The Strange but Brave Customs of the Nacirema

The Nacirema are very strange people that few sociologists and anthropologists have been able to successfully observe. Although the Nacirema as a whole are very populous, the individual is elusive and generally not open to interaction with those who are not one of them. I was first introduced to the culture of the Nacirema after reading the accounts of Horace Miner at the University of Michigan. As an aspiring sociologist, I have been lucky enough to tag along and work with professionals to observe and try to gain a better understanding of this abstract culture. The story I am about to share is my first-hand account of one of many oddities I experienced while observing the Nacirema and their customs.

Before I begin, I will provide some background information about the Nacirema. Their society has been around since the eighteenth century, but their culture has changed immensely over time and continues to do so every day. Previous to this, they had been governed by another country from which they broke free due to significant oppression. This culture can be characterized by a massive and ever-growing market economy, and acquisition of material objects and currency is the main priority for these people. However, while much of the Nacirema’s time is devoted to these economic pursuits, Horace Miner suggests that a large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity (Miner 1956: 503). I have been able to witness a few of these ritualistic activities and tendencies myself alongside world-renowned sociologists and anthropologists; none of which can completely understand this culture.

When I flew to Acirema - the land of the Naciremas – I was not exposed to any of their behaviors or practices for two days. I had spent those two days observing their land and trying to understand how they had become so developed in just a few centuries. I was amazed to see such advanced techniques of building and constructing used by the Nacirema as I wandered through abandoned settlements and clusters of supposed housing. On my third day of exploring Acirema, I saw one of its inhabitants for the very first time, and it was doing something that I had never thought possible. The Nacirema was walking down the street while single-handedly holding a long, multi-colored rope which held a massive, furry being on the opposite end. When I say massive, I do not mean bigger than the Nacirema himself, but about half his size. However, what the long-haired creature lacked in height, it made up for in length. A canine of sorts - I caught a glimpse of seemingly hundreds of razor-sharp teeth residing in its mouth. It seemed like this being that the Nacirema was containing just by a single rope could, at any moment, turn around and rip the poor man to shreds. There are creatures similar to this in my native country, but we dare not go near them – they are wild and malicious. I hid in a patch of bushes nearby as I watched this creature walk right next to the Nacirema for the entirety of my observation. I kept a safe distance, but I decided to follow them until they reached a very expansive field that was contained by a tall, thin structure made of wire. At one end of the field was a gate in which the Nacirema touched a few times and then opened, letting the creature in before himself. Once he had closed the gate behind him, the man took hold of the rope that controlled the hairy beast and released it from the grip of the rope. I turned away at once, thinking that this would be the moment in which this vicious looking creature was going to end the life of this man, but when I looked back a few seconds later, it was running wildly away from the Nacirema. There was a brief instant in which I had thought that the Nacirema freed this creature, but after some time, the Nacirema gave a loud cry, and the beast stopped in its tracks, turned around, and faced him. Another cry from the man sent the thing hurtling back towards him. *How is he not scared for his life? He is so brave!* I thought, as the four-legged monster, armed with both teeth and claws, ran straight towards him. I was so mesmerized by this behavior that I did not notice the second Nacirema, who also was holding a rope with a beast on the end, open the gate to the field and enter it. This creature had different markings and was significantly smaller than the one who had previously entered the field. It was easy to tell that they were of the same species, but their differences in colors and features made them very distinguishable. The second Nacirema allowed his creature off of the rope as well, and as he did this, I noticed this one had a smaller and brightly colored rope surrounding its neck. This must have been how the Nacirema was able to attach it the longer rope and, therefore, control it. Upon a second look at the first beast, I noticed that it had a small rope around its neck as well. I assumed this is what gave the Nacirema dominance over these animals because the ones I had seen in my country did not have these colorful accessories. When the second beast was released, the two creatures immediately ran to each other and embraced each other with a series of awkward body movements and high-pitched noises. At first, I assumed they were going to attack each other, but the apparent lack of concern from the Naciremas invalidated my assumption. It seemed like the creatures were bonding with each other - possibly even having fun. They chased each other around the perimeter of the field frantically and loudly all while the two Nacirema spoke and moved their hands at each other. I guessed that there was no negativity in this setting, as all the beings involved seemed content.

I was by myself as I witnessed this behavior because I had wanted to take a walk to clear my mind of the days’ observations. All I was carrying was a notepad and a pen, but I was thanking my past-self for preparing my future self for this encounter. As I studied these strangers for what seemed like an eternity, the sun sank lower and lower in the sky until everything was stained gold. It was at this time that the Nacirema both shouted something – each call very unique from the other – which, again, sent their creatures bolting towards them. They each attached their ropes to the creatures, and after leaving the field and closing the gate behind them, they waked in opposite directions down the street. The smaller of the beasts was whining and pulling the Nacirema by the rope back in the direction of the other couple, but he who was controlling it made a cry that must have changed the creature’s mind, because it then faced forward and walked next to him without further complication. After they were all long out of sight, I quietly but quickly left my hiding spot and headed back to the place where I was been staying. I then collected my thoughts about what I had just witnessed and went to bed.

It is clear to me now that the Nacirema are a fearless society that apparently tests the laws of nature. They do this by keeping intimidating creatures on their ropes right beside them, as if being guarded by it. It may be that this activity gives them a sense of power since they are controlling such a strong and potentially deadly monster. Horace Miner claimed that it is hard to understand how they have managed to exist so long under the burdens which they have imposed upon themselves (Miner 1956: 507). To myself and my own culture, one would be deemed insane to attempt this dangerous act with a wild being. But the Nacirema are brave people that seemingly enjoy pushing the limits of human capability.