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A New Look at the Nacirema

Horace Miner's work on the Nacirema is interesting and shines a light on an often overlooked (in the Anthropological field) tribe. Its study of the customs of the tribe is thought provoking and horrifying in equal measure. However, the study is outdated. It has been 65 years since the Nacirema were last studied. Much has changed about the society of the Nacirema since then. The social progress the tribe has made in this time has been astounding, and as a result, it hardly looks the same. It is time to dive into this unique tribe once more, and to change the focus of our study. There are more important things to the Nacirema culture than body ritual.

But, before the discussion of the Nacirema's modern practices begins, it is important to set some background. The Nacirema have, as stated, made strides in social progress. If we are to have a solid foundation to compare the modern day Nacirema tribespeople to, it is necessary to remind ourselves of how they were before. To this end, let us now take a look at Miner's foundational study of the Nacirema.

Miner's work, "Body Ritual Among The Nacirema" focuses upon but a singular aspect of the Nacirema culture, that of health rituals. This is not a bad thing; keeping the study focused upon a singular aspect of Nacirema culture allows for an in-depth exploration (which this paper hopes to do too). However, the body rituals of old have begun to lose their importance. While some aspects of Miner’s study still hold surprisingly true after 65 years, such as the ritual healing practices at *latipso*, others have lost their pervasiveness in the culture. An emerging example of the changing times are the mouth rituals. Some tribe’s members have lost their faith in the holy-mouth-doctors, and some progressives have even gone so far as to forgo the mouth-rites entirely. This is, unfortunately, still a fringe movement and those who are a part of it are actively ridiculed. Perhaps it would be prudent to study the response of Nacirema culture on fringe groups such as these, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we will note a movement that has caught on. The charm-boxes as discussed by Miner are nowhere to be seen. During my time with the Nacirema, I did not see a single one. Instead, the charms were placed in more convenient locations so that they may be used for early morning rites. Rather than keeping old charms that have lost meaning, new charms are constantly bought to replace old ones that have "lost their powers". To better illustrate the scale of this change, while more mature members of the tribe remember the charm boxes of old, the younger ones (including some adults) have never seen a charm box that is still used. The point of this exploration of Mayer's work is to show that the Nacirema exist in a constantly evolving culture. A new cultural focus has drawn the attention of the Nacirema away from the body rituals Mayer discussed, and that shall be the main focus of this study. That of the magic boxes worshiped by the Nacirema and the trance like state they enter to access something called *enteret*.

A set of magic boxes has become of much importance to Nacirema culture in the recent years. They permeate the everyday lives of the Nacirema and are the focus of many rituals that have become popular among the Nacirema. The boxes themselves are unremarkable. They resemble stones that have been cut into a rectangular shape of various sizes with a single size polished. The larger of the boxes are said to have more power in ritual, but the biggest are so big they are impossible for a single tribesperson to carry around. As such, it is popular to carry a smaller box, similar to a charm for shorter ritual during the day leaving the major rituals when one returns home. The boxes are extremely expensive, but the rituals are believed to increase safety in daily life, so many Nacirema enter debt just to have one of the boxes. The main ritual the boxes are used for is to access a spiritual domain called *enteret*. In order to do this, a set of rituals must be performed in accordance with the box used. The necessary rituals vary in length and intensity with shorter rituals preformed on recently sculpted boxes, and more lengthy and complex ones used to revere the more ancient ones. The rituals are constantly changing, but only work for the newest boxes, leading to a constant need to replace them. The rituals all culminate in the entrance of a trance like state that apparently allows the Nacirema to enter *enteret*.

The Nacirema, when asked, were surprisingly open about what happens to them when they enter the trance and *enteret*. Responses on just what *enteret* is, however, vary wildly. Some Nacirema told me it allows them to access information they otherwise wouldn’t have known, similar to asking an expert. Others answered that it allows them to gossip about current happenings such as the weather and what meals they have had recently. Still others responded that it was a way to blow off stress. All of them stated that they used it almost constantly throughout the day (Roser, Ritchie, and Ortiz-Ospina). It is notable that none of the Nacirema I asked knew what *enteret* actually was, instead choosing to respond with what they apparently did with it. Further questions about specifics of the responder’s interactions with *enteret* were very enlightening. Those who said they gossip and socialize through it seemed to have very distorted ideas of those they interacted with, believing them to have much better lives than that individual actually did. What’s worse, it seems to be a self-perpetuating issue. There seems to be a need to constantly commune to the *enteret* and update the best aspects of one’s life, and only the best aspects. There is a lack of clarity in how the Nacirema present themselves through their apparent interactions in the *enteret*. Those who said the *enteret* is a place for information often held inflated opinions of truths, or even just directly believing falsehoods. There seems to be some sort of shared delusions that come with communing with the *enteret* because often there were those who shared the same delusions in communities that normally don’t interact with each other. Every time such a Nacirema enters the *enteret*, they come back with an even more strongly held belief and an even more baseless grounding for that belief. There is a phrase amongst this type of Nacirema that illustrates this rather well, “If it’s on the *enteret* it must be true.” Lastly, the group that use the *enteret* to blow off steam often do so in excess, spending most of the day (sometimes all of it) communing with the *enteret*. While the average Nacirema might spend a few hours a day in ritual connection with the *enteret*, doing normal daily activities in between ritual sessions, these Nacirema focus their entire lives around the *enteret* rituals. Rather than work and provide for themselves and the tribe, these individuals instead choose to remain in their houses in ritual trance sometimes for entire days, and sometimes without sleep. They do not provide for the tribe, they do not wash themselves, sometimes they do not even eat. One particular Nacirema I saw apparently had been in his house for weeks without leaving and I was lucky enough to be there when he left to gather the necessary supplies for another long ritual. I asked him what possessed him to spend so long in ritual. He responded that it did not even feel that long, a day or so at most (Ruston). Even when those who practice such intense ritual leave and interact with other tribe members, the only thing they seem concerned with is what happened in ritual. It is their whole lives. *Enteret* is not solely a reductive force on Nacirema culture.

Allow us to explore the positive impact such a focus has had on the Nacirema culture. One such surprising effect is the inclusion of the disabled in jobs. Since the boxes have become such a ubiquitous part of Nacirema society, they have been attempting to include them in all parts of the society. For example, farmers will hire individuals to preform specific rituals with the magic boxes that are supposed to enhance the harvest. What is bizarre is that the rituals aren’t supposed to increase the yield, instead they are supposed to help with the process of storage and movement of the supplies. Since the rituals are usually preformed stationarily, this has opened positions for tribe members with physical impairments to help with the harvest. This is just one example. Truly, the magic boxes have affected all aspects of Nacirema society. The demand is so high for these positions that even fully functioning individuals are often sought to fill these positions. There are even cases of buildings that fit an entire town of Nacirema all preforming rituals with the boxes. These conglomerations of ritual are sought after by local shops for their blessings, in return, ordering shipments of supplies to go to the mass ritual site. While these mass ritual sites have always reportedly existed in the past, the introduction of the magic boxes has rapidly grown the scale of these operations (Wardynski).

The Nacirema continue to evolve and develop as time goes on. New rituals have shifted societal focus and caused previous norms to fall out of fashion. One such major shift in recent times is that of the magic boxes which now permeate Nacirema society. They distract and confuse them, while also allowing for new opportunities and growth. There is still more to learn about the Nacirema, a culture that can be changed so drastically by a single new thing deserves more study.

Works Cited

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