

A FEMALE'S VIEW¹
OF
PREGNANCY AND BIRTH IN NACIREMA

by

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Occasionally in the past, anthropologists have focused their numerous interests in humans and human diversity on a mysterious land known as Nacirema. Described earlier by Linton (1936) and Miner (1956:503-507), we now know that Naciremas are a North American group living in the territory between "the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumara of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles." We also know Nacireman culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy, a culture hero known as Notgnihsaw, much magic and religion, and an overriding concern with improving the human body through ritual and ceremony. More recently, we have been briefly introduced to the secular Nacireman language (Walker 1970: 102-105) and some of the purposes of the Nacireman academies (Muller 1971: 267).

Although Miner's (1956: 506-507) comments contain a few references to pregnancy and birth in Nacirema, first-hand acquaintance with this aspect of Nacireman culture has suggested that in this sphere, as in others, the beliefs and practices are much more elaborate than perhaps expected. Many of these practices are related to medicine men, latipsoh, vestal maidens and attitudes toward the human body identified earlier by Miner (1956). As such, an elaboration of them aims at expanding our knowledge of these areas, as well as of the Nacireman female and other Naciremans in general.

For one to be a "true woman" among the Nacirema, it is necessary to achieve a state which is supposedly highly desirable; namely, the state of pregnancy. Until recently, legal codes made it next to impossible, legitimately, to terminate "unwanted pregnancies" under safe medical conditions, and even now, proponents

of opposing ethical, moral, and religious views are fighting to reverse new national rulings which legalize abortions.

Everything in the enculturation of a female Nacirema ingrains a desire to become pregnant; very early in life, girls learn from various media as well as from adults that a female's role is "to have babies". Babies are described as "bundles of joy" and a girl soon begins playing "little mother" with dolls which drink bottles, cry, wet, and make sounds, and other supportive toys, such as cradles, clothes, brooms, tea sets, pots and pans, carriages, and paper dolls. The details about how to achieve this miraculous state of pregnancy, however, are not as accessible to the young female Nacirema. The secrecy which surrounds this subject reflects Nacirema ambivalence, because it suggests that while pregnancy is marvelous, at the same time, it is also evil, dirty, and physically unnatural, according to Natirup ethics. About the only thing that one learns early in life is that it is only proper to become pregnant if one is married, and that if one does otherwise, it is, indeed, bad. In the past, Nacireman homes for unwed mothers abounded, and such "bad" girls were closeted away as untouchables, either in such institutions or with distant friends and relatives, mainly to reduce further shame which their condition brought upon the family. The baby itself, when born, was also slightly untouchable, being termed a bastard or an illegitimate (unwanted, unnatural) child. Although this attitude is undergoing change at present, and some high schools now allow pregnant girls to matriculate, the unwed mother of the "fatherless child" still remains an object of sympathy as well as scorn.

Although some Nacirema females now verbalize a lack of inter-

est in becoming pregnant, and are supported in this decision by spouses and peers, in general, it is expected that once married, the female will become pregnant. Nacirema urges planned pregnancies and "the timing" of offspring arrivals, and shamans prescribe many different kinds of medicines and devices to assist with this planning, thereby delaying conception. However, when the "time is right" there are an equal amount of medical advice and technology as well as some religious and astrological beliefs Nacireman females can turn to for assistance in achieving the desirable state of pregnancy.

Provided that a Nacirema female becomes pregnant when married, Nacirema demands utter joy about the condition on the part of both prospective parents. While some jokes about "Oh, no!" responses to the knowledge that number three or four is on the way are accepted as semi-appropriate with increasing frequency as some Nacirema become more concerned about limiting the number of their offsprings, the general expectations are that the couple acknowledge the fact that the future baby is "a gift of God," "life's most precious thing," "Life's most blessed event," a future "bundle of joy." The pregnant female immediately becomes somebody "special," someone who is in a sacred state, someone who, in nine months, will be able to experience "these few moments of joy." Yet the ambivalence Naciremas feel toward pregnancy remains implicit, because the pregnancy itself acknowledges an act of sex. Thus, the female is often described not as pregnant, but rather, in "that condition," or "nature's way."

Taboos are deeply ingrained and associated with pregnant females and the kin who surround them. Ritual restrictions immed-

imately enter the picture and continue with increasing elaboration and enumeration as the conclusion of the pregnancy nears. The number, intensity and type of taboos vary somewhat according to beliefs and practices of a particular shaman, (called MDs or gynecologists), friends' comments, "old wives' tales" and one's adherence to them, the pregnant female's own upbringing, and sometimes, but only rarely, special medical conditions.

Diet immediately becomes supplemented by iron pills, vitamin capsules and other prenatal contributions. Foods are tabooed or suggested according to the amount of nausea or "morning sickness." This negative state, culturally expected as a natural accompaniment of "the condition," and an important cultural indicator of the fact that one "is going to have a baby," is another expression of Nacirema psychological ambivalence toward pregnancy.

Activities become defined; it becomes excusable to nap, put one's feet up, and as pregnancy continues, to drop out of sports such as riding, swimming, walking, skating, driving the car, and out of certain types of employment. In fact, many Nacirema employers have "maternity leave" policies, written to make certain that females visually disappear before their "positive" condition can literally get in the way of their job, or upset clientele, be these second graders or people in a waiting room. Sexual activities also become taboo, but here, the restrictions go into effect about six weeks before the "due date" and are removed from four to six weeks after the "blessed event" has occurred.

Behavioral changes are also expected in the Nacirema mother-to-be. Pregnant females are culturally expected to tire easily, become increasingly emotionally unstable, and to have cravings

for certain foods, such as pickles and ice cream. These cravings, which are expectably insatiable, are expected to be expressed verbally at inconvenient hours, with 3 a.m., of course, being preferred in common folklore. Gradual withdrawal from social events is also encouraged and allowable, since females are supposedly uncomfortable in this sacred state, more apt to misjudge distances and lose their balance, cry, and become easily upset. Such behavioral changes are further indicators of one's condition.

In Nacirema, various economic institutions respond to pregnancy by cornering the market on this "blessed condition." Much materialistic paraphernalia, often complicated in nature, has been developed; this paraphernalia is constantly elaborated and updated and is advertised as "essential" and "absolutely necessary." Maternity clothes are usually the first way in which these institutions make themselves known with special expandable clothes, the Nacirema female can hide her "desirable" condition, and continue to look stylish and attractive, thereby fulfilling Nacirema male expectations of females as sex symbols, even while in this condition. In other materialist ways, too, the female is culturally expected to prepare for the "bundle of joy." For example, collections of baby clothes, known as layettes, are well described in numerous sources, including pamphlets in shamans' offices, five and dime stores, etiquette books, and books on babies by leading Nacirema authorities.

One buys some of these layette items by one's self, and obtains others from friends, family, or through wider circles of females who attend reciprocal exchanges called baby showers. There is also the possibility that individual talents may enable

the expectant mother or her friends to create layette items with needle and thread, sewing machine, crochet hook or knitting needles. Gifts of this nature are truly valued, being associated with personal energy, thought, and a donation of "precious time."

The pregnant female, and sometimes her husband too, also obtain "basic" baby equipment and prepare a nursery corner or room in their house for the future baby. It is believed that without this equipment, one is incapable of rearing a baby properly. The "basic items" in this sphere include: a cage-like bed called a crib, mattress and its linen which includes a special protector designed to limit damaging effects of baby's feces and urine, bathtub and dressing table or a combination of these two (a bathinette), cage-like playpen (preferably portable), diaper bag, diaper pail, baby carrier, high chair, car seat, stroller, walker-jumper chair, carriage, "potty" chair, play table, nursery-night lamp, mobiles (to attract baby's attention and increase its chances of being aware and alert), baby toilet items (including nail scissors and thermometers), feeding dishes and utensils, a lip plug called a reificap, and bottles, unless the female is one of the few who insists that she will, indeed, have enough milk to breast feed.

When "the condition" becomes visible, the Nacirema folklore increases noticeably. Pregnant Nacirema females should know if they want a boy or girl, and should be prepared to explain why to anyone who asks. It is expected that if the baby is the second child, mothers will want a child of the opposite sex. The female, usually in conjunction with her husband, and sometimes in response to pressure from kin, begins to consider names. Again, manufacturers

stand ready to assist, with booklets which list names, their meanings and translations, personality qualities usually associated with them, and occasionally famous people with these names. As the baby begins to kick and move internally, the sex of the fetus becomes "obvious" to other Nacirema observers. Here, folklore is variable, and one can hear that either boys or girls are most active, kick harder, sleep less, have stronger, faster heart beats, and are carried higher in the womb. From the seventh through ninth month the Nacirema female becomes an object of increased sympathy because of the enlarging size of "the burden" she carries and her increasing feelings of uncomfortableness. About the seventh month, the pregnant female begins to see the shaman with increasing frequency, and makes some choices about method and sometimes, place of delivery. Most Naciremans prefer parturition in isolation from most kin, and choose to deliver in the latipsoh formerly described by Miner (1956). They also generally prefer to have their baby without conscious awareness of the final stages of this marvelous process, although an alternative procedure, "natural childbirth" is also available, complete with training sessions in muscle control, breathing and exercise which one pursues during pregnancy.

Nacirema folklore carries numerous helpful hints about how the pregnant female "will know that it's time", but at a first birth, none of these clues may be very helpful. Whatever the actual signs individually experienced by the Nacirema female, when it is time to go to the latipsoh, another cultural myth unfolds. The father-to-be, who during the nine months has been slipping further and further into the background in terms of attention from other Nacirema, is expected to behave in prescribed manners. These

include giving his silently amused, smiling wife a hurried trip to the latipsoh, if he is indeed present when needed, and beginning this trip with distraught culturally expected behavior which is precipitated by his wife's statement, "It is time now, dear." At this moment, Nacirema males become distraught, disorganized, and flustered, to such an extent that they may depart for the latipsoh without their wives, luggage, appropriate identification cards, a full complement of clothes, car keys and/or gas in the tank.

Upon arrival at the latipsoh, the Nacirema bureaucracy takes over to add red tape, structure, frustration, and some humor to the birth process. If the female is not in "hard labor," she is deposited in a wheelchair and taken to an admitting office to give vital statistics. Then, or earlier if necessary, she is taken to a "labor room." Here she is stripped of her clothes, dressed in a latipsoh gown and "prepped", i.e., shaved and given an enema. All of these events, as Miner (1956) has already indicated, are sources of severe psychological shock for Nacirema. Then the female is told to lie down and "work" on her "labor." Even at this stage, there are behavioral codes which must be followed by Nacirema females; for example, one does not ask for water, scream or cry in pain, or upset other residents. If one is not having a baby "The Army Way," and latipsoh policies allow husbands in labor rooms, the female must also not upset him. She is further encouraged by vestal maidens not to soil the bed after it has just been changed, and at all times, to "cooperate." She must not hit the vestal maidens or their aides or bite them, or use foul language, and at all times, she must try to "hurry up." If the labor process should stop, whether or not for medical reasons, it is

immediately the Nacirema female's fault for not working or trying hard enough. She may then be encouraged to walk up and down the maternity floor halls, despite earlier statements that to do so will damage the baby. If labor does not start again because of this walking or pacing, the labor is defined as "false," and the female is usually discharged as a failure until the labor becomes "real." If, on the other hand, labor progresses quickly and the female pushes the buzzer, calls the shaman, says she is "in stage 2" and suggests that the special area of the temple, the delivery room be made ready, the female may be encouraged "to stop rushing things" or told to "hold back" until the bureaucracy is ready. And if, of course, the labor has been medically induced, the female may be attended by latipsoh employees whose verbal and non-verbal behavior clearly communicate that such procedures are not "the right way" to have "a gift of God."

The delivery room within the latipsoh temple itself is fascinating, if one is conscious and chooses to watch Nacirema shamans and vestal maiden team work. The female is taken to the delivery room on a wheeled table and sometimes assists in her transfer to the special operating table, designed specifically for births. Her husband may be allowed in this sacred area as an antiseptically gowned observer, but many latipsoh prohibit this because of a belief that husbands will not tolerate the sight of the process without fainting and thereby become additional burdens. At some latipsoh, a shaman one has rarely seen before, because of a rotating arrangement at a clinic, will appear to assist you because of being "on call". In any case, if the female is lucky, once in the delivery room, the shaman, most likely male, becomes divorced from Nacirema bureaucracy, and deals solely with

her and her baby. The most sacred stage, the third one, the BIRTH, is now at hand. Other latipsoh personnel, however, may not be so oriented. If "natural childbirth" methods are not being utilized, anesthesiologists may refuse to give gas or other numbing agents because a particular vestal maiden has forgotten to bring an all important document, the chart, from the labor room, or someone may tell the shaman to delay the birth because the sanctifying presence of another higher-ranked personage is needed in the temple for all such events. Again, Nacirema female behaviors are well defined; she must lie on the delivery table with her feet in stirrups, even though she may have already decided during "stage one" that it would be physiologically more natural to squat. Furthermore, she must not move her arms or hands, or they will be tied down, and she must concentrate on "cooperating with the shaman and pushing out the "bundle of joy." One may be allowed to watch the miracle through overhead mirrors, but more likely, only the shaman's back will be reflected.

Once the "bundle of joy" appears, there is its initial cry (which often is hastened by a swat) and the announcement of the sex of the baby. Then the baby disappears while the Nacirema female finishes delivering all of the after-birth and is medically "repaired" from the delivery. The baby is cleaned, weighed, measured, swaddled, and after vital statistics are recorded, taken into an antiseptic room called the nursery, where there are other little basket beds (bassinets) and other bundles of joy. The father, who during all of this time usually remains in a latipsoh waiting room, smoking, flipping through magazines, and pacing nervously, now re-appears and often meets baby through the glass in the nursery room. After this initial view of the swaddled, red,

squalling "bundle of joy," the shaman emerges to congratulate the father on the fine..., and to confirm this congratulations by a handshake or a pat on the shoulder or back. Providing that everything is alright medically with both the baby and the mother, the father is expected to be elated. After a brief chat with the shaman about medical matters, the father next visits with his wife if she is conscious, before disappearing to follow still other culturally expected behaviors. The most important of the ensuing rituals are the telephone calls announcing the event, x's sex, weight, height, arrival time, and name to in-laws, siblings, and close friends. Then father may return home to celebrate, inform waiting offspring of the results or perhaps, sleep. He is allowed, by unwritten rules or couvade procedures, to take a day off from work because he is tired from his ordeal. When he returns to his job, he is expected to spread the news to colleagues himself, shaking hands with males when congratulated by them, and giving symbolic gifts of cigars to other males. Even here, Nacirema industries provide a special variety of cigar with bands which through color or printed message, announce the sex of the bundle of joy.

The female remains in the latipsoh, seeing the baby only at feeding times which are determined by the nursery staff, until she can amble to the nursery window. When the baby is brought in to its mother by the vestal maidens, it remains mysterious, mainly because of its clothing. Besides a diaper and undershirt, the baby is swaddled in a receiving blanket, wrapped like a triangular bunting and composed of cotton sheeting. Mothers are told not to disturb the clothing; evidently to expose the baby would contaminate it. At other times, the baby remains in the antiseptic,

temperature-regulated nursery in its basket, which bears the vital statistics of name, arrival time, height and weight, and shaman's name on a blue card, if a boy, and a pink one, if a girl. These colors are also reflected in many of the initial year layette items, so early sex identification is non-verbally communicated to other Nacirema. The only other link the baby has with its mother during this time in most latipsoh is the latipsoh identification bracelet, made of plastic and clipped to both the mother's and baby's wrist immediately after birth, while both are still in the delivery room. This bracelet contains similar information about her. In a few, more progressive latipsoh, after birth, babies may "room in" with their mothers, or be with them twenty-four hours a day, minus daily weighings after feedings and other rituals. However, in many cases, the expense of such arrangements or the latipsoh philosophy about a baby's needs prohibit this alternative.

While in the Latipsoh, the Nacirema female often receives family visitors, flowers, cards, and sometimes gifts for herself, but more often, for X. She is evaluated medically with regularity, and encouraged to get back in shape as soon as possible. The Nacirema starts this process by getting out of bed, walking to the bathroom and the shower, and then down the hall to the nursery; for the new mother, the goal of this period is one of recovery from the birth ordeal, and recovery includes re-learning how to navigate and sit with the least amount of discomfort, or as one should not admit, pain. The goal of most concern to vestal maidens and shamans during this period is the regaining of regularity and control of excretory functions.

Nacirema commercialism continues to affect the new mother

even while she is still in the latipsoh. Baby photographers, special introductory packets of baby food, formulas, lotion, diaper cream, soap, breast cream, and disposable disapers, and coupons for repeated offers of the same all come her way. She is supposed to familiarize herself with these items during her free time, and then give and check vital statistic information for use on X's official birth certificate before departing.

Whenever the father comes to the hospital, and he is expected to do so, he is continually treated as if he were diseased. In latipsoh not practicing "rooming-in," rules decree that father may not touch his child during its stay in the latipsoh, and that if "the babies are out" (of the nursery), he must disappear into the germ-ridden waiting rooms, while the babies are carried through the same germ-ridden halls to their mothers' rooms. There, for some reason, germs disappear; perhaps they are neutralized by the presence of the bundle of joy itself. Only after father has given departure gifts to the temple, or made arrangements for delayed gift giving and brought the car to the exit, and only after his wife has arisen from her final ride in the wheelchair and has been seated in the car, is the father allowed to handle the bundle of joy. Prior to this, his involvement has been as many visits as possible to the latipsoh during structured visiting hours, walks to the nursery window, and discussions with his wife about what clothes X will wear home. Father usually brings these clothes to the latipsoh, and here, the bestal maidens usually reinforce layette lists by insisting that X cannot emerge into the real, outside world without wearing multiple diapers, pins, rubber pants, undershirt, night shirt, and various layers of outer garments whose amount often show a minimal

relation to the climate and weather.

Upon returning home, if X has siblings, a phenomenon called sibling rivalry is to be expected. This phenomenon, well described in authoritative Nacirema books, is semi-understood, but also a source of worry since its behavioral manifestations threaten the helpless bundle. The Baby must be protected, and the Nacirema mother now becomes the supreme protector. In addition to warding off subtle or not-so-subtle hostility directed at X by siblings, the Nacirema mother is responsible for making sure that baby is constantly clean and antiseptic. Lip plugs and toys must be thoroughly scrubbed should they drop on the floor or be handled by anyone else, and of course, the baby must be kept in clean, fresh, odorless, yet sweetsmelling diapers. These should be cleansed by agents such as "Diaper Pure," if not by a professional diaper service. This latter responsibility is automatically verbalized as one of the most distasteful aspects of motherhood, and one that will become increasingly so as spinach and other foods are added to the diet, causing "disgusting-looking" feces. But the Nacirema mother knows that in the future, X will be potty-trained, and this present unpleasantness, which perhaps father can be convinced to handle, will decline and then disappear. While distasteful, the mother is rewarded by direct contact with first-hand proof of the all-important regularity of the baby.

In addition to these responsibilities, the Nacirema mother is expected to keep the home clean and quiet, so the baby is not disturbed. She must also protect the baby from the outside world, by limiting visitors therefrom, especially those who may have had any contact with colds or other sickly Nacirema. Taboos on visitors vary with the kinship status of the visitor, season of the

year, and guidelines suggested by individual bundle of joy shamans, now termed pediatricians. In most cases, restricting visiting rights are observed for several weeks.

Protecting the baby from internal and external conflicts and diseases occupies much of the Nacirema mother's time; that which is left over is appropriately channeled into getting the baby "on a schedule." This consists of establishing feeding times, either in response to time tables authored by the shamans or the baby's own demands. Babies who do not readily respond to this are called "uncooperative" and "bad," and are viewed as sources of annoyance which can only be surpassed by those who spit up, show signs of fussiness, are "colicky," and later, who fuss during teething. In these duties, the new mother can expect to receive assistance, ideally from her own mother, rather than her husband. Her mother, or rarely mother-in-law or close friend, comes to stay during this period, ostensibly to assist the new Nacirema mother and teach her how to handle X with a generation's worth of know-how and expertise, which very often does not reflect technological advances in baby merchandise or medical philosophy. Such advice, of course, can always be augmented by helpful hints in parental magazines, designed especially to answer the most common questions of Nacirema mothers.

While in the latipsoh or during the early days at home, especially if the female is an unnatural being called a "nursing mother," she may expect to experience what Nacirema terms "post-partum blues." This belief refers to a general depression about the baby, physical discomfort, new responsibilities, and the now obviously forthcoming changes in life style. Such blues are understandable and allowable in Nacirema, if not verbally expressed

too often, and if never expressed through open hostility toward the "bundle of joy." The Nacirema female learns about these blues from other Nacirema females and from authoritative books and magazines. She is also aware that these blues may return after she is home, either immediately, or directly after the departure of her assistant. When experiencing these feelings, the Nacirema female knows that it is not appropriate to dwell on them or encourage their constancy. To do so would imply to other Nacirema that she had mixed feelings about the baby and motherhood.

Early during the female's time at home, if not before her departure from the latipsoh, birth announcements are prepared to tell friends and acquaintances (but very often only about half of those on a Nacirema Christmas card list) of X's arrival. These announcements, which one must again purchase, come in various styles and degrees of formality. They may be engraved or not engraved, on formal or note paper, and they may or may not carry a standard message such as "My color is blue," "From the hand of God a little child is entrusted to us," or "It's a girl." Whatever the style, the announcement indicates X's birth date, name, sex, weight and length, and the name of the proud parents. Such announcements are often used with X #1, but not as frequently for X #2. Upon receipt of an announcement, friends usually send or bring gifts to the baby. Once again, these are usually items which are deemed "necessary" for X's layette during the first year of life. If proximity allows and restrictions on visitors from the outside have been lifted, gifts are often delivered in person, so other Naciremans can "see the baby." The new mother holds an honored position during this entire period. She has now fulfilled herself and can truly claim to be a Nacirema woman. It is obvious

that all of the values Naciremas have regarding the sacred pregnancy state and bundles of joy are reconfirmed during the visits of other Nacirema, who feel that they "just must come over and see the baby." Some of them evidently come because they enjoy brand new babies, while others come out of a sense of duty or curiosity (in some cases, to make certain that everything really is alright with X). Whatever the reason, visitors always discuss in X's presence, whether X looks like Mommy or Daddy. Again, the Nacirema expect certain responses from Mommy and Daddy during these conversations, and it is definitely inappropriate to suggest that X just looks like a baby or that X looks like itself.

The period of going to visit the baby lasts for about two months, and as the newness of X wears off and the sexual abstention period comes to an end for Mommy and Daddy, so do many of the Nacirema rituals connected with pregnancy and birth. However, others emerge to guide parental steps and decisions throughout the later years of child-rearing, and throughout it all, there is no decline in baby-oriented commercialism. For example, giving birth in contemporary Nacirema makes the female and her spouse eligible for unknown, innumerable mailing lists, and for at least six months after X's arrival, Nacirema businesses contact Mommy and Daddy about new health and life insurance plans which cover the family, and birth control methods which allow planning for the next bundle of joy. Parents also receive coupons for discounts on baby food, feeding utensils, age-graded clothes, and occasionally for toys. Free mail order catalogs advertising the latter, however, are more typical. These introduce parents to age-graded toys designed to stimulate the child

intellectually and give it a physical and mental "headstart" in the long race toward maturation and adulthood. Mommy and Daddy also receive discount offers on diapers and diaper service, Mother Goose nursery decorator sets, and photographs. The latter, in special situations such as memberships in "Aunt Mary Clubs," can bring the family special discount rates for family portraits and regular age-graded portraits of X. Eventually, however, these too fade away, and until Naciremas go through the annual ritual known as income tax, and get another financial discount for the appearance of X, all that is left, outside of the changed life style, is the knowledge that one has now experienced pregnancy and birth in Nacirema.

NOTES

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