. However, having already noticed the relaxation mode that permeated all attitudes and actions around us, we were by that time expecting that. Punctuality was not a priority. To give another example, at the restaurants, the breaks the staff took for cleaning and preparations varied both in terms of moment and duration.

To come back to the destination management representative, he was very professional in giving us numerous details about the trips and answering patiently and gladly to all our questions. He also acted with the awareness that for tourists time mattered and that we perceived time differently. He knew that holiday-goers having a limited number of days there should be able to plan for their vacation making the most of it, in case they wanted a more active approach instead of just beach time. For instance, he warned us about the fact that some excursions needed to be opted for a day in advance. Moreover, he got involved in planning the actual sequence of the trips along with us after he found out which ones we were interested in, which was a more personalized or customized approach and meant going the extra mile. In what concerns time perceptions, his attitude mixed his origin-culture, background approach, with the visiting-culture, opposite imprint and the necessities of the context, proving fluidity and adaptability, which were due to him having had contacts with different mentalities as part of his job.

Viewing time as fluid went with multitasking as well. He was able to help a colleague while we were looking at the flyers and booklet with the trips, he answered a call and went inside the office for a bit in order to solve another assignment. All this, however, occurred at precisely the right moments so as not to offend us or steal his focus away from us when we needed it. I also noticed similar attitudes of cross-talks among the waiters and reception staff as well. We could say that the Dominicans favor synchronicity rather than sequentiality (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997: 123-5). The respect that the locals have for tourism determines them to adapt to European and American time perceptions, but there is an underlying assumption that differs from these, and it is visible that they are making an effort to adjust to a way of being that is not their own or what they are accustomed to.

Borrowing a charger adaptor occasioned a concrete illustration of their short term orientation. We told the destination management local guide that we needed to buy one and asked where we could find it. He told us that his colleague at the Coco Café could help and we went to him. He brought an unboxed adaptor and gave it to us. We expressed our wish to buy it, which put him in difficulty. He insisted on us simply taking it and using it, but we needed to be clear on the status of the action – was it a borrowing, and for how long could we keep it? As we asked these questions, he seemed more and more puzzled, and it became clear to us that he only meant to solve the problem without thinking about the future or additional implications: when and where we can/should return it, how long could we keep it, if we should give him some money for the service or not. He did not really care to plan or worry for these things, straighten them out or stress about them. His horizon of expectations was reduced to the then and there.

Being in-tune with and respectful towards nature, harmonizing oneself with and adapting to its pace and manifestations, rather than trying to control it, or what has been termed as “external locus of control” (*ibidem*: 141-2) could be inferred as a characteristic of the Dominican people from a number of situations. In the dolphin Explorer program, besides forbidding jewelry, they also disallowed make-up, and the hair had to be loose (not even a scrunchie was permitted): “This is how you go to them” the destination management representative told us, showing the picture of a teenage girl who had none of the above, and which suggested that the right attitude while around the mammals was the innocence of childhood. Also, the local representative convinced us to buy the Explorer version of the visit (as opposed to the simpler and less expensive one of the tour, which we were initially set to purchase, and which was also the one advertised by the agency in Romania), by describing the more complex interaction with the dolphins that we would benefit from in this way. The way he talked about the mammals showed awareness of and concern for their welfare and protection, a certain respect which points to the same tendency of being in harmony with nature rather than merely exploiting it.

Another aspect that showed the love of nature and fauna was the way the whole property was designed as a natural park, with alleys and a big area of green spaces, where various trees, flowers and plants were labeled. Moreover, there were various species of birds, but also some types of small lizards hanging around, which the locals seemed to find as natural, whereas to us the proximity with these animals appeared a bit unusual.

Thirdly, harmony with natural phenomena and the elements was demonstrated by the way in which, when they had to cancel a pool concert one night because of an incoming storm, they reorganized immediately, and the attitude was a very calm and relaxed one, as if it just could not be helped, and such occurrences in which they lacked control over nature and were capable and willing to adapt and adjust the program according to the weather were normal and to be expected. There was no trace of stress in their manner, and the naturalness with which they approached the context, as a given, suggested somehow that the tourists should have the same attitude. On guided tours in Europe with travel agencies, tourists become extremely impatient and disgruntled if a visit is cancelled, or when the schedule is merely altered, even when this occurs as a result of a weather constraint, an accident or an unforeseen circumstance. This goes to show that Europeans have, in general, an “internal locus of control” (*ibidem*: 141), as well

as a higher uncertainty avoidance index than the Caribbean population: “people from strong uncertainty avoidance cultures may come across to others as busy, fidgety, emotional, aggressive, or suspicious and [...] people from weak uncertainty avoidance countries to others may give the impression of being dull, quiet, easygoing, indolent, controlled, or lazy” (Hofstede and Minkov, 2010: 197). We are planners and doing cultures, whereas they are a being culture, going with the flow and rhythms of nature.

Last but not least, we need to make an observation about the Dominicans’ outlook on status. We encountered there the reality of tipping practices, as somewhat expected of tourists, not necessarily more than in other places, but more visibly, comparatively. If in Europe tips are implicit and service providers assume that the customer knows that and needs not be reminded of it, in The Dominican this expectation was accompanied by a clear, suggestive physical posture and cues denoting it: taking an upright position with hands by one’s body and the chin up. These signals were overt and straightforward outside the resort – once inside, a different attitude, which did not involve this manifestation, was displayed by the staff. Another aspect of the matter would be that respect is in strong correlation with financial potency: the service providers show respect for the tourist with money. Generally speaking, ascribed status seems to matter more. For instance, the tourist guide on the Santo Domingo tour belonged to an influential family in the city, which seemed to bring him a lot of signs of deference from the people he met with as we went about our visit. However, granting respect to the economically advantaged appears to be a case of overlap between ascribed and achieved status, a situation described by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner: “Ascribing and achieving can be exclusive of each other, but are not necessarily so. Your achieving can drive your ascribing, as when you ‘land winners’. Or ascribing can drive achieving” (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997: 108). The Dominicans’ attitude does not denote that they care much *how* the people acquired their money, but rather the fact of the matter itself.

Summing up all the aspects that we have introduced in this paper, we may say that the overall attitude predominant in Dominican life and culture is relaxation and respect for leisure. Features deriving from this profile are manifest in their activities, interests and approaches. Attitudes to eating reveal an indulgent people, much more guilt-free in relation to this reality than the Europeans. Also, the Dominicans tend to be affective people, preferring to display positive emotions. In what regards the perception of time, they are also synchronic, multitaskers and short-term oriented. They display a tremendous respect and pride for nature and tend to seek harmonization and synchronicity with it, having an external locus of control. All these pertain to the outline of the Caribbean leisure-oriented culture at large.

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