**BODY RITUAL AMONG THE NACIREMA**

Reproduced from “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema” by Horace Miner,

*American Anthropologist Magazine* 58(3), 1956, pp. 503–7

The ritual of the Nacirema was first brought to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago, but the culture of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumara of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east.

Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy, which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people’s time is devoted to economic pursuits, a considerable portion of their day is spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which appear as a major concern in the people’s belief. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremonial aspects and associated philosophy are unique.

The fundamental belief underlying this ritual activity appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to weakness and disease. Captive in such a body, man’s only hope to avert these characteristics is through the use of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses and, in fact, the grandeur of a house is often referred to in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses. The shrine rooms of the more wealthy are walled with stone and decorated with fine materials. Poorer families try to imitate these materials with less costly replicas. While each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. The rites are normally only discussed with children, and then only during the period when they are being initiated into these mysteries.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest, which is usually built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he or she could live. These preparations are obtained from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose help must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another

gift, provide the required charm.

Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family enters the shrine room,

bows his or her head before the charm-box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution or cleansing. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.

The Nacirema have a pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, and their friends desert them. They also believe that there is a strong relationship between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual cleansing of the mouth for children, which is supposed to improve their moral character.

The Nacirema’s obsession with the mouth continues with the daily body rituals one that includes a mouth-rite. This rite consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders or pastes, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures. In addition to the private mouth-rite, the people seek out a *holy-mouth-man* once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these items in removing the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. The holy mouth- man opens the client’s mouth and, using the abovementioned tools, enlarges any holes which decay may have created in the teeth. Magical materials are put into these holes. If there are no naturally occurring holes in the teeth, large sections of one or more teeth are gouged out so that the supernatural substance can be applied. In the Nacirema’s view, the purpose of these religious functions is to arrest decay and to draw friends. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy-mouth-men year after year, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay.

Another of the daily body rituals, which is performed only by men, is especially fascinating. This part of the rite includes scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument. Indicating the societal belief that this is the most appropriate way a male must present his face each day.

The medicine men have an imposing temple, or *latipso*, in every community of any size. The more elaborate ceremonies required to treat very sick patients can only be performed at this temple. These ceremonies involve not only the miracle-worker, but also a permanent group of maidens who move sedately about the temple chambers in distinctive costume and headdress. The *latipso* ceremonies are so harsh that a fair proportion of the really sick natives who enter the temple never recover. Despite this fact, sick adults are not only willing, but eager to undergo the long and drawn-out ritual purification, if they can afford to do so. No matter how ill or how grave the emergency, the guardians of many temples will not admit a client if he or she cannot offer a rich gift.

The supplicant entering the temple is first stripped of all his or her clothes and placed in ceremonial robes. In everyday life the Nacirema avoids exposure of his body and its natural functions. Bathing and excretory acts are performed only in the secrecy of the household shrine, where they are ritualized as part of the body-rites. Psychological shock results from the fact that body secrecy is suddenly lost upon entry into the latipso. The supplicants find themselves assisted by maidens while they perform their natural functions into a sacred vessel. This sort of ceremonial treatment is necessitated by the fact that the excreta are used by a diviner to ascertain the course and nature of the client's sickness. Female clients often find their robed bodies are subjected to the scrutiny, manipulation and prodding of the medicine men.

Few supplicants in the temple are well enough to do anything but lie on their hard beds. The daily ceremonies, like the rites of the holy-mouth-men, involve discomfort and torture. With ritual precision, the maidens awaken their miserable charges each dawn and roll them about on their beds of pain while performing ablutions, in the formal movements of which the maidens are highly trained. At other times they insert magic wands in the supplicant's mouth or force him to eat substances, which are supposed to be healing. From time to time the medicine men come to their clients and jab magically treated needles into their flesh. The fact that these temple ceremonies may not cure, and may even kill, in no way decreases the people's faith in the medicine men.

There remains one other kind of practitioner, known as a "listener." This witchdoctor has the power to exorcise the devils that lodge in the heads of people who have been bewitched. The Nacirema believe that parents bewitch their own children. Mothers are particularly suspected of putting a curse on children while teaching them the secret body rituals. The counter-magic of the witchdoctor is unusual in its lack of ritual. The patient simply tells the "listener" all his troubles and fears, beginning with the earliest difficulties he can remember. The memory displayed by the Nacirema in these exorcism sessions is truly remarkable. It is not uncommon for the patient to bemoan the rejection he felt upon being weaned as a babe, and a few individuals even see their troubles going back to the traumatic effects of their own birth.

Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has certainly shown them to be a magic-ridden people. It is hard to understand how they have managed to exist so long under the burdens, which they have imposed upon themselves.