

Published in Journal of Man, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 1-12 (1979), Lambda Alpha. I wrote the original draft of this study in 1975 shortly after the unexpected demise of my mother. I had a long interest in our mortuary customs from the point of view of an anthropological archaeologist. It seemed to me that an archaeological study of Nacirema culture was in order.

DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD AMONGST THE NACIREMAS

By B. K. Swartz, Jr. from [Selected Writings](#)

In 1956 Horace Miner's classic article of "The Body Ritual of the Nacirema" was published. The following study is a logical extension of Miner's line of inquiry. An intermediate examination of Nacirema funeral rites, however, is needed to more closely interrelate Miner's work with the following account. This gap has been partially filled by two books written by Nacirema natives on their way of death (Mitford 1963, Harmer 1963).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the material recovered by excavation of various Nacirema cemeteries, analyze it using deciphered records and tribal native Nacirema informants, and then compare it to known Nacirema cult beliefs of the past. Steward terms this method of archaeological investigation the Direct Historical Approach:

".....the direct historical approach involves the elementary logic of working from the known to the unknown. First, sites of the historic period are located. These are preferably, but not necessarily, those of identifiable tribes. Second, the cultural complexes of the sites are determined. Third, sequences are carried back in time to protohistoric and prehistoric periods and cultures" (Steward 1942:337).

The only study of Nacirema using archaeological data is Thompson (1962). His approach is futurological and general, dealing with Nacirema land and resource utilization. All other studies are "socio-ethnographic" (Spradley and Rynkiewich 1975).

DESCRIPTION

The ideal pattern of how the Naciremas disposed of their dead clearly emerges from cemetery excavation: closed primary inhumation in a sealed casket with body in extended position, supine deposition, oriented to the west, head facing upward, variable arm position. Variations from this pattern are rare and include inhumation of cremations and surface disposal in aelosuam. Native informants mention that cremated ashes may be scattered over land or water from the air and that bodies of people who die at sea may be disposed of in the ocean. Cemetery "settlement patterns," or grave arrangements, are, also, clearly apparent: graves are grouped into nuclear family plot units; women interred at the left of men from point of view of disposed, in paired units; utilization of grave yards begin at the south with isolated markers in the northern fringe, mortuary architecture (aelosuam) on high ground. Graves located in the western Nacirema tribal lands in the last century, tend to have a consistent depth of six feet.

TABLE 1. DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD TRAITS KNOWN TO BE PRACTICED
AMONG THE NACIMEMA

Sprague (1968) Terminology (modified and adapted)	Nacirema Practice
Form of Disposal	Primary inhumation (common, ideal pattern)
A. Simple	Surface disposal in aelosuam (rare) Aquatic (rare)
B. Compound (rare)	
1. Reduction	Cremation (complete, to ashes)
2. Secondary Disposal	Inhumation; Scattered (land, water)
Location of Disposal Area	Cemeteries (inhumation), otherwise specified
*Body Preparation	Washing; embalming; dressing (occupational attire), shrouds, cloth strip wrapping (paupers); cosmetics
Vehicle of Disposal	Sealed in wooden coffin (with innerlining, often metal-casket); aelosuam; bagged with shot (aquatic)
Individuality	
A. Container	single
B. Grave	single (tiering occurs in urban areas)
C. Marker	single (prelavit), couple, "family" (rare)
Relationship of Graves	Nuclear family plots, women interred to left of men (from point of view of disposed - not observer) in paired units, utilization of cemetery begins to the south with isolated markers in the northern fringe, mortuary architecture (aelosuam) on high ground.
Types of Disposal Area	
A. Grave Yards	Usually on the grounds of tribal temples or extended family units
B. Cemeteries	Commercialized disposable areas
C. Krap Lairomems	Euphemism for large cemeteries
*Articulation	Articulated
*Position	
A. Flexure	Extended
B. Position of Arms	Variable, but not under body or over

	face
C. Rotation of Head	Face up
*Deposition	Supine (cf. Sprague's back)
Orientation	
A. Marker	
1. Tombstone	Inscription of each surface (placed at head - "headstone") Placed at foot, ground surface, inscription is up but read by viewer facing west
2. Plaque	
B. Grave	West (exceptions in modern
C. Container	curvilinearly designed
*D. Body	cemeteries)
Grave Goods or Inclusions	
A. Frequency	Common
B. Types	Dentures, eyeglasses, jewelry (especially women, usually cosmetic), medals, other items rare
C. Placement	As worn in life
*Applies to simple inhumation only	

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The greatest alteration of messianic Joshuaite¹ Nacirema mortuary custom is the introduction of cremation practice in the last 100 years. Previously Joshuaites never practiced cremation, either in Nacirema or Neporue² tribal lands, and living Joshuaites, especially members of the Retepite and Legnavene sects and rural population, often express revulsion at this practice. The progenitors of the Joshuaites, the ancient Bacojites, abhorred cremation as do living Bacojites.

There have been some variations connected with Joshuaite inhumation practices. The people of this cult do not seem to know what to do with the arms of the deceased (see Table 2). The origin of the western orientation of the remains occurs in Neporue pre-Joshuaite Early Iron Age times (Puckle 1926: 148-49), but grave orientation was not a concern of the Bacojites (de Vaux 1961: 57). Both Bacojites and Joshuaites oriented the entrances of their buildings of worship in the east wall opening to the west and Joshuaites did intern their prominent dead, on occasion, in the Evan of their temples, with the head oriented to the west. In large, more recent suburban Nacirema cemeteries that are curvilinearly designed (often with winding roads) grave orientation shifts from the west to centralized loci and, in areas of irregular terrain, uphill. Still the dominant pattern of orientation in recent Nacirema cemeteries is to the west. Pre-Joshuaite Neporue disposal was primary inhumation with flexed leg position or secondary deposition of cremations. Joshuaites followed the Bacojites tradition of extended position.

TABLE 2. A SERIATION OF JOSHUAITE ARM POSITIONS IN PRIMARY DISPOSALS

A.D. 1900 - Present	Variable arm position, often the right hand is placed on the chest.
A.D. 1875 - 1900	Often one hand on abdomen.
A.D. 1607 - 1875	Hands folded over chest-the so-called “Lily Position” for females.
Neporue (pre-Nacirema)	Hands placed under chin in “Praying” position, either with interlocking fingers or palms in opposition.

Inscription on grave markers originated with the Keerg *hermes*. The Keerges believed, in a material sense, that their dead were asleep (as is often indicated by R.I.P. in Nacirema burial grounds) and hence must be marked and identified. The use of the word “cemetery” by the Nacirema speakers means “sleeping place” in Keerg (Puckle 1926: 262). Indeed it can be argued that the Nacirema gravestone originated from the *hermes*. These were sometimes represented by ithyphalli used to ward off evil spirits (Wickler 1973: 55).

The most recent and larger urban Nacirema cemeteries use plaques placed in the ground rather than tombstones, as grave markers. They are often bronze besides the usual granite or marble. This shift may be an adaption to the use of power mowing equipment for cemetery care. There is also a shift from use of handmade wooden (often pine) coffins to mass produced standardized (usually metal) caskets.

Surface disposal in aelosuam is always rare in Nacirema cemeteries, and is probably a vestige of pre-Joshuaite Namor practice. The Bacojites abhor the idea of exposure of the dead (Puckle 1926: 143).

INTERPRETATION

Nacirema natives consider their graves and cemeteries inviolate and the work described here had to be done without tribal knowledge. This strong cult feeling, plus the decorative motifs on grave stones and the correlation of funerary practices with their Joshuaite cult indicates that one must understand Nacirema cult beliefs in order to understand their pattern of disposing of their dead. The elaborate concern and care of the body, as Miner (1956) noted for present-day Nacirema natives, is carried over to the preparation and attiring of corpses, and their installation into interior-lined durable containers called caskets. There are two conflicting explanations for such practice, (1) the Nacirema belief of pre-Joshuaite origin in an afterlife (rematerialization in the future, soul stays with body) and (2) proper appearance for the resurrection (rekindling of the spirit).

“No doubt the origin of the custom of washing, anointing and clothing the corpse in garments suitable to its rank was instituted in the dim ages, when it was believed that the departed required such attentions to enable them to appear at their best in future material state. Handed down to the later time.....[the Joshuaite] put his own interpretation to the practice which he had adopted.

The primary doctrine of the Resurrection of the *body* somewhat crudely interpreted presupposed the resurrection of the clothes by the old force of associated ideas. This led to a continuance of a tradition which...[the Joshuaites] have by no means forsaken...Thus,...[they] still array in their robes of office, kings, monks, nuns and priests, as well as soldiers, statesmen and others who wear a distinctive dress, whilst...great satisfaction has been derived from the thought of appearing before the Creator in the inevitable evening dress, apparently with the view to impressing Him with a sense of the social standing of his creatures so arrayed” (Puckle 1926: 35).

There is evidence that as Nacirema cult beliefs weakened through time, the simple pine box coffins were “developed” into durable metal caskets. Would this reflect greater hesitancy on the part of their occupants to face judgement?

The general Nacirema population seem unaware that graves are oriented to the west and have no explanation of this custom. The only natives that consistently know of this practice are rotcerid larenufs and repeek yretemecs. It seems, therefore, that grave orientation is a classic example of what anthropologists call a survival:

“Among evidence aiding us to trace the course which the civilization has actually followed, is that great class of facts to denote which I have found it convenient to introduce the term ‘survivals’. These are processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had an original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved” (Tylor 1871:16).

The limited participation (Linton 1936) of Naciremas in this practice may have been a cause of this survival. Recently translations have been made of portions of the Joshuaite sacred book, the *Holy Byblos*. This writer believes that an ethnohistoric explanation of Nacirema grave orientation can be made from this source.

It is hypothesized that the Naciremas oriented the head graves of their dead and the entrances of certain ceremonial structures to the west and deposited the bodies in a supine attitude, so that when the day of judgement arrived the dead would resurrect themselves and sit erect in their graves. Thus they would be facing east and be ready, even if indoors, to receive redemption and healing from the east as soon as possible.

Revelations 2. "...I (Yon the Eltsopa) saw another angel ascend from the *sunrising* [italics mine], having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a great voice to the four angels to whom he was given to hurt the earth and the sea. 3. saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, not the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads" (*Holy Byblos*, N.V.).

This explanation must be understood, however, as a Joshuaite reinterpretation since Neporue grave orientation of the head to the west occurs long before Joshuaite conversion in the area, probably connected with sun worship.

There is linguistic evidence that the nacirema native believed that the right stood for good and the left for evil. They refer to the left as sinistral. A cognate of this word, sinister, means threatening, ominous and/or evil. Wives may have been buried to the left of their husband because the Naciremas considered women inferior to men, and indeed, maybe evil. In Joshuaite marriage ceremonies the bride stands to the left of the groom.

If we correlate the cardinal direction east and the left side, a reasonable explanation of filling a cemetery from the south emerges, namely, if you face east, the direction from which the angel of the resurrection comes, the south is to your right. Isolated northern graves in Nacirema cemeteries, to the observer's sinister left, mark social outcasts.

The recent introduction of cremation in Nacirema society appears strange and in conflict with their cult beliefs. It may represent a portent of tribal breakdown.

CONCLUSION

Kroeber deduces, after making a broad survey of New World data (1927), that rational natives dispose of their dead largely on the basis of whim, style, or fashion. Again the Naciremas seem to be an atypical group. They have intimately related their dead to fundamental cult beliefs and to the bodily preoccupation, a symptom of extreme irrationality. Naciremas have been known to risk their lives in order to recover their dead for "proper burial."

NOTES

¹ Naciremas insist on using a Keerg derived substitute term Susejite,

² The Neporue origins of the Naciremas have been discovered since Miner's study (1956: 503), although he stated that they probably came from the east.

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