THE NACIREMA AND THE AILARTSUA

Prepared by Dr David Dufty

Anthropologists are interested in the many varied and exotic customs carried on by the peoples of the world. The magical beliefs of the Nacirema are worth studying as an example of the extremes to which human behaviour can go.

The Nacirema live in a rich environment and while much of the people's time is spent on economic activity a large part of the fruits of their labour is spent on ritual activity. An important focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which is of major importance in the belief system of the people.

The fundamental belief appears to be that the human body is ugly and is inclined to become worn out and diseased. The only hope of human beings is to overcome this decline by the use of powerful rituals and ceremonies.

Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. More powerful people have several such ritual centries. The shrine rooms are lined with stone - even in houses of the poor.

The rituals are private and secret rather than family rituals. The only time they are discussed is when children are being initiated into these mysteries.

The focal point of the shrine is a box which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept many charms and magical medicines without which no native could live. Some of these medicines are obtained from the medicine men who must be rewarded with costly gifts. However the medicine men don't directly supply the potions to the client but write them down in an ancient and secret language which is given to the herbalist. The herbalist then supplies them to the client. Only the medicine men and the herbalists understand this language. A few women are also allowed to become medicine men.

The charm is not thrown away after being used but is placed in the charm box in the household shrine. Since the Nacirema have many real and imagined illnesses the box is full to overflowing. People often forget what the magical packets are for and fear to use them again. However one can only assume that the idea is that keeping all the old materials in the charm box will in some way protect the worshipper.

Beneath the charm box is a small font. Every day, every member of the family, one after another, enters the shrine room bows his or her head before the charm box and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution. The holy waters used in the font have already been made ritually pure at the Community Water Temple.

The Nacirema have a special interest in the mouth and there are specialist Holy Mouth People who prescribe rituals for keeping the mouth clean. Were it not for these rituals their teeth would fall out, people wouldn't speak to them and their lovers would desert them.

At least every year each person must visit the Holy Mouth People. This visit involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the visitor. Holes in the teeth caused by decay are made larger and magical materials are put in the holes. If there are no naturally occurring holes the Holy Mouth People make some holes to put the magic substance in.

Other strange, almost unbelievable customs include a ritual in which some women go to a Holy Hair Temple and bake their head in a small oven for about an hour.

There is also a temple called a Latipsoh where the medicine people and their assistants perform many strange rituals including inserting magic wands in people's mouths and forcing them to take many different kinds of curative medicines, some of which have been known to kill the visitors rather than cure them.

There are many other rituals that show the attitudes of the Nacirema to their bodies. There are rituals for making fat people thin and rituals for making thin people fat; rituals for making women's breasts small and rituals for making them larger, or at least making them look larger. Some women with particularly large breasts go from village to village so that the natives can stare at them for a fee.

This study of the Nacerima has certainly shown them to be a magic-ridden people. It is hard to understand how they have existed so long under the burdens they have imposed on themselves and yet it is perhaps true to say that every tribe that has ever lived has used some magical rituals in order to solve the many problems which they face in daily living.