Here's another striking example of how the cultural developing bath creates biological and behavioral differences. In a now classic experiment,[[1]](#endnote-1) a group of American male students—half from northern states and half from southern—were told to fill in a questionnaire and deliver it to a table down the hallway. As each student walked down the narrow passageway, he passed a large man working at a filing cabinet, who needed to move out of the student’s way. As he did so, he bumped the student and called him “asshole” under his breath. By the time the student had delivered his questionnaire, he was either riled up with a blood-cortisol and testosterone spike to match, or he’d shrugged and laughed it off. The difference in individual response depended on which state the students came from. Most northerners were more amused than angered by the insult; 90 percent of southerners experienced a flash of anger and showed a rise in stress hormones. If southerners subsequently met a stranger who had witnessed this “humiliation,” they acted in a domineering manner with a firmer handshake and reported feeling less manly in the stranger’s eyes.

Southern US states have an honor culture with social norms that oblige and motivate men to defend their property, family, or reputations with violence. A relatively small slight, like being called a name, can spiral into full-blown aggression. In the next step of the experiment, the students who had just been insulted while delivering their questionnaires were confronted on their return down the narrow corridor with another man walking in the opposite direction, forcing them to step aside. Southerners who hadn’t been insulted showed their good manners, stopping to step aside when nine feet from the stranger; northerners stopped six feet away. However, after being insulted, northerners waited another foot before stopping; southerners, though, didn’t back down until they were about three feet away from bumping into the oncomer.

Stereotypes about groups usually have an element of truth. In the United States, southerners are, as a group, more friendly and polite than northerners, who are often more brusque and ruder. However, southerners have a stronger urge to punish than northerners—they are more likely to physically reprimand their children, and to approve of police using shoot-to-kill. These differences within a nation of people who ostensibly share the same language, environment, and broad culture are not genetic but they are biological. Individuals’ brains develop differences according to their specific cultural developing bath. The corridor experiment reflects regional crime statistics—FBI records show that southerners are far more likely to kill their friends and acquaintances in quarrels sparked by insults; the Deep South has twice the murder rate of the rest of the country. In other words, an individual’s cultural developing bath influences their survival.

Honor cultures arise in places where people’s resources are vulnerable and government is weak—places where dominance rather than prestige is the selection pressure on social norms. Around the world, these are typically remote herding societies prone to livestock rustlers, where there are few opportunities for cooperative collaboration and a reputation for violence—for taking no shit—is necessary protection. Most violent acts are provoked by attacks on a person’s honor and are preceded by feelings of shame or humiliation. Agricultural societies, by contrast, where large populations of settled people live closely and must cooperate over land sharing and common infrastructure such as irrigation channels, tend to result in social norms that value prestige over dominance. Crops are not a profitable steal in the same way as cattle, and farmers can rely more on stronger collective-action institutions to punish wrongdoers than self-defense. Instead of aggressive acts to deter neighbors from attacking you (in which you risk injury), generosity and cooperation toward your neighbors enlists them to help protect you from dangerous situations.

The southern United States was populated by Scottish and Irish immigrants, moor and mountain herders who brought their culture of autonomy and honor with them. In many places they settled, they assimilated into local farming or urban culture, but in the remote, rural Deep South, their “every man for himself” honor culture persisted. The northern states, by contrast, were settled by crop-growing German and Dutch immigrants with strong community institutions. Social norms are resistant to change because people don’t invent their attitudes, they learn them from their parents.

Ultimately, most social change is driven by economics. Europe’s honor culture of dueling among the aristocracy died with the rise of the middle classes, which made the practice look ridiculous by demonstrating sensible ways of resolving disputes, and stronger social institutions meant duelers were liable to be charged with murder rather than celebrated for defending their honor.42 More recently, a shift has occurred in the very strict honor culture of Yazidi herders in the aftermath of atrocities by Islamist militia against the tribe’s women. Thousands of Yazidi survivors of abduction and rape feared returning to their villages, because of strong social norms ostracizing women whose sexual reputations have been damaged. However, the economic and social necessity of allowing the survivors to return to decimated villages prompted deliberate change. Women were offered a ritualistic “cleansing” opportunity and accepted back into the community (often gaining new freedoms), demonstrating a way for everyone to save face and the community to heal after an atrocity. One of those women, Nadia Murad, was globally recognized for her courage and earned a Nobel Peace Prize in 2018.

Honor cultures are slowly dying out—intimidation is a barrier to social cohesion and so such societies often disintegrate and fall prey to more prosocial groups. The trend is toward more prestige-based cultures, like those in the northern US states. Meanwhile, as populations become more diverse, and people are exposed to a range of different norms, such as in cities, tolerance of transgressors increases, so a broader diversity of individual expression emerges. Being exposed to different social norms, especially from a young age, makes people more open-minded—studies show that when children attend more ethnically diverse schools, it leads to greater social cohesion between ethnicities.

Social norms and their decorative expression arise from the collective belief systems of a tribe, but they also in turn influence their society’s cultural beliefs and identity. For instance, homosexuality is widely practiced across North Africa and the Middle East, and it is tolerated by Islam.43 However, while private homosexual activity has been a social norm for many centuries in the Arab world, the relatively recent Western norm for expressing homosexuality is strongly rejected: men waving rainbow flags have been thrown into jail in Egypt, and a school in Riyadh was fined $26,000 simply for having a parapet painted in rainbow colors, “the emblem of the homosexuals.”44 It’s not that same- sex coupling is any different in the two cultures, but the social expression of it is entirely different. The vast majority of Arab-world men partaking in same-sex sexual acts would not describe themselves as homosexual; in the West, many more of them would. The prevailing social norms dramatically influence decoration, because it is a signifier of identity.

Through beauty, we generated a visual language that enabled larger groups of people to cooperate together as a tribe, united in a shared identity, social norms, and collective belief system. Operating on this scale brought energetic, economic, and survival advantages and enabled us to compete with other tribes for resources. Yet the great paradox of human culture is that while we are primed for tribalism, we rely on networks of cooperation between our tribes to exchange ideas, resources, and genes, as we shall explore next.

1. Cohen, D., Nisbett, R. Bowdle B. and Schwarz, N. Insult, aggression, and the southern culture of honor: An “experimental ethnography.” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 70, 945-960 (1996) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)