

READ

Read this article about an unusual tribe of people.

The Strangest of Peoples

For many years, anthropologists have studied strange and unusual peoples all over the world. One of the strangest is a group called the Nacirema, the predominant tribe of the North American continent. The territory of the Nacirema is **located** between the territories of the Canadian Cree and the Tarahumara of Mexico. In the southeast, their territory is **bordered** by the Caribbean. Relatively little is **known** of the origin of this people, though they **are said** to have come from somewhere to the east. In fact, the Nacirema **may be related** to certain European and African peoples.

Nacirema people spend a great deal of time on the appearance and health of their bodies. In Nacirema culture, the body is generally **believed** to be ugly and likely to decay. The only way to prevent this decay is through participation in certain magical ceremonies. Every Nacirema house has a special shrine room devoted to this purpose. Some Nacirema houses have more than one shrine room. In fact, it is **felt** in Nacirema culture that the more shrine rooms a family has, the richer it is.

What is in the shrine room? The focal point is a box built into the wall, inside of which is a large collection of magical potions, medicines, and creams. Below the box is a small fountain from which water is obtained. Every day, each member of the Nacirema family enters the shrine room, bows to the chest, and receives magic holy water from the fountain.

Several rituals in Nacirema culture are performed by one sex or the other, but not by both. Every morning, for example, a Nacirema man places a magic cream on his face and then scrapes and sometimes even lacerates¹ his face with a sharp instrument. A similar ritual performed only by women involves the scraping of the legs and underarms.

In Nacirema culture, the mouth is **regarded as** a highly significant part of the body. The Nacirema are fascinated by the mouth and believe its condition has an important and supernatural effect on all social relationships. The daily body ritual involves an activity that **would be considered** repulsive in some cultures. It is **reported** that the Nacirema actually insert into their mouths a stick on one end of which are plasticized hairs covered with a magical paste! They then move these sticks back and forth in their mouths in highly ritualized gestures.

Among the most important individuals in the culture are the "holy-mouth-people." Naciremans visit these practitioners once or twice a year. They possess excellent sharp instruments for performing their magic ceremonies. They place these instruments in the mouths of the Naciremans. If there are holes in the teeth, they are enlarged with these tools. Then a supernatural substance is placed in each hole. It is **said** that the purpose of this practice is to prevent decay in the teeth and especially to help Nacirema people to find spouses.

Another significant person in Nacirema culture is the "listener," a witch doctor who is **thought** to have the power to get rid of the devils in the heads of people who have been bewitched.² Naciremans believe parents often bewitch their own children, especially while teaching the secret toilet rituals, and the listeners must "unbewitch" them. It is also **believed** that the secret to getting rid of these devils is simply to talk about them, usually while reclining on a sofa.

Clearly, the Nacirema are a magic-inspired tribe. Much more research is needed in order to understand this strange people.

¹ lacerates: cuts

² bewitched: "magically" placed under one's power

AFTER YOU READ

A VOCABULARY Choose the word or phrase that is closest in meaning to the word in **bold**.

- The Nacirema are the **predominant** tribe of the North American continent.
a. most intelligent b. most energetic c. most beautiful d. most powerful
- The only way to prevent this decay is through **participation in** magical ceremonies.
a. starting b. admiration of c. sharing in d. inventing
- The **focal** point is a box built into the wall.
a. beginning b. unimportant c. central d. final
- Every Nacirema house has a special shrine room **devoted to** this purpose.
a. used for b. coming from c. kept from d. caused by
- Below the box is a small fountain from which water is **obtained**.
a. seen b. gotten c. admired d. purchased
- Naciremans visit these **practitioners** once or twice a year.
a. scientists b. specialists c. teachers d. assistants
- This is a practice that would be considered **repulsive** in some cultures.
a. dangerous b. unusual c. attractive d. disgusting
- One **ritual** involves the scraping of the legs and underarms.
a. thought b. habitual act c. illegal act d. unusual event

B COMPREHENSION Complete the sentences based on the reading.

- The Nacirema people are one of several _____ in North America.
- The shrine room is in reality the _____.
- The measure of a family's wealth in Nacirema culture is felt to be the number of _____ it has.
- The activity of scraping the face, legs, or underarms is _____.
- The stick that Naciremans insert in their mouths is a _____.
- The holy-mouth-people are _____.
- The listeners or witch doctors are in reality _____.
- In reality, the devils in the heads of bewitched people represent mental _____.