

Body Rituals Among the Nacirema

Professor Emma Linton first brought the ritual of the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists 47 years ago, but the culture of these people is still poorly understood. A look at their culture is very important in order to understand primitive societies.

Linton says that the Nacirema work very hard, live richly but spend most of their day in ritual activity. The main point of the ritual is the human body, and the people worry a lot about health. They believe that the mind is trapped in a diseased body, and the only way to avoid sickness is through the powerful influences of rituals and ceremonies. Every house has one or more shrines or holy places for ceremonies. The more powerful people in the culture have many shrines, and you can tell how rich a person is by the number of shrines in the house.

Each house has at least one shrine, and the rituals are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. The rites are normally only discussed with the children and only when they are learning the mysteries of the shrine. Professor Linton was able to become friendly with the natives; they let her examine the shrines, and the elders described the rituals so that she could record them.

The main attraction of the 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. They get the potions from special people. The most powerful are the Medicine Women whose help must be rewarded by great gifts. The Medicine Women do not give out the potions though, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in ancient and secret language. The language is only understood by the herbalist, who, for another gift, gives out the charm that the person needs. The charm is not thrown away after it has served its purpose but is placed in the charm box of the household shrine. Each charm is for certain ills, and the people have so many sicknesses that the box is usually full. The rituals are performed in front of the charm box so that the charm box and the charms can protect the worshipper.

Underneath the charm box is a small font (a fountain). Every day each member of the family, one by one, enters the shrine room, bows the head before the charm box, mixes different sorts of holy water in the font and begins with the rite of cleansing. The holy water is gotten from the water temple of the community where initiated priestesses keep it ritually pure.

Another special magician, but less important than the Medicine Woman, is the Holy Mouth Man. The Nacirema have a tremendous horror and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have supernatural powers in all social relationships. If they do not follow the mouth rituals, they believe their friends will reject them, and their lovers desert them. The daily mouth rite is performed by everyone, and to the stranger is disgusting. The ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth along with certain magical creams and then moving the bundle around. The Nacirema seek out the Holy Mouth Man twice a year.

Some other customs of the Nacirema include the Great Temple or *latipsoh* which is run by the Medicine Women, who are aided by maidens and young men dressed in white. In the *latipsoh* ceremonies are performed on the very sick. Another custom is one in which the men once a day scrape their faces with very sharp objects.

Little is known of the beginnings of the Nacirema, although tradition says that they came from the East. Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has shown that they are a magic-ridden culture. It is hard to understand how these people have existed so long under the burdens of their beliefs.