

BODY RITUAL AMONG THE NACIREMA

THE MAGICAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES of a group of people known as the Nacirema are interesting because they are so unusual. The Nacirema have many magical beliefs, but the most interesting are those about their own bodies and how they should be cared for.

The Nacirema are a group of people who live in the territory north of the Tarahumare people of Mexico. No one knows much about their origin, but traditional legends say they came from the east. Their customs have been studied for many years, yet their culture is still poorly understood.

The Nacirema have a highly developed market economy. They live in a rich natural habitat. The people devote much of their time to economic activity. However, a large amount of money and a great deal of time each day are spent on ceremonies. The subject of these ceremonies is the human body. The Nacirema are extremely concerned about the health and appearance of their bodies. They believe that certain rituals and ceremonies must be practiced to maintain and improve the condition of their bodies. Though it is not unusual for people to be concerned about their own bodies, the rituals practiced by the Nacirema are unusual and extremely time consuming.

The main belief of the Nacirema appears to be that the human body is ugly and that the only way to prevent it from growing weak and diseased is to practice powerful rituals devoted to this purpose. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this goal. The more powerful people in the society have several ritual shrine rooms in their houses. In fact, the wealth of the owners of the houses is often measured in terms of the number of such ritual shrine rooms in a house. The shrine rooms of the more wealthy people are walled with stone. Poorer families imitate the rich by applying pottery plaques to their shrine room walls.

While almost every family has at least one shrine in the home, the ritual ceremonies associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. The rites are normally discussed only with children, and then only during the period when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to make friends with the natives and they allowed me to examine the shrine rooms. Though they were reluctant to talk about them, they finally described the rituals to me.

The most important part of a shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. The natives get the charms and potions from specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with generous gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curing potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm.

The charm is not thrown away after it has served its purpose, but is placed in the charm box of the household shrine. Since the people believe that a new magical material must be obtained each time a new problem arises, and since the real or imagined problems and diseases of the people are many, the charm box is usually full to overflowing.

The packets and containers of magical materials are so numerous that the people often forget what their purposes were and fear to use them again. While the natives are very vague on this point, we commonly assume that the reason for keeping all the old magical materials is that their presence in the charm box—before which the body rituals are conducted—will in some way protect the worshipper.

Beneath the charm box is a small basin. Each day every member of the family, one after another, enters the shrine room, bows his head before the charm box, mixes different sorts of holy water in the basin, and conducts a brief ceremony of ritual cleansing. The holy waters come from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.

The Nacirema have another kind of specialist whose name is best translated as "holy-mouth-man." The Nacirema have an almost extreme horror and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Several times each day, the natives rub the insides of their mouths with a small bundle of hog bristles. Those who neglect the ritual are forced to visit the holy mouth man who, as punishment, digs holes in their teeth with sharp instruments. Though small children must be forced to undergo this punishment when they neglect the mouth ritual, adults willingly accept it. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them. I observed that those nearing marriageable age even decorate their teeth with strips of metal which are believed to improve their appearance.

The medicine men have a special temple, or latipsoh, in every community of any size. The more elaborate ceremonies required to treat very sick patients can only be performed in this temple. The maidens who conduct the ceremonies move quickly about the temple chambers wearing special costumes and headdresses. No matter how ill the native may be, or how serious the emergency, the guardians of many temples will not admit a client who cannot give a rich gift to the temple.

The people willingly go to the latipsoh even though they fear it. In fact, I observed that many people who went to the latipsoh for a cure died during the curing ceremonies, which appear to be very harsh. One curing ceremony which takes place in this temple involves allowing the medicine men to cut out and throw away parts of their bodies. The Nacirema believe that this ceremony will remove the evil from their bodies and improve their health. The medicine men who conduct these ceremonies own a large collection of special knives which the client is never allowed to see. The Nacirema also allow the maidens of the temple to place sharp wires in their bodies and to remove small amounts of their blood in order to cure them.

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 they have imposed upon themselves. ■

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