



Customs and Superstitions.

by
Pru Lees

A resource in support of: The New Zealand Social Studies Curriculum.
Strands: Social Organisation , Economic Resources

'Customs and Superstitions' has been prepared by the Howick Historical Village Education Department while under LEOTC contract to the Ministry of Education.

The resources was researched and written by Pru Lees, Education Assistant, Howick Historical Village.

Customs and Superstitions was submitted to the Howick Historical Village Education Department External Review group for approval before being made available as a resource. The *'Customs and Superstitions'* resources relates broadly to the Victorian period 1837 - 1901 and could be used with *'The Evening'* resource.

Curriculum links through:

Culture and Heritage.

Level 1. Features of the Culture and Heritage of their own and other groups.

Customs and traditions associated with their own and other groups.

Level 2. Ways in which communities reflect the Culture and Heritage of their people.

Explain how certain features of the community (place names) reflect Culture and Heritage.

How people interact within their cultural groups.

Describe customs and traditions that influence interaction.

Level 3. How practices of cultural groups vary but reflect similar purposes. Describe how cultural practices reflect tradition.

Identify places of origin of individuals and groups within the community.

Level 4. Why and how individuals and groups pass on and sustain their Culture and Heritage, explain why people attach importance to their culture and heritage.

Describe various ways in which cultural practices and heritage are recorded and passed on to one another: e.g. myths, legends, stories and songs.

Give examples of ways in which people can retain their Culture and Heritage when they move to a new community.

Curriculum links through :

Time, Continuity and Change.

Level 1. Ways in which time and change affect people.

Give examples of changes that have affected family and community life.

Describe ways in which people's lives are influenced by time; e.g. seasons, days of the week, calendars, timetables.

Level 2. How past events changed aspects of the lives of communities.

How and why the past is important to people.

Give examples of ways in which people are connected with their past.

Level 3. How the past is recorded and remembered in different ways.

Identify ways people can find out about their past.

Explain what people in the present can learn about people in the past through records.

Level 4. How and why people experience events in different ways.

Related activities and resources.

- This resource is complimentary to "The Clothing" and "Butter making activity" both activities available to visiting school groups
- '*Customs and Superstitions*,' links with '**The Working Day**,' '*Wit and Wisdom*,' and '**The Evening**' resources.

Teachers wishing to book should contact the Co ordinator at: (+64) 09 5769481 or e-mail fencible@ihug.co.nz

Customs and Superstitions

by Pru Lees

Customs and Superstitions have been part of everyday life for hundreds of years. Every country has its' own particular festivals and customs which set the pattern for the year. Many races hand down their history through stories, songs, legends, customs and superstitions. Culture and Heritage as well as Time Continuity and Change offer students the opportunity to explore both their past and the past of others to establish a link through time.

The early European settlers to New Zealand, in the 19th century, brought with them their own customs, these varied depending on what part of the British Isles they came from. Until the middle of the 19th century there were 40 Saints Days observed in Great Britain although not all of these were public holidays. The traditions that accompany the old beliefs may seem irrational and illogical in our modern world, but they formed the background to the lives of hundreds of early settlers who chose to move to New Zealand.

Guy Fawkes.

One of the best known traditions commemorates the gunpowder plot of November 1605. Guy Fawkes was involved in a plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament on 5th November, as it was being opened by King James. The plotters were discovered with their barrels of gunpowder in a room beneath the chamber where the King was to have been later in the day. Guy Fawkes was imprisoned, tortured then put to death accused of treason.

As early as 1607 there is a record of Bonfire celebrations at Bristol on 5th November to commemorate the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot. Bonfires had been used as a warning device in Britain for hundreds of years. Professional fire lighters or 'beacon' men were employed to watch over the coastline and light the bonfires if invasion was threatened, this tradition of large bonfires became the sign of celebration. Church bells were another warning device used across England. It is said that when news of the safe deliverance of King James became known, church bells began to peal, spreading the good tidings across the country. The number of bells rung on Guy Fawkes day was said to exceed those rung on Christmas Day. Guy Fawkes day was often known as Ringing Day.

The date of the first effigy of Guy Fawkes is not known, although in the reign of Charles II there is a record of a very large guy being made, with live cats inside the body of the effigy, the realistic squeals were said to impress the crowd as the smoke and flames reached the guy.

Fireworks or pyrotechnics were invented by the Chinese; firework displays were much in demand at Religious Festivals throughout Europe, in the Middle Ages. Queen Elizabeth I enjoyed intricate firework displays, these were organised and made by firework experts. Many 'pleasure gardens' were developed over the years the most famous one being Vauxhall Gardens in London. Elaborate firework displays attracted large audiences. C.T.Brock developed the commercial use of fireworks in Britain, he staged spectacular displays at The Crystal Palace in London, these lasted from 1865 to 1936 when the Crystal Palace burnt down.

Water was often used as a backdrop for firework displays as the reflections in the water enhanced the effect. The reign of George III in the mid eighteenth century saw

the height of popularity for displays especially on 5th November. Towns around England which could not afford a professional firework maker began to make their own displays, concocting their own recipes. Soon there was great competition throughout the country to see which area made the most spectacular designs. The growth of a tradition developed that continues to this day.

Right Hand.

Since early times children have been encouraged to write with their right hands, those who preferred their left hands were thought to be clumsy, awkward or even 'ill-omened.' The right hand was thought to be stronger than the left, the right foot the preferred foot to put on the floor, when getting out of the right side of bed in the morning; the right sock and right shoe to be put on first, the right foot being that which is the 'best foot to put forward'.

The right hand has always been used to place on the Bible to affirm an oath of allegiance.

Courtesies.

Courtesies, good manners, and etiquette all derived from a time when politeness was not just a matter of custom, it originated from an era when fear and mistrust lead to courtesies that remain common to the modern day.

The outstretched empty hand demonstrated that a weapon was not concealed and the visitor came in peace, making a firm handshake with the right-hand was a precaution, it immobilized the sword hand.

Hats

The age of knights gave rise to the practise of men raising and removing their hats. Initially knights raised the visors of their helmets to show peaceful intent, this led to helmets being removed before women, as a matter of courtesy. Men took their hats off when in the home of their host to show that they relied on his protection, this habit extended to churches where men would remove their hats to show that they did not have cause to fear an enemy whilst in the House of God. Eventually the removal of a hat indicated a friendly greeting. Women have always been exempt from this particular courtesy.

The curtsy is a custom reserved for women. It comes from an age when women were considered inferior to men, bending the knee was a sign of subservience.

Sneezing

Sneezing used to be thought of as a time of great danger; in ancient times it was thought to indicate ill - omens, the presence of evil spirits, a soul leaving the body, or an indication of the plague. Saying 'God bless you' was a method of protection against evil forces.

Many superstitions surround sneezing, it is thought that three sneezes in a row predict good luck, the number three has been associated with good fortune for many centuries.

An old rhyme tells which days are safe for sneezing!

*Sneeze on Monday, sneeze for danger;
Sneeze on Tuesday, kiss a stranger;
Sneeze on Wednesday, get a letter;*

*Sneeze on Thursday, something better;
Sneeze on Friday, sneeze for sorrow;
Sneeze on Saturday, see your true love tomorrow.
Sneeze on Sunday, your safety seek,
Or the devil will have you the rest of the week.*

Yawning, without covering the mouth, has been thought to be rude since primitive times. Before modern methods of oral hygiene, covering the mouth whilst yawning was a method of disguising bad breath. Man's spirit was identified with his breath, the mouth being the point of entry and exit, to cover the mouth was the method by which the spirit was prevented from leaving the body.

Leaving the mouth open was thought to be an invitation to evil spirits, Hindu people used to snap their fingers in front of their open mouths to chase away the 'evil one.' In some European countries the sign of the cross is made in front of the face for the same reason.

Kissing the mouth of a dying person was a custom amongst some people, it was thought to be the way by which the spirit could be held and passed onto future generations.

Hiccapping has been a source of mystery through the years, not surprisingly they were blamed on the devil. A person was thought to be possessed when hiccups went on for days, occasionally a person became so exhausted they died. A number of old remedies for curing hiccups remain popular, they still work!

Drink a glass of water then recite the following words three times whilst holding your breath;

*As I went over the bridge,
The hiccups fell in the water.*

Take nine gulps of water without taking a breath, the hiccups should be cured. Many of the old remedies relied on combinations of the magic number 'three.'

Whistling

Whistling is associated with a number of superstitions, especially first thing in the morning when it is said to invite bad luck. To whistle at sea is dangerous because whistling is said to resemble the wind in the rigging, therefore to whistle is asking for a storm. Alternatively a soft sailors' whistle was said to ask for a breeze to help a becalmed ship, as long as the whistle was done in the direction the wind was to come from and gently so as not to encourage a storm.

Whistling must never be done down a mine or in the dressing room of a theatre. A cave in could be caused by careless whistling down a mine, or a play ruined by 'whistling' up an invitation to 'cat calls,' whistles and boos!

Women were not supposed to whistle at all, whistling being considered a male privilege.

Many dog owners snap their fingers when whistling for their dogs, this is to deter evil spirits who might have been called by the whistle.

Cutting nails and hair.

Customs and superstitions surrounding the cutting of both nails and hair these continue in many countries.

A rhyme as a guide to the most appropriate day to cut nails is as follows;

*Cut your nails on Monday, cut them for wealth;
Cut them on Tuesday, cut them for health;
Cut them on Wednesday, cut them for news;
Cut them on Thursday, a new pair of shoes;
Cut them on Friday, cut them for woe;
Cut them on Saturday, a journey to go.
Cut them on Sunday, cut them for evil,
For all the next week, you'll be ruled by the devil.*

Nail cuttings should not be left around for evil spirits to find, a lucky place to bury them would be beneath an ash tree. Some families would never cut a babies finger nails during the first year of life, the mother would bite them to keep evil spirits from the baby.

Hair cutting

Superstitions surrounding the cutting of hair are as many as for cutting nails. Hair has been thought to be a sign of a person's inner strength, as in the Bible story of Samson and Delilah.

The clippings of a baby's first curls that are kept, should be carefully preserved to keep them from witches; hair that is cut should be put on a fire to guard against evil spirits. Hair should not be shaken out into the garden as the person concerned will suffer from headaches if a bird should weave the hair into a nest. The headaches will not be cured until the nest falls apart.

Fire.

As with other superstitions there are many associated with fire. Before electricity took over as the main source of power in the home, the hearth was the centre of family life. The fire being the method by which food was cooked, water heated and the family kept warm and dry. A visitor would take a piece of firewood to a home as a sign of good will.

According to ancient beliefs, the hearth is the area of the home that attracts the good fairies and brownies who would help with household tasks and bring good luck to the household. Some housewives believed that the fairies would remain if the hearth was kept tidy, therefore the hearth would be swept before going to bed at night.

A fire would not be allowed to go out for fear that the good spirits would leave and evil would enter via the cold chimney, a more practical view would be that the fire would have taken time to kindle, to keep it burning over night would enable the housewife to attend to her work more efficiently in the morning.

The housewarming party has developed from the custom of taking embers from the fireplace of the old house, to burn in the hearth of the new, this act signifies the continuance of family ties.

Smoking or poorly burning fires were often blamed on witches, the cure being to lay a cold poker across the fire.

From tales told of King Alfred burning the cakes, portents in the fire have held the fascination of people through the years. A sudden flaring of a fire signifies a stranger suddenly arriving, a wedding in the family could be predicted from a burning coal falling from the grate. Poking a fire when visiting a house should be avoided, unless one has been known to the household for more than seven years - another significant number; misfortune will befall the house if someone other than close family or friends

attend the fire.

Children.

There are many superstitions surrounding pregnancy and the first year of life. In the mid 19th century many children only survived until they were five years old, which led to many parents looking to mystical forces to protect their youngsters.

Baptism was thought to protect the child from evil forces, before the baby was christened other measures would be used to keep it safe: a little crust of salted bread or a small piece of iron would be placed underneath the crib, to protect against witches; a bowl of fresh primroses or garlic and rowan leaves hung around the cradle were also thought to be effective, but the greatest value was of a Bible placed beneath the baby to protect against demons.

The mystical powers of iron remained with children as they played their games. One such 'chasing' game made the child 'safe' from capture if they ran and held onto an item made of iron. It was thought that cold iron protected a baby from the fairies.

Some people believed that the fairies would steal baby boys away if they found them, many boys were clothed in dresses until their fifth birthday, when it was thought that they were big enough to run faster than the fairies.

The significance of the date and time of the birth of the child was, and in many places still is, thought to be of great importance in determining the fate of the child's life.

Love and Marriage.

Love and marriage was another area full of superstition. St Valentines Day, February 14th was the traditional day to seek your partner. It was thought that the first person that you saw on that day, excepting members of your family, would be the one that you would marry. It was acceptable to keep your eyes closed until the most appropriate person came along!

Midsummer Eve was thought to be the most dangerous of the year, fires were lit and herbs hung on front doors to protect the inhabitants from fairies and evil spirits. At midnight on Midsummer Eve a girl could see the form of her future husband if she walked seven times around a church in a clockwise direction, sowing hempseed and saying;

Hempseed I sow

Hempseed I mow

Let him that is my true love

Come after me and mow.

Looking over her left shoulder, a young lady should see the form of her future husband.

Another night when a girl could dream of her future husband was the Eve of St Agnes' Day 20th January. Preparations had to be made during the day - no food was to be eaten, no word spoken and no one was allowed to kiss the girl during the day. As night came the best nightdress was worn, an egg was hard boiled, the yolk removed and replaced with salt before eating the egg complete with the shell. To complete the charm the girl had to walk backwards to bed, saying;

*Fair St Agnes, play thy part
And send to me my own sweetheart
Not in his best or worst array
But in the clothes he wears every day.*

The future husband would be seen in a dream, but it was not to be spoken of the following morning!

The wedding ring was worn on the third finger of the left hand as this was thought to be the direct connection with the heart - the seat of love! The wedding ring, being round, signified the continual flow of mutual love and affection between a couple.

Milk and cream were thought to be kept fresh by hanging a leather boot above a dairy door to ward off witches. Wearing a hares foot, complete with jointed bones, was thought to be very lucky. Not picking blackberries after 10th October when the devil is said to drag his tail over them, nailing an iron horseshoe on the front door of the house (open sides uppermost for good luck), searching for four leafed clovers, not standing on cracks in the pavement or walking under ladders, saluting magpies, greeting a new month, turning the money over in your pocket at a new moon to increase your wealth, not looking at a new moon through glass. The customs and superstitions of the early settlers were many and varied.

How difficult it would have been for many of these people to maintain their old traditions when the seasons came in different months, the climate was not like that of the old country and the native plants were quite different. In spite of this some of the old customs remain and give the present generation the opportunity to reflect and learn from what has gone before.

Sources used:

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