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.

They are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Creel, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Caribbean Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east.

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 seem an important concern in the culture of the people. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremony is unique.

The basic idea of the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and likely to be broken or ill. Stuck in such a body, man's only hope is to avoid the illness through the use of the powerful influences of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines for this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses. 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 first shown these mysteries.

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 which no native believes he could live without. These items are received from many different people. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose help 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.

As these magical materials are specific for certain ills, and the people have many sicknesses (real or imagined), the charm-box is usually full to overflowing. 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 fountain. 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 fountain, and proceeds with a brief ritual. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.

**Instructions**: In the following chart, write down the information from the article for each of the 4 different historical tools we discussed in class (significance/importance, social institutions/how people interact, time, and spatial scale)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Historian’s Tool** | **Information** | **Key Questions** |
| **Significance/**  **Importance** | *Facts that seem important to knowing who these people are:* | *What do you believe is the most important information about the Nacirema?*  *Why?* |
| **Social Institutions/**  **How people interact** | *Economic facts:*  *Family facts:*  *Religion facts:* | *How do you think the rituals mentioned in the article impact the social order of the Nacirema?* |
| **Time** | *Write clues to when this tribe existed* | *When do you think the Nacirema were on earth?* |
| **Spatial Scale/**  **Place** | *Write clues to where this tribe existed* | *Where do you think the Nacirema lived?* |