

Natalie Kalinowski

Anthropology 1001 101 Being Human

### Nacirema Revisited

Reading Horace Miner's *Nacirema* evoked the same fascination in me that one might have while learning about a "exotic" place or moment in time on the History Channel. Describing the geography of the region with key words like "between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico" makes the reader visualize some undiscovered, uncivilized area. Yet, when the next sentence describes the cultural hero who is known for "the chopping down of a cherry tree" almost immediately the thought of Abraham Lincoln appears, and you realize that this is in fact describing the United States (Nacirema).

An outsider view explains that the culture is unique because although it has a "highly developed market economy" it still has "medicine men" also known as Pharmacists and "holy-mouth-men" who are also called Hygienists. To an insider such as myself, I never considered the ritual of "mouth-rite." Although it sounds foreign and unfamiliar it is the action of going to the bathroom and brushing your teeth and getting ready.

All these seemingly normal activities we perform living in Nacirema, when substituted with different language makes our society seem primitive and undeveloped. Looking at the common actions of the majority from an outsider's perspective shows exactly how strange some parts of our culture are.

Since the year 1956, Nacirema's culture has held most of the same characteristics. Many cultural events that occurred then still occur now; however, there are new changes and additions to the culture that reflect the way the society has advanced with technology over time.

An outsider's perspective of the Nacirema's culture will still identify many aspects that can seem exotic and strange. Educational institutes for example are largely unchanged. They teach most of the same material that has been taught over decades. The way students interact is similar except for the methods of communication.

High Schools are largely unchanged and the social aspects of how students interact with each other are still the same as 1956. The addition to our society has been the development of new technology like cell phones, computers, tablets, etc. that changes how students communicate. However, if you were an outside observer and did not understand the changes in technology you would still see that similar patterns of behavior that occurred in 1956 will still occur now.

#### Journal Observations

*August 21, 2018 Nacirema High School Lunch Room*

Natives enter a room after a loud bell sounds throughout the area. They enter the room in groups. The floors are made of hard, white material and scattered throughout the room are many high tables. The smell of food is strong, and the natives all walk toward it.

At the front are the female elder natives wearing a lot of pigments and chalk on their face and communicating with loud sounds with the occasional loud screech from a female and the repetition of phrases such as "like" and "uhh." Some of the female elder natives even use dyes in their hair to show status. Occasionally, a few elder female's hold scrolls that they appear to be deciphering.

Directly behind the elder females are what appear to be elder male natives. Most of them wear similar cultural clothing that has the same patters in color but differentiate with a different symbol in black. No symbol is the same, so I believe this is some

identification system. The few males whose clothing are not in the same pattern hold plastic devices in their hands and seem to be communicating about battle strategies.

Next are the young native female who travel in packs. Some of them wear a type of uniform that exposes a lot of skin. Others where pants that are dyed with a blue plant and a loose shirt that may be the combination of many different dyes.

Lastly are the young male natives who are in constant motion and scanning the area around them. They keep watching all the female's and are wary of the male elders. Some wear a head covering with a part that comes out forward like a wide bird's beak over the eyes.

In the gathering there are also full elders. They wear a netting over their hair to show their status, and don't communicate with young natives unless necessary. They provide the food during a ceremonial process where the younger natives line up in order of importance: elder females, elder males, young females, young males. After each native passes through the ceremony and receives a food offering they in return give an elder a gift. Usually, it is some type of green paper with some artistic design. However, occasionally some show a grey plastic square that the elder takes and moves in a strange hand gesture over a black box and then returns.

Finally, the natives all sit in their designated spots at high tables. It appears to be some type of unspoken system where the natives intrinsically know where to sit and never change their spot.

*August 21, 2018 Nacirema High School Assembly*

The natives all enter a large room with high ceilings. The room contains high seating area, almost like an arena. The floor's contain strange symbols and lines, perhaps the work of some ceremony or magical enchantment. A strange song plays from

magic black boxes standing around the room. At the center is a stage where a full elder stands holding a cylindrical black device that amplifies his voice.

There seem to be four designated sections in the arena. There are two groups of elders and two groups of young natives. This time the males and females sit mixed. However, there is still some type of organization where the natives with scrolls sit together. The natives with plastic devices sit together. The natives with uniforms or similar patterned clothing sit together.

At the beginning of the ceremony all the natives stand together and put their right arm across their left breast. It seems to give them some solidarity as they chant while looking at a large patterned cloth hanging in a place of honor in the arena. Next a young native female walks to the stage and takes the cylindrical black device that amplifies her voice. She starts to sing some long and soulful melody that makes the entire group of natives stand solemnly. Finally, the full elder male starts to speak to the crowd.

The role these two journal examples play in society both have to do with how a high school community interacts.

In the case of the lunch room, we notice the hierarchy that occurs between the younger and older students. This is important because it shows how our interactions in that environment are limited and are dictated by being with people in the same age group. Meanwhile, when you leave high school, age doesn't really matter as much, and you can find yourself interacting with people of all ages. This might seem peculiar to someone who had never attended a public high school, where there are very clear lines defining with whom and where you should sit or talk to.

Another important aspect is the way exchanges work. When the students are all getting their lunch, they get food in exchange for paying. Notice that some students used cash money and others used a credit card. The credit card is still relatively new

and would not have been used in 1956, yet the part it takes in the process is essentially the same. To an outsider it might seem weird to exchange food, which is very clearly valuable, for pieces of paper that seem to have no purpose other than maybe to look at the artwork on it.

Next, patterns in clothing were described for each age group. Looking at the clothing people wear, you can assume that some things have changed since 1956. Although there are changes in style, there are still the cheerleader uniforms, numbered sports uniforms, and baseball hats. These things still help students find identity and a place in social standings. This might seem odd to an outsider because all the members of this society seem to be imitating each other by wearing the same colors. Although it might indicate unity, it also shows who the outsiders are within the society because they are not dressed in the same school colors or wearing the same type of outfit.

During the assembly we saw many strange ceremonial actions that have not changed in Nacirema. Saying the Pledge of Allegiance with a hand on your heart or facing the flag while the national anthem was sung never seemed like an “exotic” activity. It just seems normal for those who are insiders. Now if you were to compare this with some other indigenous group you would find a lot of similarities between the groups and their cultural patterns. This behavior is important in Nacirema because it builds unity within a high school, but also because it builds solidarity within a nation with a territory that large.

Reflecting on Miner’s Nacirema and on the journal entries above I find that we live in a culturally-constructed reality. We see how Nacirema’s culture puts a large emphasis on health and vanity. I see symbols of this when I walk into a bathroom at home: mirrors, make-up tools, various creams and perfumes. Our culture demands for people to constantly look unflawed and smell unflawed.

Within the journal entries I see how symbols like a flag, a pledge or a song all were created by humans and integrated into our reality. Someone decided that a red, white, blue flag was to be

a symbol of our country's solidarity, the hope of our people, and to hold a place of honor. Now it has embedded itself into the institution of our society that people don't even think twice before accepting that as our reality.

Miner's Nacirema helped me grasp the outsider's view because the language he used changed the way I saw the society. In the journal entries I attempted to imitate his writing to evoke the same feeling of strangeness and "outsiderness." Analyzing actions by finding why they are important to a society helped me understand why some of Nacirema's realities exist and how we perpetuate them as a society.

#### Citation

Miner, Horace, "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema," American Anthropologists, 1956