

Nacirema

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Various sociologists have used the term **Nacirema** to examine (with a degree/pretense of anthropological self-distancing) aspects of the behavior and society of **American** people—citizens of **North America**. *Nacirema* offers a form of **word play** by spelling "American" backwards.

Body Ritual Among the Nacirema

The original use of the term was in **Body Ritual Among the Nacirema**, which **satirizes anthropological** papers on "other" cultures, and the Northern American Culture. **Horace Miner** wrote the paper and originally published it in the June 1956 edition of *American Anthropologist*.

In the paper, Miner describes the Nacirema, a little-known tribe living in **North America**. The way in which he writes about the curious practices that this group performs distances readers from the fact that the North American group described actually corresponds to modern-day Americans of the mid-1950s. The article sometimes serves as a demonstration of a **gestalt shift** with relation to **sociology**. Miner presents the Nacirema as a group living in the territory between the Canadian **Cree**, the **Yaqui** and **Tarahumare** of Mexico, and the **Carib** and **Arawak** of the **Antilles**. The paper describes the typical Western ideal for oral cleanliness, as well as providing an outside view on hospital-care and on **psychiatry**.

Miner's article became a popular work, reprinted in many introductory **anthropology** and **sociology** textbooks. It is also given as an example of **process analysis** in *The Bedford Reader*, a literature textbook. The article itself received the most reprint permission requests of any article in *American Anthropologist*, but has become part of the **public domain**.

Some of the popular aspects of Nacirema culture include: Medicine men and women (doctors, psychiatrists, and pharmacists), a shrine box (medicine cabinet), the mouth-rite ritual (**brushing teeth**), and a cultural hero known as Notgnihsaw (**Washington** spelled backwards).

Though generally viewed to be on the west coast, there are several places given the name of Nacirema, including certain streets and very old neighborhoods on the east coast.

The Mysterious Fall of the Nacirema

In 1972 Neil B. Thompson revisited the Nacirema after the fall of their civilization. Thompson's paper,

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nacirema>http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_fusion

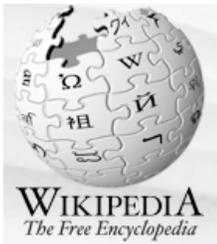
unlike Miner's, primarily offered a **social commentary** focused on **environmental issues**. Thompson paid special attention to the **Elibomotua** Cult and their efforts to modify the environment.

The high esteem of the cult is demonstrated by the fact that near every population center, when not disturbed by the accumulation of debris, archeologists have found large and orderly collections of the Elibomotua Cult symbol. The vast number of these collections has given us the opportunity to reconstruct with considerable confidence the principal ideas of the cult. The newest symbols seem to have nearly approached the ultimate of the Nacirema's cultural ideal. Their colors, material, and size suggest an enclosed mobile device that corresponds to no color or shape found in nature, although some authorities suggest that, at some early time in the development, the egg may have been the model. The device was provided with its own climate control system as well as a system that screened out many of the shorter rays of the light spectrum.

The above refers to an automobile. (Comment for members of the Nacrima tribe)

This article is reprinted and appears as the final chapter in an anthology called *Nacirema: Readings on American Culture*. The volume contains an array of scholarly investigations into American social anthropology as well as one more article in the "Nacirema" series: "The Retention of Folk Linguistic Concepts and the TI'YCIR (pronounced: teacher) Caste in Contemporary Nacireman Culture." This article laments the corrosive and subjugating ritual of attending *sguwlz*. On grammar, the anthropologist notes:

The vowel system of Secular Nacireman consists of nine phonemically distinct vowels distinguished on the basis of three degrees of tongue height and three degrees of tongue advancement.... There can be no question as to the validity of these nine vocalic phonemes, for each is attested by a number of minimal pairs elicited independently from several informants. Curiously enough, however, most informants insist that only five vowels exist in the language: these are called *?ey*, *?iy*, *?ay*, *?ow*, and *yuw*, and are invariably cited in precisely that order.... The discovery of the widespread myth of the five-vowel system prompted the present writer to conduct a series of intensive interviews and administer questionnaires to a sample of Nacireman informants with a view to mapping the general



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outlines of Nacireman folk linguistics. This research strategy ultimately provided compelling evidence that it is the *ti'y^cir* caste that has disseminated the notion of the five-vowel system.

Nacirema vs Teamsterville

Gerry Philipsen (1992) studies what he terms "speech codes" among the Nacirema, which he contrasts with the speech codes of another semi-fictionalized group of Americans, the inhabitants of **Teamsterville** culture. His Nacirema comprises primarily middle-class west-coast Americans.

External links

[Body Ritual among the Nacirema \(PDF\)](#) from *American Anthropologist*, June 1956

[Body Ritual among the Nacirema](#) in Wikisource format.

[The Mysterious Fall of the Nacirema](#) from *Natural History*, December 1972

[1]: web resources on the nacirema

Bibliography

Philipsen, Gerry: *Speaking Culturally : Explorations in Social Communication*. ISBN 0-7914-1164-8

James P.Spradley and Michael A. Rynkiewich eds. *The Nacirema: Readings on American Culture*. (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1975)