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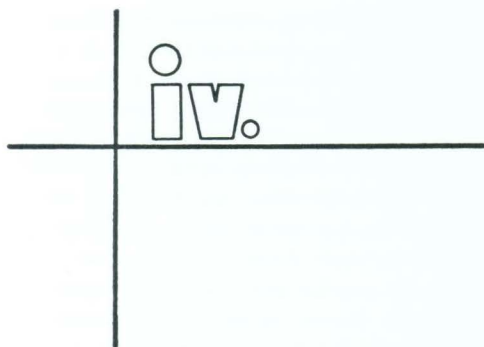
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# Anatomy of an Anatomy Cult

By CLAUDE S. PHILLIPS

The Sexual Revolution of the last half-century has produced in advanced societies a new curiosity about the varieties of cultural forms dealing with erotic matters. It may be a little surprising, therefore, for our readers to find that there is still a major culture with unusual sexual attitudes and practices which is almost unknown. I refer to the Nacirema Tribe, which was discovered, as it were, by Professor Horace Miner ("Body Ritual Among the Nacirema," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 58, No. 3, June 1956, pp. 503-07). Until his discovery, scholars had assumed that all major societies and almost all minor ones had been visited, studied, measured, psychoanalyzed and classified. The academic community, therefore, was electrified to learn that an unusually large society, comprising fully 6% of the earth's population, had been almost totally neglected by the probing scholars. Even to this day there is little popular awareness of the Nacirema in general and probably no understanding of their peculiar concern with anatomy.

The Nacirema (na-si-reé-mah) Tribe is located between the Tropic of Cancer and the Canadian Cree, and extends all the way from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Professor Miner has made many observations about the Nacirema, and has published his study in a major journal. He has identified certain heroes (such as Notgnih-saw, who is regarded as the father of the tribe and was known, among other things, for his ability to throw wampum across a holy river, the Camotop) and analyzed many social and behavioral characteristics of this unusual society. He was especially puzzled, however, by what he calls the Body Ritual which pervades every level of the class system. In every compound is to be found a shrine room, with gleam-

ing white utensils, in which daily libations, vigorous scrubbing of teeth with hog bristles, and secret excretory rites occur. In each shrine is a holy box containing magical herbs for all kinds of ills, and magical potions and instruments to produce beauty. This box is kept filled by the recommendations of shamans (healers, which all societies have) and holy mouth men (peculiar in many aspects to the Nacirema). After a lengthy discourse on these and similar matters, Dr. Miner could only conclude that the Nacirema are magic-ridden, with special body rites having particular significance to them.

I have spent some time recently among the Nacirema, originally motivated by Professor Miner's study. It now appears that he was too cautious in his conclusions and that, in fact, the very core of the Nacirema religion is the Body. Indeed it is now quite clear that the very heart of their existence, the basis of their values, the object of their idle thoughts, the root of their jokes, the source of their conscience, the central aspect of their taboos, is the Body and one must assert, therefore, that the Nacirema have a full-blown Anatomy Cult before which other aspects of life pale. My purpose here is merely to introduce some of the evidence which has led me to such a conclusion.

For perspective it might be helpful to point out that this article could not have been circulated in Naciremaland until quite recently. To be sure, the Nacirema do have a system of magic symbols by which they communicate ideas and pictorial images on artificial parchment. But in order to protect the purity of the people they have created what they call a "rosnec" to restrict the use of the magic symbols. A rosnec is a person, frequently self-appointed, who believes that he can read magic symbols dealing with the Body and not be harmed, but that all other people would be harmed by such reading. A rosnec, therefore, is one who may read anything but stop other people from reading what he condemns! If a rosnec says something he has read will harm others, the law says that no one else may read it. By some hidden magic, which the myths do not explain, when a Nacirema becomes a rosnec his mind is transformed into a void which permits him to read the magic symbols and remain impervious to thought; he becomes a walking, talking, reading, mindless human being.

However, not every rosnec is backed by law in Naciremaland. Only those, for the most part, who are concerned with the Body and Body functions have the law behind them. The Nacirema have built up a rich language about the Body which must never be written or pictured in magic symbols. Thus one must not read about birth, menstruation, copulation, excretion, breasts, genitals or buttocks. Artistic representations of the human Body, even in sculpture and drawings, blot out the absolute proof of the sex of the model. (In 1962



the elders of a large village, Tiorted, required their artists to paint "bronze pants" on a statue before they would permit it to be displayed in a public building.) Masterpieces have tree leaves or wisps of cloth floating conveniently across the unnamed areas, and popular art men pose their models, often grotesquely, so as to protect the senses from the evil parts. Some parchments, boldly and radically devoted to advocating nudism, depict their models as completely sexless below the waist. It is in this realm of Body references that rosnecs have their function. One may criticize, or even debase, their superstitions, their rich political, economic and social institutions, even their general system of ethics, with almost total impunity. On the other hand, one may not describe the Body in its most natural functions, or most rewarding activities, or most aesthetic and meaningful purposes, and it is the duty of the rosnecs to enforce this taboo. This puts the Nacirema in the most unusual position of being tolerant about what they have created as human beings, but allowing no tolerance about the human Body which nature created.

Recently the Nacirema have faced the acculturative process of contact with more advanced societies. As a result numerous inconsistencies have developed in the Body Cult. For example, shamans and their female assistants may now view individuals wholly nude and no one objects. On the other hand, a man who is not a shaman cannot see his baby born, no matter how willing his wife may be and even if he has seen her nude before. The point is that nudity gets special treatment. This is due to the fact that the Nacirema act on the premise that the Body is a positive evil, and unclothed it is in its most evil state. Taboos are especially strong on this point.

In the past, before the contact with higher civilizations, the Body was always covered, all over. Even today, any degree of nudity is an exception to the rule. Although some taboos have yielded, there are still strong feelings about genitals, buttocks and female breasts, and every effort is made to protect people from seeing these. But, as I have said, inconsistencies have now appeared. For some reason the female nipple is more evil than the male, as can be seen in the most liberal cloth-wearing style. Women may wear little strips of cloth that expose their whole bosom, but the nipples are covered. Even at a clan dance the women may wear long pieces of cloth covering their legs and lower Body, but the top may cover almost nothing of the front and back except the nipples. (At such dances men cover themselves all over except for the hands and head, but on other occasions they freely expose the whole chest.)

Even for swimming the Nacirema cover themselves with cloth, and many of them were shocked a few years ago when a new swimming design was introduced which exposed the navel. The cause for disturbance is apparent if one accepts the fact that everything associated

with sex is evil. They reason as follows: the navel implies birth, birth implies uterus, uterus implies vagina, and, *mutatis mutandis*, the most evil part of the Body.

Learning-houses, where children learn to read the magic symbols and study the accumulated wisdom of the tribe, also give some instruction on the Body. Until recently, however, the learning-house disciplinarians proudly boasted that demonstration models of the Body were sexless. Inconsistencies have appeared here also, as revealed by the fact that a large percentage of the natives are now saying that knowledge is better than ignorance, even in learning-houses and on matters of sex. Conservative forces have now rallied to a defense of ignorance, publicly proclaiming that there should be no public discussion of sex. Leading the defense of ignorance is a small band of natives who call themselves the Society of the Birch. The Society not only maintains that the awareness of sex is evil; it claims that boys and girls do not know that there are two sexes unless or until evil persons point it out to them.

Nacirema taboos require that the Body be covered for two related reasons. One is to hide evil (I will explain later the source of the myth that the Body is evil). The other is to take the mind off the Body, the assumption being "out of sight, out of mind." Given these premises, one would assume that the clothing would consist of tents, with arm holes for working. This is not the case, however. They cover the Body with cloth to hide it, then cut and mold the cloth in such a way as to reveal it. Men's garments are usually tight enough to reveal the masculinity of the wearer, and women's garments are shaped to reveal every curve, every protrusion and almost every cleavage of femininity. Instead of taking the mind off the Body, Nacirema clothing constantly focuses attention on it. No man, for example, can see a Nacirema woman sit down without watching her arrange the cloth about her knees, hoping for a forbidden glimpse of thigh.

Modern psychology indicates that the best way to take the mind off the Body is to make it commonplace, that is, undress it except for those occasions when one wants the mind focused on it. I pointed this out once to a Nacirema witch doctor (priest) and he accused me of trying to interfere with nature. Discretion forced me to drop the issue. However, some explanation is called for and I believe that I may have discovered it. Nacirema mythology holds that the first man covered his genitals with a fig leaf. From their artistic expression of this significant event, I must conclude that it was a small fig leaf indeed. Somehow through the course of history this action expanded by a kind of Parkinson's Law to hiding the whole Body most of the time and some of it all the time.

Certain wise men who study the ways of their society continue to



demonstrate the unusual consequences of the taboos associated with the Body among the Nacirema. It has been discovered, for example, that some married people have never seen their spouses unclothed. It is not yet understood how copulation occurs and, indeed, many of these people deny that it does; but they do continue to have children so we must assume that some form of Body contact takes place. Rumors have it these people get around the sight taboo by disrobing, or more exactly partly disrobing, in total darkness. However, more research needs to be done on the relationships of the sight taboo with the feeling taboo. Do non-disrobers also refrain from feeling the partner's Body, and if so where do they place their hands?

It may be that non-disrobers are dwindling in number, for the wise men have shown that a considerable number of people seem to practice certain activity in contradiction of the taboos. The Nacirema hold that monogamy is natural, ergo bi-sexual bodily contact outside of rigorous monogamy is worse than evil, it is unnatural. However, the taboos associated with monogamy are violated rather freely. Apparently, monogamy is natural only at a particular moment in history, for a person may marry any number of people in a lifetime as long as he has one spouse at a time and a divorce is obtained from the last one. Furthermore, studies of wise men show that the Nacirema copulate with people other than their particular spouse of the moment, although the witch doctors constantly deny it. (There is a relationship between the wise men and the witch doctors which is worth noting. Wise men are required to train until they are able to pass rigorous examinations at around age thirty before they can examine either the ways of nature or the ways of man. Witch doctors, however, have no universally prescribed training. One clan may require only that a man have a trance in which he feels called of their god to become a witch doctor, while another clan may require as much training of their witch doctors as is prescribed for wise men. The unusual relationship occurs when wise men who study the ways of man assert that the Nacirema are behaving differently than the taboos dictate. The witch doctors immediately attack, not the taboo breakers, but the wise men. This happened recently when a wise man, named Yesnik, pointed out that the Nacirema were secretly violating the monogamy taboos. He was denounced by the witch doctors, but no effort was made to reinforce the taboos, possibly because the witch doctors were themselves typical of the rest of the population in this matter.)

The most obvious evidence of bi-sexual relations outside of marriage is seen in dancing. Men and women, unmarried or not married to each other, hold one another close, face to face, and move around the floor keeping in step with music. This is regarded as "good fun," and on festive occasions such as New Year, the partners may even

kiss. Such activity may go on for hours with a heightening erotic anticipation in each partner which is suddenly frustrated by a taboo against the end result. Here we see the strange spectacle of a permissiveness towards many forms of sex-play and an absolute prohibition towards carrying it to its natural conclusion. The contradictions stem largely from the fact that copulation is both an embarrassing subject and an embarrassing act. This may appear unusual in view of the fact that the Nacirema are far more advanced than other tribes in many ways. Not only do they know the relationship of copulation to parentage, they have even developed a medicine, called the "llip," which allows the first to occur without producing the second. Sexual freedom, heretofore restricted because of the fear of producing unwanted babies, has now been made possible. One might assume, therefore, that the llip would produce among the Nacirema the freest of all societies in sex relations. This has not happened. Chiefs, councillors and the law makers are embarrassed to talk about its many implications, and witch doctors, in their traditional role, have inveighed against it. Only shamans have free access to the contraceptive, and they are supposed to provide it to married people only. Yet the tragedy of unwanted children is most acute among unmarried people!

Advanced civilizations regard pregnancy as a rather natural condition for women to be in occasionally. The Nacirema do much to pretend that it does not exist. (However, they will do nothing to stop pregnancy. Recently a woman who wished to abort what scientific knowledge said would be a horribly deformed child had to flee to a foreign land to do it.) They require pregnant women to wear special covering which consists of a piece of cloth hung from the waist with a big hole in it for the protruding abdomen. Over this and hung from the shoulders is another piece of cloth which reaches below the hole. Thus adorned, women venture forth into the market place pretending that no one knows. When a pregnant woman meets a man she pretends that he does not know she is pregnant, and he pretends to notice nothing unusual about her bulging outfit. When she meets other women they all pretend that they would not have known if she had not told them.

Pregnancy is so much a part of Body function that the Nacirema have special words to avoid admitting the obvious. A woman is never simply pregnant—she is "expecting," or "anticipating," or "in that condition," or "in a family way." If for some reason she has not had the approval of a witch doctor or a minor chief to get pregnant, she is referred to as being in a sinful way and the baby which results is punished for her deed. Such a baby is labeled a "dratsab," a particularly offensive word among the Nacirema. In fact, all of the important taboo words are associated with the Body, and most concern reproduction and/or sex. The most serious charge one can make



to a Nacirema is to call him a son of a female dog.

Further evidence of the Anatomy Cult comes from the use of cloth to create illusions about the Body. For example, they have a harness implement of straps and cups in which women encase their breasts. This device, called an "arb," is worn by women of all clans, apparently for two reasons. One is to allow padding to be placed in front of the breasts in order to call attention thereto by the illusion of largeness. The other is to keep the breasts from bouncing and thus calling attention to them! Another example is the "eldrig," which is an especially restrictive garment stretched over the Body from waist to mid-thigh, an obvious carry-over from the torturous chastity belt of old. The eldrig provides women a sense of both daring and security. On the one hand, it is regarded as shaping the entire pelvic region more alluringly. On the other hand, there is a sense of inviolability about being packed into a tight garment which is as difficult to get out of as into.

The ideal image of the human Body among the Nacirema has gotten so far from the shape of human beings as to cause some consternation. The ideal man has very broad shoulders, a little waist and almost no hips. The ideal woman has almost no shoulders, grape-fruit-size breasts, a tiny waist (ideally top and bottom should be connected by the navel), and hips equal in size to the bosom. Consternation comes, of course, when human beings try to mold themselves into these shapes. Aberrations in nature help some people, but others must exercise and diet to achieve the ideal shape. Those who achieve some success become known as "Srats" and are herded together in a holy village called Doowylloh. There they are paid great riches to display their priceless possessions, and select females are even referred to as deities. The masses, however, enjoy the good fortune of the Srats vicariously and rely on cloth to give them the ideal illusion (hence their phrase "clothes make a man").

Research is still under way on the myth-system which created the Anatomy Cult. However, certain conclusions can now be reached on the basis of what has already been said. In Naciremaland the people, through various forms of magic communication, have considerable freedom in areas of war and peace, politics, economics, superstitions, other tribes, marketing, and what have you, but a rigid taboo system comes into play when the human Body and the individual relationships connected therewith are involved. When the temple of his being is involved, the average Nacirema becomes uncomfortable. Any parchment of magic symbols and magic pictures which deals with the human Body is criticized, and if possible suppressed altogether. (Some Nacirema have even asserted that open treatment of sex is a subversive trick perpetrated by their mortal enemy, the Tsinummoc Tribe.)

The crowning proof of the Anatomy Cult is the concept they use



known as "onrop-graphy" which refers to those things people may not see, or read about. The word never refers to murder, sadism, lynching, racial hate, sacrilege, war, brutality or the Un-Nacirema Activities Committee—these are not obscene. It refers only to the Body, that worst of all encumbrances of human beings. The ineffable frustration of the guilt-ridden Nacirema is a superstition based on a longing to get rid of the Body and a horrible fear that they might lose it.

## II

Since the above was written new evidence has come to light on the myth system which helps to explain the Anatomy Cult of the Nacirema. I stumbled on the evidence by accident. For years I noticed that the witch doctors of the various clans are the most guilt-ridden to hide their bodies behind cloth. Rarely do they engage in activities in which other people wear a less-than-average amount of cloth. Furthermore, cloth-wearing is frequently the subject of their weekly admonitions to the natives, although their concern always is whether too little, never too much, cloth is being worn. So great has been the concern of witch doctors with body covering that the people have coined the phrase "men of the cloth" in referring to them. In fact, many witch doctors even use special shapes and colors of cloth to distinguish them from other witch doctors and the average native.

A second significant fact I noticed was that there are degrees of nudity (as alluded to earlier), that is, small pieces of cloth cover the body on some occasions and on others all of the body is covered but hands and face. What struck me about this was the idea that their god would be embarrassed by any nudity except of hands and face. For example, a person wearing swimming cloth would not be permitted to enter a magic house. Furthermore, as I came to know the people, I began to sense a secret belief that their god really made a mistake putting bodies on people in the first place. He could have attached the legs to the neck and people would not have to be concerned with the most evil parts of the body. This belief is never uttered openly, however, for the myths assert it to be a direct revelation of their god that he is a man. Obviously if god is a man one can hardly blame him for building a human that is male. This discovery revealed the third significant fact, namely that the myths do not explain where god got his model for a woman.

From these discoveries I have been able to reassemble (at least partially) the myth structure leading to the Anatomy Cult and the present superstitions. Apparently in 4004 B.C. there existed only god—who was masculine in every respect even to having a beard. At this time god decided to create a man and did so, the result of course looking like the only model in existence. Later he created, without

any model at all, a woman who was physiologically different from the man in certain respects. The differences were complementary and when properly conjoined could produce pleasure and happiness. However, god frowned on any happiness the man obtained by taking advantage of the physiological differences. Apparently god, who faced no temptation for similar pleasure, expected man to live as god himself did (although there are gaps in the myth here, for now it is unclear why god made woman at all).

The woman, not being like god, tempted the man and he yielded. God became enraged and drove both of them from paradise to inhabit the earth. The man in his turn became angry at the woman and ordered her to hide the evil parts of her body, and then in a moment of compassion decided to hide his also. The woman, in turn, having been blamed for the whole affair, became coy and pretended to have no further interest in the matter.

From this creation myth, embellished over the centuries, the Anatomy Cult developed to its present form among the Nacirema. The myth system now runs as follows: Virile man was modelled after an equally virile but lonely god. God in an act of inscrutable wisdom created a part-man to assuage man's virility, but labelled it sinful if he did so. The absence of a divine model for females meant that women were responsible for this state of affairs. If that part of their body which is most female did not exist, man would be unable to sin. Since it is important for man not to sin, women must be encouraged to suppress and hide their femaleness. Unlike many other primitive tribes, however, the Nacirema did not segregate the women into separate compounds but allowed them a certain freedom of movement. They were never as free as men, though, and until quite recently could not even participate in tribal decisions.

Psychologically, of course, such a myth system could only produce a guilt-ridden society. If for no other reason than racial propagation, men were always sinning and women were always blamed for it. The real world of sex constantly intruded on the Nacirema and the superstitions constantly condemned them for it. Some witch doctors, in a desperate effort to be god-like, have even resorted to a whole life of celibacy and would like others to follow suit, but are torn by a counter-belief that god wants people to have children. Other witch doctors merely warn against enjoying sex, justifying copulation on the basis that there ought to be children. Thus a complicated system of interacting taboos and natural needs has developed. Since the taboos are directed against one of man's few innate drives, it is no wonder that the Nacirema are said to be a sick tribe.

As might be expected when a natural drive of human beings is frustrated, a reaction formation occurred among the Nacirema. The interesting aspect of this development is that it was led by women,

apparently unconsciously motivated by the idea that if they were going to be responsible for sin they might as well make it exciting. Through the course of Nacirema history they had attempted to make the most of the great quantity of cloth men forced them to wear. They put frills on the cloth and cut and molded it to the body. Borrowing a leaf from the Chinese practice of foot-binding, they began to give the illusion of small feet by wearing blocks of wood under their heels. They also adapted the arb and eldrig, which we mentioned earlier, to create illusions about the bosom and hips. But there was only so much one could do when covered from head to feet. The next step, therefore, was to start cutting away the cloth. Women's arms, then their legs appeared, followed by back, waist and much of their bosom. A revolution was under way and with it the full fruition of the Anatomy Cult, discussed in the first part of this paper.

As a result of the above-described developments, other and more diverse forms of Body-oriented innovations have occurred. All kinds of magical herbs have been invented to make women beautiful. Cloth-men have grown rich creating every conceivable form of attire. An ironical abandonment has seized women, who for one occasion will pile on the cloth and for another will practically dispense with it. They wear some cloth which is invisible and some which is porous. For occasions like swimming they wear tiny pieces of cloth which have to be stretched over the evil parts. They have recently invented an arb-less arb which gives the illusion of being an arb without the restrictions of one. Some bold women with large breasts will even dispense with all cloth above the waist while working in men's eating and drinking houses. Ironically, such women are referred to as topless (which apparently is an example of a suppression complex on a mass basis). Some women have even organized to have the arb outlawed on the grounds that it is a demeaning garment which leads to hypocritical but silent boasts by those who wear it.

Another unusual activity is the aesthetic contest, the prime feature of which is that young women display most of the Body. This contest is undoubtedly a vestige of an earlier form of virgin sacrifice. Today, no examination is made for virginity, although contestants are expected to be unmarried. Winners are now sacrificed to a commercial orgy for one year. Winners at the clan level compete once each year for the honor of being chosen Miss Nacirema. The woman so honored receives great wealth and an adulating public openly discusses her Body measurements. In spite of the public obsession with her Body, the winner is never permitted to appear absolutely nude. In view of the other developments, however, this may be a simple case of culture lag.

Older women emulate the aesthetic contest by engaging in cloth parades where they display the idealized Body as created by cloth



and illusion. The latter is especially significant in a spring holiday called "Retsae" which is devoted almost entirely to a display of Body-worn cloth. It is a fertility rite with strong taboos against any act of fertility. The Body has become the center of existence.

Women, reacting to a creation myth which made them inferior, have twisted the whole system into a cult in which the Body itself is worshipped. Witch doctors have condemned these developments, but have lost much of their earlier authority. Nacirema men as a whole also opposed the changes at first, but then discovered they liked them. Since contact with advanced civilizations has made them less conscious of sin, men too have joined in the cult, focusing considerable attention on their own Bodies.

The myth system, of course, still exists. Since it is theoretically contradictory to the Anatomy Cult it has created, there is as yet considerable frustration in the society. The irony in the Cult is that it may contain the seeds of its own destruction. If the Nacirema finally come to accept the sex-adorned body as a very natural and useful and enjoyable thing (and that appears to be the evolutionary direction of their history), the cult itself should wither as it has in advanced civilizations. Such an event would probably also destroy the creation myth, and an advanced society free from sex-guilt would probably be on its way. As I said earlier, however, it will still probably take a few generations for this to happen. The Anatomy Cult at this stage of Nacirema evolution seems firmly entrenched.

