

WHO ARE THE NACIREMA?



OVERVIEW

Students read a short story about the body-related rituals of a cultural group called “the Nacirema” (American spelled backward). Students write their own short stories about rituals of the Nacirema using the same literary device as the original story, and they discuss cultural awareness, assumptions, and worldview.

KEY ISSUES/CONCEPTS

- Cultural awareness and assumptions
- Worldview

SUBJECT AREAS

- Social studies
- Geography
- Language arts
- Environmental studies

GRADE LEVEL: 9–12

NATIONAL STANDARDS CONSISTENCY

- NCSS: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
- NSES: F
- NGS: 6

TIME REQUIRED: 1 hour

MATERIALS

Handout *Body Ritual Among the Nacirema*, by Horace Miner, 1 copy per student

PREPARATION

Read the short story *Body Ritual Among the Nacirema*.

INQUIRY/CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

- How does our cultural worldview influence and inform our perception of people from other cultures?
- How can we be aware of and change our assumptions?
- How can we benefit from understanding our own cultural worldview and how it affects our relationships with other cultures?

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- **Identify** and **discuss** a specific “cultural group” described in an anthropological study.
 - **Write** their own anthropological study on the same cultural group.
 - **Discuss** “cultural worldview” and how it informs different cultural perception and understanding of each other.
1. Have students brainstorm a list of “what we know about a specific cultural group,” focusing on cultural practices. (Choose a cultural group that is in the news today or one that the students will have some knowledge of.)
 2. Have the class read aloud the short story *Body Ritual Among the Nacirema*. (Do not tell them that it is a fictional account.) After reading the first few paragraphs, stop and ask students if they are familiar with the cultural group described in the article. Ask those who are familiar to not reveal what they know about the Nacirema until the class has finished reading.
 3. After reading, ask how many students now know who the Nacirema are. What made it hard to identify who they are? How does Minor’s description of the Nacirema affect our ability to identify them? What are the techniques Minor uses to describe the Nacirema? (He uses a distinctively anthropological form of observation and writing called “ethnography.” It is as if he is from another

planet and is merely reporting what he observes without the benefit of any understanding of the culture he describes.)

4. Brainstorm other rituals of the Nacirema that might seem odd to someone from another culture or even from another planet. (For example, playing a particular sport, preparing and eating food, watching TV, shopping, going to a party, sitting in a classroom, et cetera.)
5. Have the students write a paragraph or two describing another “ritual of the Nacirema,” either from the brainstorm list or one they think of on their own, using the same techniques Minor uses in his story.
6. Have students read their paragraphs to the class and have the class identify the ritual described.

REFLECTION

Use the following questions and prompts to lead a class discussion about the activity:

1. “Were you surprised when you figured out who the Nacirema were? Explain why or why not”.
2. “How does *Body Ritual Among the Nacirema* help us understand our own view of other cultures and how we are viewed by other cultures?”
3. “Why do some of the practices and rituals of other cultures seem odd or foreign to us? How do our own cultural norms affect our understanding and perception of other cultures?”



4. “What assumptions do we make about other cultures? What are some examples of practices in other cultures that we find odd and hard to understand?” (For example, arranged marriages, eating and preparing unusual foods, ritual body piercing, rites of passage.)
5. “Go back to the brainstorm list created earlier about a specific cultural group. What are the listed assumptions based on? How does our own cultural worldview affect how we perceive this specific group?”
6. “What techniques can we use to notice when we are making assumptions about others, and how can we avoid this?”

CLASS PROJECTS/ACTION IDEAS

- Have students research and write about a particular practice or ritual from their own cultural background and present it to the class.
- Have the class write a play based on their paragraphs about the Nacirema and perform it to other classes.
- Students can research a particular culture focusing on the practices that might seem odd to someone from another culture and exploring how assumptions drive our views and beliefs about that culture.



BODY RITUAL AMONG THE NACIREMA

Revised from "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema" by Horace Miner, *American Anthropologist Magazine* 58(3), 1956, pp. 503-7

The ritual of the Nacirema was first brought to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago, but the culture of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumara of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east.

Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy, which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people's time is devoted to economic pursuits, a considerable portion of their day is spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which appear as a major concern in the people's belief. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremonial aspects and associated philosophy are unique.

The main belief underlying this ritual activity appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to weakness and disease. Captive in such a body, man's only hope to avert these characteristics is through the use 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 grandeur of a house is often referred to in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses.

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 or she could live. These preparations are obtained from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose help must be rewarded with large gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the 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 men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm.

Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family enters the shrine room, bows his or her head before the charm-box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of 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.

The medicine men have an imposing temple, or *latipso*, in every community of any size. The more elaborate ceremonies required to treat very sick patients can only be performed at this temple. These ceremonies involve not only the miracle-worker, but also a group of assistants who move quietly about the temple chambers in distinctive costume and headdress. The *latipso* ceremonies are so harsh that a fair proportion of the really sick natives who enter the temple never recover. Despite this fact, sick adults are not only willing, but eager to undergo the long and drawn-out ritual purification, if they can afford to do so. No matter how ill or how grave the emergency, the guardians of many temples will not admit a client if he or she cannot offer a rich gift.

The Nacirema have an unrealistic 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, and their friends desert them. They also believe that there is a strong relationship between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual cleansing of the mouth for children, which is supposed to improve their moral character.

The daily body ritual includes a mouth-rite. This rite involves a practice which strikes the unfamiliar 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 people seek out a *holy-mouth-man* once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of tools, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these items in removing 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 Nacirema's view, the purpose of these religious functions is to arrest decay and to draw friends.

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.



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