The meaning of custom and the traditional spirit of the Kanak people remain, but Kanaké* must, in order to preserve its authenticity, make a continued conscientious effort regarding the material and symbolic expressions of his way of life.
If he is not careful, he could find himself the depository of rites and phrases devoid of content.

Jean-Marie Tjibaou in Cibau Cibau, Kamo pa Kavaac, ADCK, 1998

* Kanaké is the hero of a Kanak myth. Here he is taken to mean Kanak man.

The meaning of custom

A gesture from the heart

“Every context has its own customary tradition. The customary ceremonies for greeting a new visitor, mourning a death or celebrating a wedding are very different. The ‘customary gesture’ made by tourists is not the same as the customary gesture between Kanaks. It’s a way of announcing yourself to those who are welcoming you and who represent the doorway to the hut. It’s not the market value of the customary gesture which is important, but its cultural value as the symbolic acknowledgement of a society. We are very touched when a visitor from outside shows their respect for our traditions. It’s a mutual respect which implies personal commitment. In return, we feel responsible for taking care of our visitor during his or her stay with us.

Visitors can offer their customary gesture directly to the tribe or they can first make themselves known to the High Chiefdom, which allows us to let the whole district know that we have a visitor or visitors.

Visitors can also make a farewell gesture. For our visitors, it’s a way of saying thank you and for us, a way of affirming that a bond has been created and that we will always welcome them with open arms.”

Jean Poadja, High Chief of the Poindah District

Jean Marie Tjibaou in Cibau Cibau, Kamo pa Kavaac, ADCK, 1998

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It’s about taking care of people

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Throughout the world, you make a gesture when arriving at someone’s place. It’s the same in the Kanak world.
Knowing, recognising each other

Custom is a way of life, a code of social relations as practised amongst all peoples of the world. It may be more or less sophisticated, depending on circumstances. “Customary gatherings” mark the important times in Kanak social life, such as the celebration of the new yams, weddings, births and deaths. At such times, long speeches are made, genealogies and their stories are recounted. Gifts are exchanged. “Making custom” is entering into a precise relationship with an individual or a group of individuals at a given time and place, being respectful of their culture and traditions. It is recognition of one another.

The customary gesture respects a hierarchy. Is usually carried out one to one. Each group appoints its spokesperson.

Traditional custom objects

The exchange of words is accompanied by gifts, of which the most important are traditionally money and yams. The term “Kanak money” describes objects used in customary ceremonies. Kanak money has nothing to do with money as known in Europe; it is of symbolic rather than market value. The yam, a sacred tuber, is at the heart of custom. Symbol of virility and honour, it seals the union between clans. The Kanak distinguishes between true yams, the basis of all important exchanges and ordinary yams, found at the market and eaten everyday.

When should I make customary gesture?

“Making custom” is an expression which often comes up in conversation in New Caledonia, whether one is Kanak, European or Polynesian. It is a practice now integrated into everyday life. At the time of leaving or arriving, more and more Caledonians have got into the habit of making a gesture, which they call “custom”, unconsciously imitating the Kanak.

In certain circumstances, you could follow their example:
- when entering a tribe for the first time.
- when invited into a family.
- if you wish to visit a special place (waterfall, cave, islet) not open to tourists.
- if you wish to enter, even briefly, into the heart of the Kanak world.

The simpler and more sincere the gesture, the better it will be appreciated.

How do you make a customary gesture?

A customary gesture is a mark of consideration and respect. It’s a reminder that you don’t just walk into a house without announcing yourself, and it is accomplished very simply. When friends invite you to dinner, it is a courtesy to bring a bottle of wine, a bouquet of flowers or a box of chocolates as a thank you gift. The principle is just the same when visiting a tribe. By offering your hosts a packet of sweets, some food or a tee shirt, you establish a special relationship with them. A souvenir or a speciality from your own region will also be much appreciated. Such a gift is the perfect way to start a discussion about your respective traditions.

More that the object itself, it’s the gesture that counts. The gesture and words. Those pronounced by Kanaks will explain that as from that moment you are their guest and they will protect you. Listen carefully and do not interrupt whilst they are speaking. If they look down while you are speaking to them, do not be offended. It is their way of paying attention, of showing respect.

You are a guest, admitted into a private area. Basic rules apply: do not take photos without first asking permission, wear correct clothing, etc.