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On my recent trip to study the unique and fascinating culture of the Nacirema I examined some interesting, bizarre and sometimes mysterious cultural characteristics. My observations were made over a series of decades living with this cultural tribe. I have documented my findings and have written a brief reflection on what I observed in my anthropological study. The origin of the Nacirema is relatively unknown, tradition states that the culture migrated from the east.

The Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed economy that has produced extreme wealth. Setag is honored as the "money man" in their culture. The Nacirema are oddly possessed with a demon that drives them to spend most of their time and efforts to collect certain material goods. Nearly every person in the Nacirema culture must have a belonging known as a rac. While the rac is generally worthless, the Nacirema demonstrate an addiction to owning at least one. Many of the Nacirema people rank themselves in importance based on the number of and quality of racs they possess. Interestingly, the Nacirema people continue to employ the rac at an extremely high rate, despite the fact that the rac is a leading cause of death among their culture, is very costly and is contributing to the disease of the natural vegetation of their environment.

The language of the Nacirema is so complex that children have to be instructed each year in its proper use and even then, common mistakes are made in writing, reading and speaking the language. Most confusing is the fact that the language actually has two different alphabets that are used simultaneously. Additionally, the symbols that are used in the language are not spoken the same for all words and only special people, known as the Trams, can decipher the language correctly most of the time. The Nacirema speak very quickly to each other. The language also employs a variety of hand gestures that are unknown to many outside of their territory and that cause a mixture of responses from those involved in the conversation.

The Nacirema live in a variety of structures. Most of them are larger than are necessary and are simply to demonstrate a family's status in the culture. Much productive land is lost to ssarg, which the Nacirema spend much effort, time and wealth on. In each dwelling, a typical Nacirema family resides. As the Nacirema are obsessed with a demon for material wealth, most adult Nacirema wake before dawn.

The Nacirema demonstrate many odd behaviors in relation to their physical bodies. The fundamental belief in their society is that the human body is ugly in its natural state and must be altered. Through the use of ritual and ceremony the Nacirema spend much time and currency on body-altering rituals. Every household has one or



more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines devoted to this purpose and their status is often demonstrated by the shrines they possess. The shrine rooms, unlike the rest of the dwelling, are walled with stone. 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 that is built into the wall to hold charms and magical potions that the native Nacirema believe they cannot live without. These potions are prepared by specially trained medicine men who must be rewarded with substantial gifts for their magical potions. Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day members of the family in succession, enter the shrine room, bow their heads before the charm-box and dips themselves in holy water from the font. The holy waters are secured from the community water temple where the liquid is made ritually pure through elaborate ceremonies.

One of the most bizarre ceremonies I observed of the Nacirema, was their rituals of the mouth. The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth and its condition. Without the mouth rituals, the Nacirema believe that horrible physical conditions will erupt, that friends will desert them and lovers will reject them. Throughout each day, the Nacirema perform a mouth-rite in which they insert a small bundle of hog-hairs and scrap at the interior of the mouth until it begins to froth. As an outsider to the Nacirema culture, the mouth-rite was one of the most bizarre and frightening rituals I observed. In addition to the mouth-rite rituals, many of the young Nacirema visit a holy-man every few months in which large metal brackets are screwed into the mouth which causes much pain.

In every-day life the Nacirema avoids exposure of his body and its natural functions. Bathing is done ritually at the same time each day by the vast majority of the culture but each person is done separately. Bathing and excretory acts are performed in the secrecy of the household shrine, where they are ritualized as part of the body-rites. Psychological shock results from any time that body secrecy is suddenly lost. Another torturous component of the Nacirema body rituals is a distinctive ceremony performed by men and women regularly. This part of the rite involves scraping and lacerating the surface of the skin with a sharp instrument. This rite is time-consuming, repetitive and can result in bleeding. From an anthropological perspective, I wonder what the real purpose is for this body ritual; however the Nacirema cannot be convinced that it is unnecessary.

My review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has shown them to be a magic-ridden people that live to excess. It is hard to understand how they have managed to exist so long under the burdens which they have imposed upon themselves. The Nacirema are a culture that are unique to say the very least.