**Before Reading Exercise:**

On a scale of 1 to 5, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1- strongly agree 2- agree 3-neutral 4- disagree 5-strongly disagree

A. Native cultures tend to be ritualistic and barbaric.

B. Native cultures are notoriously obsessed with the human body.

C. Civilized cultures don’t believe in magic.

What follows is a slightly edited excerpt from an article, “Body Ritual among the Nacirema,” written by Horace Mitchell Miner, and published in the June 1956 issue of *American Anthropologist*.

The magical beliefs and practices of the Nacirema present such unusual aspects that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go.

Professor Linton, an anthropologist (someone who studies mankind), first brought the ritual of the Nacirema to the attention the world twenty years ago, but the culture of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group of people living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yagui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they come from the east. According to Nacirema mythology, their nation was originated by a culture hero, Notgnihsaw, who is otherwise known for two great feats of strength—the throwing of a piece of wampum across the river Pa-To-Mac and the chopping down of a cherry tree in which the Spirit of Truth resided.

Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy, which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. A large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the people.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to weakness and disease. It is man’s (and woman’s) only hope to change these characteristics through use of ritual or ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose.

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 could live. Many often seek the medicine man who does not provide curative potions, but decides what the ingredients should be and writes them down in ancient and secret language.

In the hierarchy of magical practitioners and below the medicine men in prestige, are specialists whose designation is best translated as “holy-mouth-men.” 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. The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. 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. The people seek out a holy-mouth-man once or twice a year.

A distinctive part of the daily body ritual is performed only by men. This part of the rite includes scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument.

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.

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 people who have been bewitched. The Nacirema believe that parents bewitch their own children. Mothers are particularly suspected of putting a curse on children while teaching them the secret body rituals. The counter-magic of the witchdoctor 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.

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.

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.

**After Reading Exercise:**

Define the following terms:

Holy Mouth Men

Medicine Man

The Listener

Latipso

Charm box

Nacirema