

Cultural conflict

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A lament for a world that is no more

About 60 years ago, this writer bought a publication called "Land and People". It ran to 20 volumes, like an encyclopaedia and had colourful illustrations. It described lands that were distant and that most people never dreamed of being able to visit. Because of the vast distances involved and very poor communications, people's dress, customs and ways of doing things remained distinctly different. Since very few means existed of any interchange of culture, the only way a person could assuage his curiosity about other peoples and lands was to read about them in such publications, as the one mentioned above. It was because of this craving for the exotic and unknown that such publications as the "National Geographic Magazine" could flourish. It was still the age of exploration when Stanley and Livingstone could be exploring the "dark continent" of Africa.

Papua New Guinea was such a distant land, shrouded in mystery and its people so different that whilst it was still a German colony, it was a favoured haunt of anthropologists who went there measuring the craniums of the naked people who were said to be cannibals.

The Pacific Islands were thought of as a paradise on earth. Most people dreamed of getting there somehow. R.L. Stevenson did get there after all and wrote his "Treasure Island". Paul Gauguin, the Impressionist French artist found the South Seas so beckoning that he abandoned the delights of Paris and went and settled in Tahiti where he painted the most colourful pictures departing from his sombre, almost monochromatic, work that he was doing in France.

People read about pygmies with wonder, about Eskimos, Zulus and a whole heap of others.

In ones' life time, all that has disappeared. The fastest means of communication, telegraphy, was replaced by radiography. The pace quickened and mobility on land improved with the advent of the motor car which has revolutionised life in all continents. Then with the advent of aeroplanes distances were annihilated. After World War II, air travel became an everyday phenomenon. People began visiting other lands more frequently. Countries like Borneo and Sumatra ceased to be places to gawk at. The kayaks of Borneo, so removed from the world began to be integrated with the rest of the world.

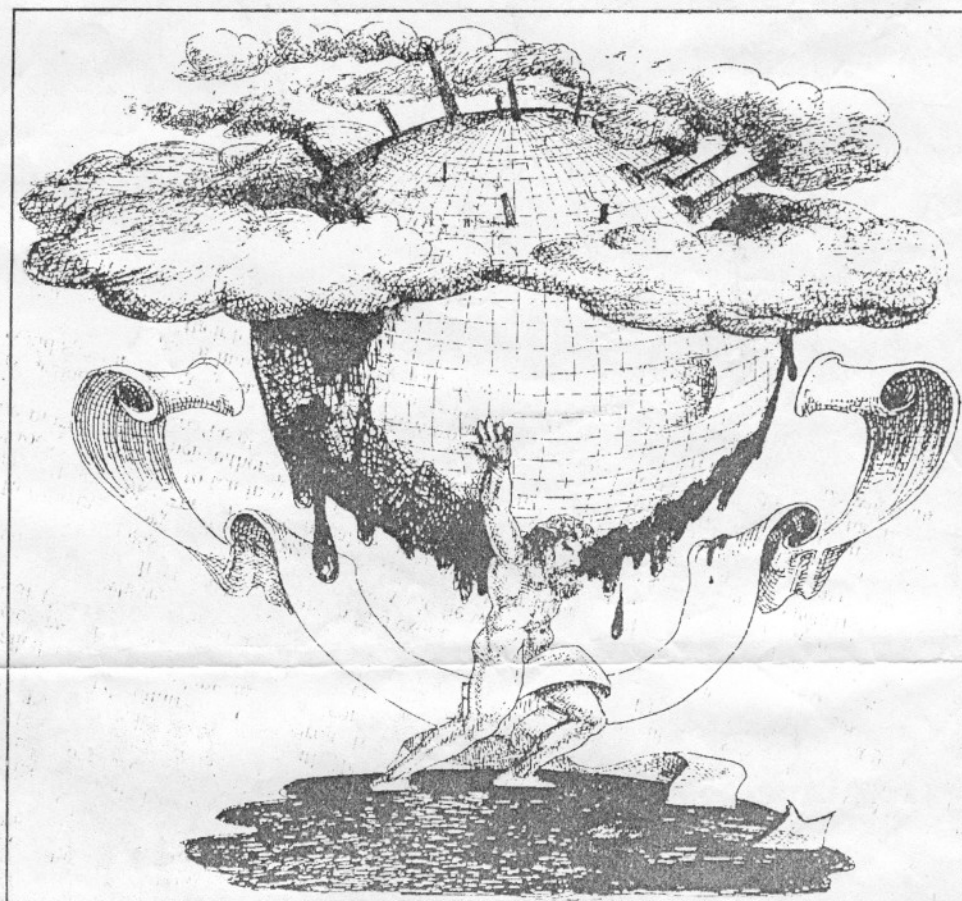
The breakdown of separate cultural patterns had commenced with the arrival of radio. It actually accelerated with astounding rapidity after the inception of Television. After World War II, TV spread through all lands like wild fire and reduced the world to what Marshal McLuhan has called a "Global Village". The emulation of one mode of living becomes very much easier because of the graphic illustrations of TV.

The world over the years has acquired a uniform dress, language, behaviour.

Take dress. The Japanese adopted European clothes, discarding their very colourful and attractive kimonos in the 19th century. In fact today, the Japanese Emperor is to be found in a morning frock coat and pepper and salt trousers.

The Chinese have given up their very distinctive dress with sleeves so wide that they could sport a Pekinese chou in them.

The European suit has now become an interna-



tional uniform and is worn by the ex-cannibals of New Guinea as it is by Fijians in the Pacific.

In various lands the mode of consuming food differed vastly. In Asia, people sat on the floor mostly and either ate off the floor from their plates or like the Chinese and the Japanese had low tables off which they ate whilst they squatted on the floor. In India and further west, it was customary to sit on a carpet and use bolsters. This writer started off life on the floor amidst carpets and bolsters and as the world adopted western furniture, he too elevated himself to chairs and began to eat off a dining table.

Then look how, particularly since World War II because of radio and television, one language, English, has overtaken all. Starting from New Zealand, Australia, Singapore, South Africa, Canada, the US and countries too numerous to mention, English rules. The language of air controllers and pilots is English. It is not to say that local languages do not exist. They do. English, however, prevails everywhere.

If a traveller sets out to find exotica in this boringly uniform and colourless world he will find in every city, country or place Hilton Hotels or their like. They are so identical and uniform that it is difficult to tell in which country one is. Airports do not help either. They are all alike except in Pakistan where the older type still lingers — though not for long.

Why has this happened? Europeans for a couple of hundred years remained dominant because of their technological superiority and, in particular,

because of their better armaments. Then it was in Europe that the industrial revolution took place.

When everyone began to industrialise, it was inevitable that they would copy European modes of doing things. The Japanese were the first to do this starting with the Meiji restoration in late 19th century. When the Japanese defeated the mighty Russian Empire at Port Arthur in 1904 they put a seal of approval on adopting European ways of doing things so that armies of all peoples have been modelled on European armies, methods of protection have initially been copied from Europe. Most Asian and other people sat on the floor and worked. Europeans worked standing up at a work bench. Consequently, the machines they designed were for to work standing up.

Even food is becoming universalised. The standardised McDonald's burger or its equivalent is making its insidious inroads everywhere.

One mourns the demise of a world that was colourful, kaleidoscopic, exotic and vastly different. It has been replaced by a uniform greyness. There is no need to buy books like "Lands and People" or subscribe to magazines like National Geographic. There is no need even to travel by airplane to distant lands because besides it being boringly the same when one gets there it is simpler to sit in ones' arm chair and have it spread in front of one by television. With satellites, dish antennae and high definition television with one's wall being a wide screen, the world has become our oyster. No amount of lamentation will bring the old beautiful world back.