

Body Ritual among the Nacirema

Little is known about the origin of the Nacirema. Their culture while still poorly understood is characterized by a highly developed market economy which has evolved in a rich habitat. While much of the day is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of their labour and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the philosophy of the people. While such a concern is not unusual, its ceremonial aspects are unique.

Some of the rituals and ceremonies include:

The Shrine

Each family has at least one shrine. The focus of the shrine is a charm-box that contains a number of charms and potions, many of which have been there for a long time. On occasion the people forget why they put them in there and fear reusing them, while at the same time fearing discarding the magical brews in case the bad spirits return in the form of horrible ailments. Beneath the charm box is a small font that is used by each family member daily. Each person goes into the shrine and mingles different sorts of holy waters in the font and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution. The holy waters that are used in this rite are considered tainted and are securely stored in the Water Temple where priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to purify them once more.

Potions

The Nacirema are generally not able to create their own potions and charms, not having the necessary knowledge of herbs or the training. Instead they go to the medicine men in their villages for this purpose. The Nacirema will travel great distances to locate the right medicine man with the greatest skill at driving out the bad spirits. The medicine men do not always create the charms themselves, most often they decide what is needed and write the ingredients down in an ancient and secret language that only the local herbalist will understand. The herbalists then provide the charm to the villager.

Other Rituals

There are a wide range of other rituals which include:

- Nacirema men's daily body ritual of scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument.
- Nacirema women frequently baking their heads in small ovens for about an hour

From these and other rituals it appears that a certain amount of sadism is involved and that most of the population show definite masochistic tendencies.

Latipso

Another component of the Nacirema culture is the imposing temple or Latipso in every community of any size in which Medicine men perform the more elaborate ceremonies required for very sick people. Only those who can give rich gifts are able to enter the temple no matter how gravely ill they are.

Daily ceremonies often involve discomfort and torture. They include the insertion of magic wands into the mouth and being forced to eat substances which are supposed to be healing. From time to time the medicine men come and jab magically treated needles into their flesh. The fact that these ceremonies may not cure them, and may even kill them, in no way decreases the people's faith in the medicine men.

Note: do not read source to participants

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