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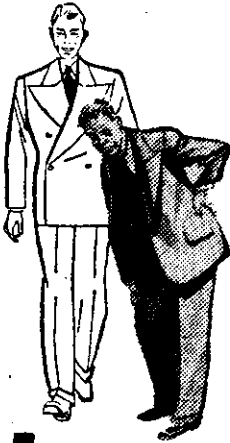
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CUSTOM SHAPES OUR LIVES

"Accepted Ways of Behaviour Cannot Be Avoided"

(Condensed from a recent talk in 4YA's Winter Course series, by G. W. Parkyn,
Lecturer in Education, University of Otago).

EVERY human being comes into a world of already established usages or customs, into a world where certain political institutions, economic systems, religious beliefs and so on are accepted. These accepted ways of life cannot be avoided by the newcomer. Ruth Benedict, in her fascinating book *Patterns of Culture* says that "the life history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed down in his community. From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behaviour. By the time he can talk he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities. Every child that is born into his group will share them with him, and no child born into one on the opposite side of the globe can ever achieve the thousandth part. There is no social problem it is more incumbent upon us to understand than this of the role of custom."

Decorating the Body

Everyone recognises the part that custom plays in the superficial things of life. The art of decorating the human body is a case in point. When the Shilluk warrior from the region of the Upper Nile considers his personal charm he spares no efforts to achieve a magnificent hair-do. He twists and kneads his hair into the desired shape with grease, ashes, and manure, and then he powders it. He then sleeps with his head on a wooden headrest so that his overpowering coiffure will remain undisturbed. The young Chacabo of Bolivia dresses for the festival in a great necklace of red toucan feathers and the front teeth of a certain species of monkey. As many as 1500 front teeth go into one ornament, the lives of nearly 200 monkeys being sacrificed to his end. And the Brazilian Indian woman, to take another example, who would normally wear no clothes at all, would no more permit herself to be seen in public without an ornament in her nose, than the British male would think of wearing a red and yellow spotted tie with his dinner jacket.

In Much More Subtle Ways

But these are external trappings, obvious to see, and we readily agree that in such matters custom plays tricks with us all. What is less obvious is that custom may shape us in much more subtle ways and may affect our personalities and our characters. When we are faced with the great differences found among human beings in such important things as personality and character, we tend very readily to assume that these must

be inborn. "It's their nature," we say, and are too ready to leave it at that, as if certain that the nature of an individual or of a nation is a fate that cannot be escaped, no matter under what conditions life is lived. This is no more true, however, than the idea that we would be wearing the same sort of clothes as we now wear if we had been brought up among the forest tribes of New Guinea.

Let us take some different ways of life and contrast them to see what vast differences in human behaviour are produced in different cultures.

More Blessed to Give . . .

Among the American Indians who lived half-a-century ago on the west coast of Canada, the dominant motif in the pattern of living was the struggle to demonstrate one's personal prowess by vanquishing and shaming one's rivals. The main weapons used in this struggle were the amassing and the destruction of wealth. Indeed the economic system was turned almost completely to the service of this struggle for superiority. There were two main methods which custom permitted a chieftain to use in order to bring glory to himself and shame



"The destruction of wealth"

upon another. The first was to give a very costly present to the other, who then was obliged to make a return present later, together with interest at the rate of two or three hundred per cent. Throughout a lifetime one would give presents, receive double in return, make larger presents, receive still more in return, and so on. The losers in these competitive exchanges would be those whose earlier gifts to others failed to return enough goods to wipe out the obligation some more powerful chiefs placed upon them. The fate of the loser was shame and misery, which could be wiped out only by murder or suicide.

The second method used in this society was that of the conspicuous destruction of one's own wealth, which obliged others to cap the performance. One of the customary ways in which this was done was to hold a great feast in the following manner. The host, about to establish his claim to fame, would invite a rival to bring his followers to a feast. A fire would be lighted, around which the guests had to recline. Then large quantities of valuable candlefish



"The art of decorating the body"

oil would be poured on the flames. The heat might scorch the skin of the guests red, but they must not move, for to do so would be to admit the magnitude of their host's conflagration. If the oil feast surpassed anything that the guest had ever given he would have to return home and set in train preparations for a return match. If on the other hand the oil feast was less spectacular than one of his own efforts he would derisively insult the host. The host then had to increase his bid by having canoes broken and fed to the flames, or by melting down sheets of copper worth thousands of blankets. And so on it went till the end came, bringing elation to one and shame to the other.

The Ideal Indian

In striking contrast to the customs of these Canadian Indians which developed then into megalomaniacs, are the customs of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico. Among one of the Pueblo peoples, the Zuni, custom decrees precisely the opposite. No man must seek leadership or thirst for power over his fellows. The ideal person is one who is friendly, generous, and co-operative. No one must seek offices for himself, so the annual meeting to choose office-bearers goes as follows: All the eligible men are shut up together in a room where they proceed to make their excuses, and to beat down the excuses of each other. The ones with the greatest poverty of excuses are elected. In their games and sports too they prefer the chances to be even. Outstanding runners are discouraged because they spoil the race. And if one person wins several races he is likely to be debarred from further racing. Their economic life, too, is singularly co-operative. The commercial methods of the rest of America still leave untouched the Pueblos in some of the more isolated villages.

Was It Bad Advice?

Some of you may remember the following delightful anecdote from the book *Little Golden America* by that satirical pair of Soviet travellers, Ilf and Petrov. An Indian deciding to go into business, bought two hundred dollars worth of merchandise to sell among his people. His trade went well, but an old cowboy who was telling the travellers this story found that the Indian was selling the goods at the same price as he paid for them.

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