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Anthropology

Discussion Questions for *Body Ritual among the Nacirema*

1. According to Miner, what functional beliefs underlie Nacirema body rituals? (What are the purposes for them?)

2. Miner treats Nacirema behavior in caring for the body as “ritual.” Is it? What makes something “ritual” as opposed to “habit” or “custom”? What trappings of Miner’s “medicine men” or “Holy mouth-men” make them appear as ritual specialists?

3. Some would say that Mine’s analysis exoticizes the Nacirema and makes them seem mysterious and irrational. What in his writing does this? Does presenting customs as “religion” rather than as “science” or “medicine” inevitably make them seem irrational to people in our own culture? Are our own customs with respect to care of the body irrational? In what ways is scientific medicine different from other (“religious”) belief systems? How much of what human beings do in everyday life is “rational” or “irrational”? Do you think that there are cultural differences in such rationality?

Nacirema questions part 2

4. Who are the Nacirema? When did you discover the joke? What point do you think Miner is trying to make in this article?

5. Contemporary anthropologists are very concerned about what is often called “the problem of representation.” The question, in part, is: who gets to “represent” a group of people, by writing about them, interpreting their behavior, and in other

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ways speaking “for” (or about) them? How does somebody get that right? Does the social position of the speaker play a role in the process? What kind of social position do American anthropologists have?

6. What is “ethnocentrism”? What is “cultural relativism”?