



# Body Ritual of the Nacirema: Misinterpretation of Artifacts

## Overview

The interpretation of artifacts is not an exact science. Archaeologists, like historians, use new information to support or refute previous interpretations. This article, similar to the book *Motel of the Mysteries*, examines the culture of the Nacirema (American spelled backwards) by observing artifacts and activities. Through the eyes of the author, modern American culture is as unfamiliar as other "exotic" cultures.

## Objectives

Students will:

- understand the importance of context
- discuss misinterpretations of artifacts
- define and discuss ethnocentrism
- create their own cultural misinterpretations

## Core Standards of Kit

- 2.2 Problem Solving Process
- 6.4 Historical Connections
- 6.6 Being a Historian

## Additional Standards

- 1.3 Reading Comprehension
- 1.9 Narratives
- 6.5 Traditional and Social Histories
- 6.13 Concepts of Culture

## Age Level

Grade 7-12/ Ages 12-18

## Time

1 hour

## Materials

- copies of "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema"




## Background

This article originally appeared in *The American Anthropologist* in 1956 (vol. 58, pgs. 503-507). By looking at American culture as a foreign or mysterious culture, the author uses satire to emphasize the need to understand the context of a culture when making interpretations. The article uses the language and style of early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropological case studies.

To make this version more appropriate for students, some sections have been deleted and some language has been simplified.

## Procedure

1. Do not explain the context of this article before having the students read it. Hand out copies and ask the students to read the article silently. Have them make a list of artifacts used in this culture and the purpose of the artifacts. (As students start to catch on, try to keep them from explaining the gag to others.)
2. When the students have finished, write a class list of the artifacts, as they are labeled in the article. Which artifacts (and accompanying actions) are familiar to the students?
3. Explain, or have a student explain, that the author is describing American culture, including medicine cabinets, dentists, and hospitals, from the point of view of an outsider. How does the author support his interpretation? Can the students understand why the author assumes that these rituals are based in magic?
4. Introduce the concept of ethnocentrism, or using the standards and practices of one culture to define, study or judge another culture. By assuming that the "Nacirema" base their society on magic rituals and that they write from right to left, the author presents an unfamiliar interpretation of very familiar activities. Likewise, if students judge or interpret other cultures based on their own culture, the interpretation may be unbalanced or inaccurate. Assuming that Native American societies were not technologically advanced because they did not have computers is an ethnocentric and unfair assessment. Native Americans made many technological advancements in hunting and farming but to meet different needs and under different circumstances. When



making interpretations, archaeologists, anthropologists and historians must take into account the context of the culture they are studying.

5. Ask the students if they can think of examples when actions or words have been taken out of context. Misinterpretation can range from amusing to confusing to harmful.
6. Have the students write their own misinterpretation of a common activity or event such as a football game or lunch in the cafeteria. Make sure the students support their interpretation with evidence. Can other students figure out the appropriate context?

### **Evaluation**

Students need practice to be able to recognize ethnocentric bias. Have them examine newspaper or magazine articles and school textbooks for examples of ethnocentric interpretations of current and historical events.

### **What Next?**

Read *Motel of the Mysteries*, another satire based on Egyptian archaeologists and artifact interpretation.

When studying early Native American culture through archaeology, use Abenaki source materials and invite an Abenaki representative to your classroom. Take care to avoid ethnocentric interpretations of other eras in Vermont history.



# Body Ritual Among the Nacirema


Horace Miner

The anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which different people behave in similar situations that he or she is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs. In fact if all of the possible types of behavior have not been found somewhere in the world, he or she is apt to suspect that they must be present in some yet undescribed tribe... In this light, the magical beliefs and practices of the Nacirema are described as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go.

Professor Linton first brought the ritual of the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago, but the culture of these people is still very poorly understood... Little is known of their origin, although tradition states they came from the east. According to Nacirema mythology, their nation was originated by a culture hero, Notgnihsaw, who is otherwise known for two great feats of strength - the throwing of a piece of wampum across the river Pa-To-Mac and the chopping down of a cherry tree in which the Spirit of Truth resided.

Nacirema culture is based on a highly developed market economy which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people's time is spent in work, a large part of their wealth and parts of each day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which seem very important to the people. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremonial aspects and associated philosophy are unique.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to weakness or disease. Trapped in such a body, the people's only hope is to avoid those characteristics through the use of the powerful influences of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses and, in fact, the richness of a house is often referred to in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses...




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. I was able, however, to establish sufficient friendship and trust with these natives to examine these shrines and have the rituals described to me.

The focal point 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. These preparations are from the medicine men, whose help must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine man and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm...

Beneath the charm-box is a small font or basin. Each day every member of the family, one after the other, enters the shrine room, bows his head before the charm-box, mixes different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution or cleansing. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.

In the hierarchy of magical practitioners, and below the medicine men in prestige, are specialists whose role is best translated as "holy-mouth-men." The Nacirema have an almost sickly horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them...

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so careful about the care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the unknowing stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical pastes, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures.



In addition to the private mouth-rite, the natives seek out a holy-mouth-man once or twice a year. These people have an impressive set of tools, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes and prods. The use of these objects in the exorcism (or driving out) of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. The holy-mouth-man opens the client's mouth and, using the above mentioned tools, enlarges any holes which decay may have created in the teeth. Magical materials are put into these holes... In the client's view, the purpose of this is to stop decay and to gain friends. The extremely sacred and traditional nature of the rite is obvious since the natives return to the holy-mouth-men year after year, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay...

The medicine men have an impressive temple, or latipso, in every community of any size... The latipso ceremonies are so harsh that it is amazing that a fair proportion of the really sick natives who enter the temple ever recover... Few of the natives in the temple are well enough to do anything but lie on their hard beds. The daily ceremonies, like the rites of the holy-mouth-men, involve discomfort and torture. With ritual precision, the maidens dressed in white awaken their miserable charges each dawn and roll them around on the beds of pain... in the formal movements of which the maidens are highly trained. At other times they insert magic wands in the native's mouth and force him to eat substances which are supposed to be healing. From time to time the medicine men come to their clients and jab magically treated needles into their flesh. The fact that these temple ceremonies may not cure, and may even kill the native, in no way decreases the people's faith in the medicine men...

Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has certainly shown them to be magic-ridden people. It is hard to imagine how they have managed to exist so long under the burdens which they have imposed upon themselves.