

The Mysterious Fall of the Nacirema

This vigorous culture's obsession with altering its landscapes and waterways may have caused its own death.

By Neil B. Thompson

THE revival of concern in the recently extinct culture of the Nacirema is, to say the least, most interesting, and perhaps reflects an increasing state of concern for our society. (Aspects of the Nacirema culture were first described by Horace Miner in "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema," *American Anthropologist* [1956] 58:503–507.) The use of a multidisciplinary approach in deciphering this puzzling culture is gratifying; for it is only by bringing all our methodological techniques to bear on the fragments of evidence in our possession that we will be able to rationally study and understand the history of this apparently vigorous but short-lived culture.

Through exploratory digs by our archeological expeditions, we are able to say with some confidence that the Nacirema were the dominant group in the complex of North American cultures. Although the Nacirema left a large number of documents, our linguists have been unable to decipher any more than a few scattered fragments of the Nacirema language. Eventually, with the complete translation of these documents, we will undoubtedly learn a great deal about the reasons for the sudden disappearance of what, from the physical evidence, must have been an explosive and expansive culture. For the present, however, we must rely upon the physical evidence we have uncovered and analyzed in order to draw any conclusions concerning its extinction.

When we examine the area occupied by these people in a single overview, it is immediately apparent that the Nacirema considered it of primary importance to completely remake the environment of the lands they occupied. On studying the fringes of their territory, particularly their penetration of the Cree cultural area to the north, one is struck by the energy that they expended on this task. Trees, if in large enough numbers and size to influence the appearance of the landscape, were removed. In treeless regions, hills were leveled and large holes were dug and partially filled with water. In a few areas the Nacirema imported structural steel with which they erected tall, sculptural towers. Some of these towers were arranged in series, making long lines that extended beyond the horizon, and were linked by several cables running through the air. Others, particularly in the northern fringe area, were erected in no discernible geometric pattern and were connected by hollow pipes laid on the surface of the earth.

When one views areas normally considered to be within their cultural suzerainty, one sees evidence of similar activity. Most trees were removed. In some areas, however, trees were replanted or areas were allowed to reforest themselves without assistance. Apparently, the fetish against trees went by fits and starts, for the Nacirema would sometimes move into a reforested area and again remove the trees.

Most of the land, however, was kept clear of trees and was sowed each year with a limited variety of plants. Esthetic considerations must have led to the cultivation of plants poisonous to human life because, while the products of the cropland were sometimes used as food, few were consumed without first being subjected to long periods of complicated processing.

Purifying chemicals, which radically changed the appearance and the specific weights of the seeds or fibers, were added. These purification rituals were seldom performed in the living quarters, but rather in a series of large temple-like buildings devoted to this purpose. A vast hierarchy of priests dressed in white (a symbol of purity) devoted their lives to this liturgy. Members of another group, the powerful ssenisub community (whose position will be explained later), constantly examined the efforts of the first group and, if they approved, would affix to the finished product one of several stamps, such as "ADSU" or "Doog Gnipeekesouh." Still a third group, the repeekkoobs, accepted and recorded on permanent memorial rolls the gifts of the general population to their priestly order.

On a more limited territorial basis, the Nacirema spent great time and energy constructing narrow ribbons, called steerts, across the landscape. Some steerts were arranged in connected patterns, and in regions with a great concentration of people, the patterns, when viewed from the air, increased in size and became more elaborate. Other ribbons did not follow any particular pattern but aimlessly pushed from one population center to another. In general, their primary function seems to have been to geometricize the landscape into units that could be manipulated by a few men. The steerts also served as environmental dividers; persons of a lower caste lived within the boundaries of defined areas while those of the upper caste were free to live where they chose. Exploratory digs have shown that the quality of life in the different areas varied from very luxurious to poverty stricken. The various areas were generically referred to as ottehgs.

The task of completely altering the appearance of the environment to fit the Nacirema's ideology was given such high priority that the ssenisub community completely controlled the amassing of resources, manpower, and intelligence for this purpose. This group, whose rank bordered on that of a nonregimented priestly caste, lived in areas that were often guarded by electronic systems. There is no evidence to suggest that any restraints—moral, sociological, or engineering—were placed on their self-determined enterprises.

For a period of about 300 solar cycles (a determination made on the basis of carbon-dating studies) the Nacirema devoted a major part of their effort to the special environmental problem of changing the appearance of air and water. Until the last 50 solar cycles of the culture's existence, they seemed to have had only indifferent success. But during the short period before the fall of the culture, they mastered their art magnificently. They changed the color of the waters from the cool end of the spectrum (blues and greens) toward the warm end (reds and browns).

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The air was subjected to a similar alteration: it was changed from an azure shade to a uniform gray-yellow. This alteration of water and air was effected by building enormous plants in strategic locations. These are usually found by our archeologists in or near large population centers, although, as success rewarded the Nacirema's efforts, they seem to have built smaller plants in outlying areas where environmental changes had not yet been effected. These plants constantly produced a variety of reagents, each appropriate to its locale, which were then pumped into the rivers and lakes or released into the atmosphere in the form of hot gases.

The problem of disposing of the many by-products of this process was solved by distributing them among the general population which retained them as venerated or decorative objects in their living quarters for a short time, then discarded them in the huge middens that were established near every population center.

In regions where colder temperatures apparently prevented the reagents from changing the color of the water sufficiently, the Nacirema, near the end of their cultural explosion, built special plants that economically raised the water temperature to an acceptable level for the desired chemical reaction.

The idea of a man-made environment was so pervasive that in some areas, notably in the provinces called Ainrofilac and Anaisiuol, the Nacirema even tried to alter the appearance of the ocean currents. In these regions they erected steel sculptures in the sea itself and through them released a black and slick substance, which stained the waters and the beaches. This experiment however, was relatively unsuccessful since the stains were not permanent and the Nacirema apparently never mastered a technique for constantly supplying the reagent.

The quasi-religious Elibomotua Cult, which sought to create an intense sense of individual involvement in the community effort to completely control the environment. Early research has disclosed the importance of ritualistic observance among the Nacirema. In support of these observations, we should note the presence of the quasi-religious Elibomotua Cult, which sought to create an intense sense of individual involvement in the community effort to completely control the environment. This pervasive cult was devoted to the creation of an artistic symbol for a man-made environmental system.

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 object was designed to eliminate most sounds from the outside and to fill the interior with a hypnotic humming sound when the machine was in operation. This noise could be altered in pitch and intensity by the manipulation, through simple mechanical controls, of an ingenious mechanism located outside the operator's compartment. This mechanism also produced a gaseous substance that, in a small area, could change the appearance of the air in a manner similar to the permanent plant installations.

In the early stages of the symbol's development, this was probably only a ritualistic performance since the production plant was small and was fueled by a small tank. This function, however, may have been the primary reason for the cult's symbol: to provide each

family with its own device for altering the environment by giving it a private microuniverse with a system of producing the much desired air-changing reagent.

The complete machined piece was somewhat fragile. Our tests of the suspension system indicate that it was virtually immobile on unimproved terrain; by all of our physical evidence, its movement was restricted to the surfaced steerts that the Nacirema had built to geometricize the landscape.

We are relatively certain that a specially endowed and highly skilled group of educators was employed to keep the importance of these enclosed mobile devices constantly in the public eye. Working in an as yet unlocated area that they referred to as Euneva Nosidam, these specialists printed periodical matter and transmitted electronic-impulse images to boxlike apparatus in all homes.

While some of the information was aimed at describing the appearance and performance characteristics of the various kinds of machines, the greatest portion of the material was seemingly aimed at something other than these factors. A distinguished group of linguists, social psychologists, and theologians, who presented the principal symposium at our most recent anthropological conference, offered the hypothesis that the elibomotua symbols, also known as racs, replaced the processes of natural selection in the courtship and mating rituals of the Nacirema. Through unconscious suggestion, which derived from Euneva Nosidam's "mcnahulesque" materials, the female was uncontrollably driven to select her mate by the kind of elibomotua he occupied. The males of the culture were persuaded to believe that any handicap to masculine dominance could be overcome by selecting the proper cult symbol. In this way, the future of the race, as represented by Nacirema culture, was determined by unnatural man-made techniques.

The symposium was careful to point out that we have not yet uncovered any hard evidence to show whether or not this cultural trait actually had any effect on the race or its population growth. We have found, however, one strange sculpture from the Pop Looches depicting a male and female mating in an elibomotua's rear compartment, indicating a direct relationship. The hypothesis has the virtue of corresponding to the standard anthropological interpretations of the Nacirema culture—that it was ritual ridden and devoted to the goal of man's control of the environment.

Further evidence of the Nacirema's devotion to the Elibomotua Cult has been discovered in surviving scraps of gnivom serutcip. Some of these suggest that one of the most important quasi-religious ceremonies was performed by large groups who gathered at open-air shrines built in imitation of a planetary ellipse and called a kcartecar. There, with intensely emotional reactions, these crowds watched a ritual in which powerful gnicar racs performed their idealized concept of the correct behavior of the planets in the universe. Apparently, their deep-seated need for a controlled environment was thus emotionally achieved.

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The racs did not hold a steady position in the planetarium, but changed their relationship to the other racs rather frequently. Occasionally a special ritual, designed to emphasize man's power over his universe, was enacted. On these unannounced occasions one or more of the planet symbols was destroyed by crashing two of them together or by throwing one against a wall.

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The emotional pitch of the worshipers rose to its highest level at this moment. Then, on command of the high priest of the ceremony, all the gnacar racs were slowed to a funereal speed and carefully held in their relative positions. After an appropriate memorial period honoring man's symbolic control of the universe, the machines were given the signal to resume their erratic speeds and permitted to make unnatural position changes.

We can only speculate on the significance of this ritual, but it seems reasonable to conclude that it served as an educational device, constantly imprinting in the individual the society's most important values.

Many of the findings of archeological explorations suggest that these symbols of universal power took up a large portion of the time and energy of the Nacirema society. Evidence indicates that a sizable portion of the work force and enormous amounts of space must have been devoted to the manufacture, distribution, and ceremonial care of the devices. Some of the biggest production units of the economy were assigned this function; extensive design laboratories were given over to the manipulation of styles and appearances, and assembly lines turned out the pieces in serial fashion. They were given a variety of names, although all of those made in the same time period looked remarkably alike.

Every family assumed the responsibility for one of the machined pieces and venerated it for a period of two to four solar cycles. Some families who lived in areas where a high quality of life was maintained took from two to four pieces into their care. During the time a family held a piece, they ritually cleansed it, housed it from the elements, and took it to special shrines where priests gave it a variety of injections.

The Nacirema spent much of their time inside their elibomotuas moving about on the steerts. Pictures show that almost everyone engaged, once in the morning and once in the evening, in what must have been an important mass ritual, which we have been unable to decipher with any surety. During these periods of the day, people of both sexes and all ages, except the very young and the very old, left their quarters to move about on the steerts in their racs. Films of these periods of the day show scenes analogous to the dance one can occasionally see in a swarm of honeybees. In large population centers this "dance of the racs" lasted for two or three hours. Some students have suggested that since the swarm dances took place at about the time the earth completed one-half an axial rotation, it may have been a liturgical denial of the natural processes of the universe.

Inasmuch as we are reasonably certain that after the rite most of the adults and all of the children left the racs and were confined inside man-made structures variously called loohcs,

eciffos, tnalps, or emohs and, when released, went immediately to their racs and engaged in the next swarming, the suggestion may be apropos. The ardent involvement of the whole population from ages 6 through 65 indicates that it was one of the strongest mores of the culture, perhaps approaching an instinctual behavior pattern.

It should also be mentioned that, when inside their racs, people were not restricted to their ottehgs, but were free to go any where they chose so long as they remained on the steerts. Apparently, when they were confined inside a rac, the Nacirema attained a state of equality, which eliminated the danger of any caste contamination. These, then, to the best of our present state of knowledge, were the principal familial uses of the Elibomotua Cult symbols. After a family had cared for a piece long enough to burnish it with a certain patina, it was routinely replaced by another, and the used rac was assigned to a gallery keeper, who placed it on permanent display in an outdoor gallery, sometimes surrounded by trees or a fence, but usually not concealed in any way. During their free time, many persons, especially those from the ottehgs of the lesser sorts, came to study the various symbols on display and sometimes carried away small parts to be used for an unknown purpose.

There seems to be little doubt that the Cult of the Elibomotua was so fervently embraced by the general population, and that the daily rituals of the rac's care and use were so faithfully performed, that the minute quantities of reagent thus distributed may have had a decisive effect on the chemical characteristics of the air. The elibomotua, therefore, may have contributed in a major way toward the prized objective of a totally man-made environment.

In summary, our evaluation of both the Nacirema's man-made environmental alterations and the artifacts found in their territories lead us to advance the hypothesis that they may have been responsible for their own extinction. The Nacirema culture may have been so successful in achieving its objectives that the inherited physiological mechanisms of its people were unable to cope with its manufactured environment.

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