Body Ritual among the Nacirema

Horace Miner

Ritual involving repeated symbolic acts can be about many things—the growth of crops, the response to death, movement from one social identity to another, community solidarity, and much more. It can also be about one’s body, including how to care for it, how to make it socially acceptable, and how to make it impressive to others. This classic article written in 1958 by Horace Miner describes the extensive body ritual of a North American group, the Nacirema, whose houses contain special shrines in which body ritual takes place. From the article, it is clear that the society’s elaborate variety of body rituals reveals important Nacirema cultural values.

language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm. The charm is not disposed of after it has served its purpose, but is placed in the charm-box of the household shrine. As these magical materials are specific for certain ills, and the real or imagined maladies of the people are many, the charm-box is usually full to overflowing. The magical packets are so numerous that people forget what their purposes were and fear to use them again. While the natives are very vague on this point, we can only assume that the idea in retaining all the old magical materials is that their presence in the charm-box, before which the body rituals are conducted, will in some way protect the worshipper.

Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows his head before the charm-box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablation. 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 designation is best translated "holy-mouth-men." The Nacirema have an almost pathological 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. They also believe that a strong relationship exists between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual ablation of the mouth for children which is supposed to improve their moral fiber.

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so pious and conscientious about the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninstructed 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 powders, 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 practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and probes. The use of these objects in the exorcism 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. 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 client's view, the purpose of these ministrations is to arrest decay and to draw friends. The highly 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.
trained. At other times they insert magic wands in the supplicant's mouth or
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 neophyte, in no way decreases the people's faith in the medicine men.

There remains one other kind of practitioner, known as a "listener." This
witchdoctor has the power to exorcise the devils that lodge in the heads of peo-
ple who have been bewitched. The Nacirema believe that parents bewitch their
children. Mothers are particularly suspected of putting a curse on children
while teaching them the secret body rituals. The counter-magic of the witch-
doctor is unusual in its lack of ritual. The patient simply tells the "listener" all
his troubles and fears, beginning with the earliest difficulties he can remember.
The memory displayed by the Nacirema in these exorcism sessions is truly
remarkable. It is not uncommon for the patient to bemoan the rejection he felt
upon being weaned as a babe, and a few individuals even see their troubles going
back to the traumatic effects of their own birth.

In conclusion, mention must be made of certain practices which have
their base in native esthetics but which depend upon the pervasive aversion to
the natural body and its functions. There are ritual fasts to make fat people
thin and ceremonial feasts to make thin people fat. Still other rites are used to
make women's breasts larger if they are small, and smaller if they are large.

General dissatisfaction with breast shape is symbolized in the fact that the ideal
form is virtually outside the range of human variation. A few women afflicted
with almost inhuman hyper-mammary development are so idolized that they
make a handsome living by simply going from village to village and permitting
the natives to stare at them for a fee.

Reference has already been made to the fact that excretory functions are ritu-
alized, routinized, and relegated to secrecy. Natural reproductive functions are
similarly distorted. Intercourse is taboo as a topic and scheduled as an act. Effort
is made to avoid pregnancy by the use of magical materials or by limiting inter-
course to certain phases of the moon. Conception is actually very infrequent. When
pregnant, women dress so as to hide their condition. Parturition takes place in
secret, without friends or relatives to assist, and the majority of women do not
nurse their infants.

Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has certainly shown them to
be a magic-ridden people. It is hard to understand how they have managed to
exist so long under the burdens which they have imposed upon themselves. But
even such exotic customs as these take on real meaning when they are viewed
with the insight provided by Malinowski when he wrote:

"Looking from far and above, from our high places of safety in the de-
veloped civilization, it is easy to see all the crudity and irrelevance of magic. But
without its power and guidance early man could not have mastered his practi-
cal difficulties as he has done, nor could man have advanced to the higher stages
of civilization."