

Recognizing Cultural Traits

Directions: Read the story below. Underline elements of culture and write which element is being displayed, to the left of the line in which you find the element. You should underline and identify elements even if you have picked out the element already.

The Nacirema

Professor Linton first discovered and brought the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists over 65 years ago, but the culture of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group. According to the Nacirema, their nation was begun by a hero, Notgnihsaw, who is known for two great feats of strength -- throwing a piece of silver across a river and chopping down a tree in which the Spirit of Truth resided.

Nacirema culture is focused on acquiring wealth and items and this is seen as the most important way to measure success. While much of the people's time is devoted to this pursuit, a large portion of the day is spent in special activity. The focus of this special activity is the human body; its appearance and health.

The most important idea underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and tends to be weak and diseased. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to items that prevent disease. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses and, in fact, houses are often described by the number of shrines it contains. Houses of the wealthy are designed with very large and luxurious shrines, some with elaborate tile mosaics in intricate patterns.

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. It has been the practice of the Nacirema that the mother is responsible for initiating the children into most rituals.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built in to the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no Nacirema believes he/she could live. These magical potions are selected by a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the magical potions for the people, but they do decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down using an ancient and secret code. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required magical potions.

The most important medicine men are "holy-mouth-men." The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror 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 mates reject them. They also believe that a strong relationship exists between oral health and being able to know right from wrong. For

example, there is a ritual washing out of the mouth for children which is supposed to make them better people

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so thorough about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which is quite strange. It has been reported that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of 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 people seek out a holy-mouth-man once or twice a year. These holy-mouth-men have an impressive set of tools, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these items in the removal of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the Nacirema. The holy-mouth-man opens the person'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. If there are no naturally occurring holes in the teeth, large sections of one or more teeth are gouged out so that the supernatural substance can be applied. In the person's view, the purpose of this act is to stop decay and to draw friends. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy-mouth-men year after year, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay.

The Nacirema also participate in two contradictory rituals. There are ritual fasts (not eating) to make fat people thin and ceremonial feasts to make thin people fat.

The Nacirema children, rich and poor, participate in an annual special day when they are allowed to travel through the village begging for food. The children look forward to this special day each year. The children are given various types of food, all of which are said to promote the rotting of their teeth.