

- ❖ Body Ritual Among the Nacirema, by Horace Miner
- ❖ Read the original article posted on the course site. Note that Wesch's chapter below has been edited for ANTH 101.

## **GROWING UP AMONG THE NACIREMA**

*"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."*

– T. S. Eliot

If viewing an exotic and very different culture can help us leap out of the water of our own culture to truly see it, the Nacirema need to be high on our list of cultures to examine. In 1956, cultural anthropologist Horace Miner's original article about the Nacirema provided an in-depth look at their ritual behaviors that show, in Miner's words, "the extremes to which human behavior can go." The work was so shocking and revealing that the article went on to be the most widely read article in the history of Anthropology.

As Miner explains in the article, the Nacirema are obsessed with the body, which they believe is intrinsically ugly and prone to debility and disease. Each Nacirema household has a shrine or sometimes several shrines in which private rituals are performed to mitigate what they see as ever-present and pervasive threats to their bodies. Various

charms provided by medicine men are ingested, and they perform several rites of ablution throughout the day using a special purified water secured from the main Water Temple of the community.

Since Miner's time, the Nacirema have started building very large temples called "*mygs*" that contain rows and rows of various body torture devices which they use to punish their own bodies. The devices are designed to tear and damage muscles, causing them to swell. Others are designed to completely exhaust the body and use up all of its energy so that the body starts to consume itself in order to provide energy for movement.

While the Nacirema believe that these rituals make their bodies stronger and more resilient to disease, the primary purpose of these rituals seems to be to transform the shape of the body to conform to Nacirema ideals. These ideals are so extreme that they are beyond the reach of natural human capacity. To achieve these ideals, some Nacirema go so far as to have ritual specialists cut them open and inject liquids into areas of their body that they desire to be larger, or remove soft body tissues and make other parts of their body smaller.

These new temples are just one example of how cultures are always changing, and over the past 70 years, the Nacirema have changed dramatically. For the Nacirema of Miner's study in 1956, even simple black-and-white televisions were a new and exotic technology. Today the Nacirema can be found across the social media landscape on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube. This media offers us the ability to observe this exotic culture almost anywhere.

Another observation: Nacirema children, who are often required by their parents to sleep alone (a rare practice across cultures around the world), often sleep with these small toy bears, seeing them as protectors and often building up strong imaginary friendships with them.

The cost of their core values of freedom and choice is that there are no limitations or guidelines on how to grow up properly. There are no clearly defined rules for what it means to be an adult. There are no clearly defined pathways for becoming independent. Instead, there are options at every turn of life. The Nacirema cherish these options. But they also make growing up very, very hard.

Children are raised with the idea that they can "be whatever they want to be." They are taught to question and distrust any message that attempts to tell them who they are or how they should behave. "Be true to yourself," is a commonly espoused Nacirema proverb. Yelim echoed these sentiments in her performance, *"We don't take nothing from nobody."* But because they "don't take nothing from nobody," like advice or values, they are left with nothing to guide them. They set off on a lifelong quest to figure out what they want to do and who they want to be. "Who am I?" is a question that dominates the Nacirema psyche.

As a result, many Nacirema make it their life goal to "find" their "self." Though most Nacirema take this goal for granted, it has not always been this way. Even in Miner's time, the 1950s, things were different. Back then people were often encouraged to conform and follow the rules of society. But by the late 1970s, books like William Glasser's "The Identity Society" and Christopher Lasch's "Culture of Narcissism" documented a shift from a culture that valued humility and "finding one's place" to one that valued self-expression and "finding one's self."

### THE POWER OF CONTINGENCY AND "MAKING THINGS FRAGILE"

It is obvious at this point that the Nacirema are not some exotic culture, but are in fact American, and that "Nacirema" is just "American" spelled backwards. This was Miner's trick. He forced us to see the strange in the familiar and used the art of seeing like an anthropologist on his own culture.

This trick is one method of "seeing your own seeing" without going to an exotic culture. You can find the exotic right around you, and the more mundane, the better. Because when you reveal that even the most mundane beliefs and practices that make up your life can be viewed as strange and exotic, they also become *contingent*, which is a fancy way of saying that they need not exist or that they could have been different. Our beliefs and practices are *contingent* upon the historical and cultural conditions that led to them. And once we recognize them as contingent, we can ask new questions about them.

*What is a self? Is it really a thing? Or is it something you do? Would it be better to say that we "create" ourselves rather than "find" it? And what did that other great poet, Marshall Mathers, mean when he said "You gotta lose yourself"? Is it possible that you have to lose your self in order to find your self? If so, what is this "self" that must be lost? Am "I" the same thing as my "self"? If they are the same, how can I say "I" need to find my "self"? Can "I" really find, lose, or create my "self" or do I just need to let the "I" be my "self"?*

These are a special kind of questions. These questions do not require answers; the questions are insights in themselves. They give you new alternatives for how to think about your life. They give you a little bit of freedom from the limited perspectives offered by your taken-for-granted assumptions, ideas, and ideals.

This particular power of the anthropological perspective has been at the heart of anthropology since its founding in the late 1800s. Franz Boas, the father of American Anthropology, said that his whole outlook on life had been determined by one question:

*How can we recognize the shackles that tradition has laid upon us?  
For when we recognize them, we are also able to break them.*

## Challenge Two: Fieldwork of the Familiar

Your challenge is to do fieldwork in your own culture, find the strange in the familiar, and produce a compelling photo essay of your insights.

Objective: Practice the anthropological method of seeing your own seeing – to see the strange in the familiar – and to understand how our taken-for-granted everyday life is actually contingent on specific historical and cultural conditions.

Start by thinking of things that are done in your culture that might strike an Anthropologist from Mars as strange. For example, the Nacirema keep small animals called *teps*, heal themselves through the ritual of *gnippohs*, spend lots of time obsessing over their bodies while they *ezicrixé*, spend 13 to 25 years of their lives simply training for the complexity of their lives in special places called *loohcs*, etc.

Next, go to a location where you can really observe this behavior. Try to come up with four or five interesting observations about this behavior. Write down your observations (bullet point is fine), and share these observations with your study group.