

FEATURE: A Mysterious Culture

The following is an example of how a future archaeologist might describe part of a culture that exists somewhere in the world today. Read the description carefully. Use a dictionary to help you understand any unfamiliar vocabulary. Can you identify the culture that is being described? What point does the extract make about the problems of interpreting archaeological finds?

Every household has one or more shrines. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept many charms and magical potions.

Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day all the members of the family enter the shrine privately. They bow their heads before the charm-box, mix different kinds of holy water in the font and proceed with a brief rite of purification. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where spiritual leaders conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid pure.

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth rite. The ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of bristles into the

mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle around in a special series of gestures.

In addition to the private mouth rite, the people seek out a holy-mouth specialist once or twice each year. These specialists have an impressive set of tools, including a variety of augers, awls, probes and prods. These objects are used to exorcise the evils of the mouth in a process that involves almost unbelievable torture to the client. The holy-mouth specialist opens the client's mouth and uses the above-mentioned tools to enlarge any holes which may exist in the teeth. Magical materials are then put into these holes. If there are no naturally occurring holes in the teeth, large sections of one or more teeth are gouged out to make room for the magic substance. In the client's view, the purpose of this ritual is to stop mouth decay and to attract friends.

This is obviously an extremely sacred and traditional rite in the society. The people return to the holy-mouth specialist year after year even though their teeth continue to decay.

[Adapted from Horace Miner, "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema," in *American Anthropologist*, vol. 58, no. 3.]