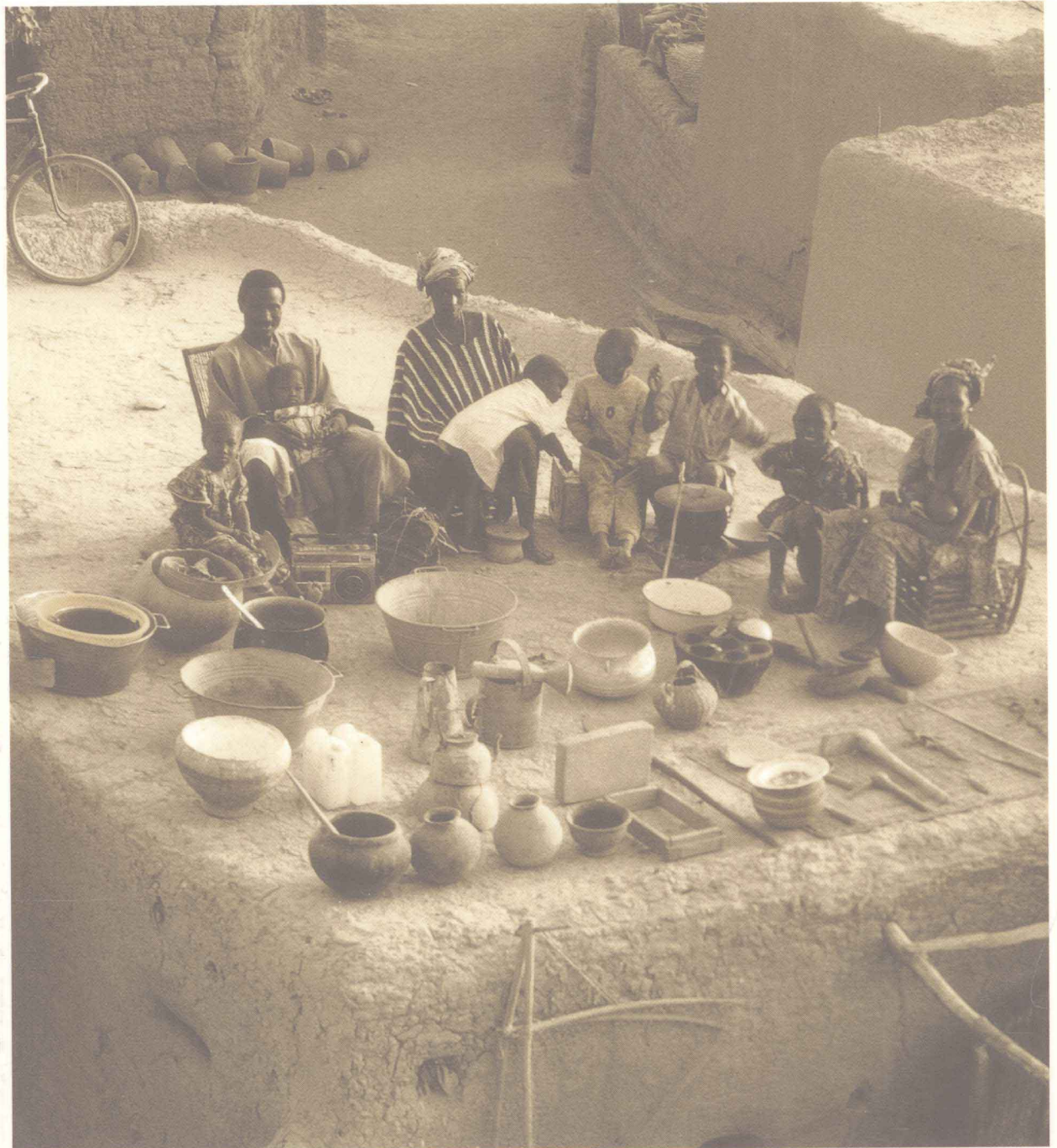


GARY FERRARO

CLASSIC READINGS IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY



Classic Readings in Cultural Anthropology

GARY FERRARO

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

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To all of the authors of classic readings who have been my teachers.



Preface

It has been estimated that there are over five thousand different cultures in the world today which speak mutually unintelligible languages. With such enormous linguistic and cultural variability in the world, it is virtually impossible to become conversant with *all* of the details of *all* of these different cultures. Thus, by necessity, the study of cultural anthropology at the introductory level needs to take a more conceptual approach. Beginning students, in other words, are exposed typically to certain core ideas, which provide a conceptual framework for studying comparative cultures. Introductory textbooks, for example, are organized around such chapters as marriage and family, which, in turn, cover such key concepts as polygyny, the levirate, arranged marriages, the sororate, cross-cousin marriage, and bridewealth. These central concepts are defined and illustrated with ethnographic data from around the world.

Admittedly introductory textbooks in cultural anthropology take a broad brush approach to a vast subject matter. The emphasis, by necessity, is to expose beginning students to the enormity of cultural variability, while at the same time allowing them to see universal similarities among the cultures of the world. This general approach to studying other cultures, however, can be enhanced by supplemental readings, which permit the student to explore some areas of the subject matter in greater depth. It is with this idea of “post holding” in mind that *Classic Readings in Cultural Anthropology* was conceived.

This reader was carefully designed so as to include those articles and segments from books that best represent the discipline over the course of the past

century. These readings were not selected because they represent the most recent research and cutting-edge thinking of twenty first-century scholars. Rather, they represent writings which have been assigned to introductory students by their professors for the past sixty plus years. While being eminently relevant for cultural anthropology today, these selections have endured the decades to become classics in the field. As one anthropologist has put it, these readings are the “gold standard” for modern cultural anthropology.

The readings found in *Classic Readings in Cultural Anthropology* were selected after consulting with a number of cultural anthropologists, including some leading authors of introductory textbooks. Included are pieces dating back as early as 1937 (Evans Pritchard’s study of witchcraft among the Azande) and as recently as the 1990s (Deborah Tannen’s work on gender differences in language). It should be pointed out that selections were not excluded because they contain terminology that is considered politically incorrect today. In some of the earlier writings, for example, we will see such terms as *man* used to refer generically to humans or the use of the term *Eskimo* instead of the more current term *Inuit*. Nevertheless, the use of these outdated terms (which were not politically incorrect at the time they were written) does not invalidate the relevance of these writings for contemporary cultural anthropology.

Classic Readings in Cultural Anthropology is organized according to the major categories found in most introductory courses of cultural anthropology. These include perspectives on culture, language and communication, ecology and economics, marriage and family, politics and social control, supernatural belief systems, and issues of culture change. The timeless “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema” is as relevant today as it was when it was written by Horace Miner nearly a half century ago, for it forces us to confront our own ethnocentrism. George Gmelch reminds us that despite the fact that Americans view themselves as highly rational, scientific, and objective, they often rely on supernatural forces (such as rituals, taboos, and fetishes) to bring about desired outcomes. In the selection on the potlatch practiced by Native Americans on the northwest coast of the United States, Marvin Harris demonstrates the need to interpret a cultural item within its own cultural context, rather than trying to make sense of it from the perspective of one’s own culture. And, Lauriston Sharp’s piece on the Yir Yoront remains today (five decades after it was written) a vivid example of the principle of the functional interconnectedness of the parts of culture.

The reader contains a number of pedagogical features designed to help the beginning student learn the content of cultural anthropology more efficiently. First, each reading is preceded by a brief introduction, which helps the reader better understand both the article’s relevance and context. Second, a series of “Discussion Questions” at the end of each piece serves not only as a check on understanding, but also as a means to stimulate lively class discussions and encourage the reader to make connections to their everyday lives. Third, a “Resources on the Internet” section follows the discussion questions and enables students to access recent information related to each article.

The purpose of this reader is to provide beginning students of cultural anthropology with a set of readings that have stood the test of time. To ensure that this selection of readings meets your needs as both students and instructors, I encourage you to send me your thoughts on how we can improve upon this volume. Please send your comments to me at *gpferrar@email.uncc.edu*

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Introduction

In a recent article in the *Anthropology Newsletter*, anthropologists Bird and Von Trapp report on a nonscientific survey they conducted among a hundred undergraduates that had never taken a course in anthropology. Many of the common stereotypes about anthropology were confirmed. The majority of respondents associated the discipline with stones and bones exclusively; very few could cite the name of a real anthropologist other than the fictional Indiana Jones; and the image of the anthropologist that emerged was a person who was drab, eccentric, elderly, bookish, unbusiness-like, disheveled, wears shabby clothes, and has very little to do with anything outside of academia. All of these impressions are misleading stereotypes, which do nothing but obscure the nature of the discipline and its relevance beyond academia.

Of all of the social sciences, anthropology is the most broadly defined. Some anthropologists do, in fact, deal primarily with stones and bones. One branch of anthropology (*archaeology*) searches for artifacts and other cultural remains of people who lived in the distant past. The subfield of *physical anthropology* unearths fossil remains for the purpose of reconstructing the human evolutionary record. Yet, there are other anthropologists (*cultural anthropologists* and *linguists*) whose focus is on live, warm bodies (i.e., living cultures). Even though these different branches of anthropology have different research agendas, they are all directed at a single purpose: the scientific study of humans, both biologically and culturally, wherever and whenever they may be found. This volume deals only with cultural anthropology, defined most simply as the comparative study of contemporary peoples throughout the world.

Even cultural anthropology, when contrasted with other social sciences, tends to be a wide-ranging discipline. Political scientists focus on power relationships among a group of people. Economists confine their studies to how people produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Sociologists concentrate on social interaction as their major theoretical construct. Cultural anthropologists, on the other hand, do not limit themselves to a single domain of activity. Rather, by focusing on the concept of culture, cultural anthropologists look at *all* aspects of behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and material possessions. This comprehensive perspective on the study of human behavior makes cultural anthropology particularly effective at helping us better understand people different from ourselves.

What do we mean by the term *culture*? Although we all think we know what culture is, anthropologists have a considerably different definition than the one popularly held. In everyday usage, the term *culture* refers to the finer things in life, such refinements as symphonies, great works of art, and fine wines. In other words, the so-called cultured person prefers Bach to Britney Spears, spends time at art openings rather than at the NASCAR track, and drinks expensive French champagne rather than Bud Light. Cultural anthropologists, however, define the term *culture* much more broadly to include the total lifeways of a group of people. This anthropological definition of culture involves much more than playing cello in a string quartet or eating pheasant under glass. For the anthropologist, a culture encompasses all aspects of a group's behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and material possessions—both the artistic and the mundane. Shaking hands, brushing one's teeth, visiting Aunt Maude, or eating a hot dog are all part of the widely defined anthropological definition of the term *culture*.

But what is it that enables the discipline of cultural anthropology to so effectively reveal human nature? To be certain, cultural anthropologists over the past century have adhered to certain guiding principles, which have distinguished them from other social scientists. First, anthropologists take a highly comparative approach by examining cultural similarities and differences throughout the world. Such an approach serves as a valuable corrective against the pitfall of explaining all human behavior in terms of one's own culture. A case in point is the revision of a prominent psychological theory in the early twentieth century in light of comparative, cross-cultural data from Melanesia. Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the founders of modern anthropology, spent four years of uninterrupted fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders of the Pacific between 1914 and 1918. At the time, a widely held theory of psychotherapy was the Oedipus Complex, in which Sigmund Freud explained the social/psychological tension between fathers and sons as the result of sexual jealousy over the mother. Freud reasoned that, since all males have an innate desire to have sexual relations with their mother, they are jealous of their fathers, who, in fact, do have such sexual relations.

However, Malinowski's research among the matrilineal Trobrianders revealed no social or psychological tension between a man and his biological father, as was common in western Europe where Freud made his observations.

The Trobriand Islanders made the distinction between a man's *biological* father (who actually impregnated the mother) and his *social* father (who is actually the man's maternal uncle). Malinowski found that in Trobriand society there was considerable tension with the social father (the man actually responsible for his upbringing) and little or no tension with the biological father, who was more like an older brother. Clearly everyone understood that it was the biological father who slept with the mother to produce the child. Malinowski concluded that the tension between fathers and sons observed by Freud in Europe was in fact the result of authority rather than sexual jealousy, and as a result, the so-called Oedipus Complex was a culture-bound explanation of human behavior. Here, then, is an example of how the broad, comparative approach of cultural anthropology served as a check against an oversimplified explanation of human behavior based solely on evidence from one's own culture.

A second principle that has guided cultural anthropology over the past hundred years has been firsthand observation and inquiry. Many social scientists rely primarily on secondary data such as census data or survey information collected from respondents with whom the scientists never have any face-to-face contact. Cultural anthropologists, by way of contrast, rely on participant observation to a greater extent than any other single data-gathering technique. As its name implies, participant observation involves living in the culture under study while at the same time making systematic observations about it. By engaging in participant observation, cultural anthropologists share in the everyday activities of the local people while making detailed observations of people working, playing, eating, talking, trading, educating, or any other cultural activity. The methodological advantages of hands-on research should be obvious. Since most people appreciate any attempt from outsiders to at least try to live according to their culture, participant observation will, in most cases, improve both rapport and the quality of the data received. Moreover, firsthand research allows the anthropologist to distinguish between what people actually do and what they say they do. Participant-observers, in other words, have the advantage of observing actual behavior rather than relying on hearsay.

Perhaps the single-most important feature that cultural anthropologists bring to the study of other cultures is the insistence upon viewing a foreign cultural object within its proper *cultural context*. Whenever people encounter a foreign cultural item (such as an idea, a material object, or a behavior pattern), the usual tendency is to make sense of it in terms of their own cultural assumptions. They generally ask themselves the question: how does this foreign idea or thing fit into my culture? Of course, since it is not part of their culture, there is absolutely no reason why it should fit in. There is, in other words, nothing in their own culture that would tend to support that particular cultural item. If you really want to understand why this particular idea or thing is part of that foreign culture, it must be examined in terms of that culture, rather than your own.

Perhaps an example would help. Most middle-class North Americans, men and women alike, see no sense in the practice of polygyny (a man having more than one wife at a time). They see it as nonsensical, or worse yet, downright immoral and illegal. And, viewed from the perspective of their own cultural assumptions, they would be right. There is very little in our culture that would support or reinforce the practice of polygyny. In fact, there are many parts of our culture that would be in direct conflict with polygyny, such as our legal system and the norms of Christian churches. Even our economic system is at odds with polygyny, because, in a cash economy such as our own, it makes no economic sense whatsoever to have large numbers of wives and large numbers of children.

However, if we view polygyny from its original cultural context—let us say from the cultural perspective of an East African mixed farming community—it makes a good deal of sense. In fact, given all of the other parts of *that* culture, polygyny is the most logical form of marriage imaginable. First, there is nothing illegal about having more than one wife at a time in East Africa. Second, their traditional agricultural system encourages men to take more than one wife so as to maximize the size of the family. Unlike in the United States where large families are economically irrational, in East Africa the more family members there are to cultivate crops, the better off the entire group will be. Third, the system of social prestige in East Africa is based on the number of wives and overall family size, not material wealth as is the case in our own society. Even women in traditional African societies, wanting to be part of a high-status household, supported their husbands' efforts to take additional wives. And, finally, the practice of polygyny is supported in many East African societies by the traditional religious practice of ancestor worship. Since men are often elevated to the status of ancestor-god upon death, it is only logical that men would want to have large families so they will have large numbers of people worshipping them after they die. A man with one wife and one child would have only a "congregation" of two people!

Thus, cultural anthropology teaches us that if we view a foreign cultural item through our own cultural lens, it is not likely to make much sense. When polygyny is wrenched from its original cultural context in East Africa, there is no way that it can seem rational. The best way to truly understand an item from another culture is to view it from within its proper cultural content. No one is asking you to practice a foreign cultural norm (such as polygyny). In fact, you are not even required to like it. But, if you want to understand the inherent logic of why people in another culture think and behave the way they do (which is the primary objective of the discipline of cultural anthropology), then it is imperative that you follow the lead of cultural anthropology, which from its beginnings has insisted on analyzing the parts of different cultures within their original contexts.



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1

Body Ritual Among the Nacirema

HORACE MINER

Since the early decades of the twentieth century, Western anthropologists have concentrated their research on small-scale, technologically simple societies outside of Europe and North America. In that same tradition, Horace Miner, a former professor of sociology and anthropology at the University of Michigan, wrote a piece for the American Anthropologist, in 1956 about an exotic people called the Nacirema, whose central belief is that their susceptibility to disease and ill health can only be averted by engaging in a wide range of rituals and magical practices. Miner's elegant description of this highly ritualistic culture provides what at first glance would be a classic example of an exotic non-Western culture. But as you get further into this article—which is probably the most widely reproduced article in twentieth-century anthropology—you get the feeling that it sounds a little too familiar.

Unlike Miner himself, the editor of this reader will not try to obscure the true identity of the Nacirema, who, Miner tells us, “live between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles.” The Nacirema, of course, are us—middle-class residents of the United States. The name Nacirema is American spelled backwards.

The significance of this first selection, and no doubt the reasons for its enormous popularity among anthropologists, is that it forces us to confront our own ethnocentrism. That is, we tend to view other, non-Western societies as filled with ritual, while automatically assuming that our own behavior is based totally on rational thought. The reason that first-time American readers fail to recognize themselves as Nacirema is because they have never applied such terms as ritual or superstition to their own, everyday, mundane behavior. Their ethnocentrism, in other words, prevents them from seeing their own culture as anything other than normal and natural. But Miner's article, now nearly a half century old, forces us to confront our biases when trying to understand our own culture in relation to others.

From “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema” by Horace Miner in *American Anthropologist*, 58(3): 503–507, 1956. Reprinted with permission from the American Anthropological Association.

The anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which different peoples behave in similar situations that he is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs. In fact, if all of the logically possible combinations of behavior have not been found somewhere in the world, he is apt to suspect that they must be present in some yet undescribed tribe. This point has, in fact, been expressed with respect to clan organization by Murdock (1949: 71). In this light, 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 first brought the ritual of the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago (1936: 326), 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 Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, though tradition states that they came from the east. According to Nacirema mythology, their nation was originated by a culture hero, Notgnishaw, 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. While much of the people's time is devoted to economic pursuits, 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. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremonial aspects and associated philosophy are unique.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and dis-

ease. Incarcerated in such a body, man's only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of the powerful influences 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 opulence of a house is often referred to in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses. Most houses are of wattle and daub construction, but the shrine rooms of the more wealthy are walled with stone. Poorer families imitate the rich by applying pottery plaques to their shrine walls.

While each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. The rites are normally only discussed with children, and then only during the period when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to establish sufficient rapport with the natives to examine these shrines and to have the rituals described to me.

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. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative 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.

The charm is not disposed of after it has served its purpose, but is placed in the charm-box of the household shrine. As these magical materials are specific for certain ills, and the real or imagined maladies of the people are many, the charm-box is usually full to overflowing. The magical packets are so numerous that people forget what their purposes were and fear to use them again. While the natives are very vague on

this point, we can only assume that the idea in retaining all the old magical materials is that their presence in the charm-box, before which the body rituals are conducted, will in some way protect the worshipper.

Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows his head before the charm-box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.

In the hierarchy of magical practitioners, and below the medicine men in prestige, are specialists whose designation is best translated "holy-mouth-men." The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror 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, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them. (They also believe that a strong relationship exists between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual ablution of the mouth for children which is supposed to improve their moral fiber.)

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated 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 powders, 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 paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these objects in the exorcism of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual tor-

ture 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 client's view, the purpose of these ministrations is to arrest decay and to draw friends. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy-mouth-men year after year, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay.

It is to be hoped that, when a thorough study of the Nacirema is made, there will be a careful inquiry into the personality structure of these people. One has but to watch the gleam in the eye of a holy-mouth-man, as he jabs an awl into an exposed nerve, to suspect that a certain amount of sadism is involved. If this can be established, a very interesting pattern emerges, for most of the population shows definite masochistic tendencies. It was to these that Professor Linton referred in discussing a distinctive part of the daily body ritual which is performed only by men. This part of the rite involves scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument. Special women's rites are performed only four times during each lunar month, but what they lack in frequency is made up in barbarity. As part of this ceremony, women bake their heads in small ovens for about an hour. The theoretically interesting point is that what seems to be a preponderantly masochistic people have developed sadistic specialists.

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 thaumaturge but a permanent group of vestal maidens who move sedately about the temple chambers in distinctive costume and headdress.

The *latipso* ceremonies are so harsh that it is phenomenal that a fair proportion of the really