

## An anthropological examination of an exotic tribe: The Naicisyhp

Do physicians have a culture? In this allegorical examination of an apparently unfamiliar tribe, the Naicisyhp (physician), the author illustrates that doctors do indeed have a culture and that examining this culture may help us understand the structure and practice of medicine.

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**T**his article provides an ethnographic description of the sacred customs of the Naicisyhp culture. It is inspired by an earlier ethnography published on the equally exotic Nacirema people.<sup>1</sup> While there is some debate among scholars as to the exact origins of the western Naicisyhp, it is generally agreed that they are likely a derivative of a larger cultural group known as the Rotcod Lacidem. There are various subgroupings and types of Rotcod Lacidem throughout the world, all of which fall under the general rubric of Enicidem.

### Canadian Naicisyhp

The Naicisyhp settled in coastal communities of Western Canada in the late 19th century and have always been fiercely independent. In British Columbia, Canada, the Naicisyhp were provided with the right to self-government in 1886, and ever since

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they have existed as a kind of nation within a nation akin in modern times to the establishment of the territory of Nunavut in northern Canada. They have their own written language and have recorded the values of their culture, a set of cultural commandments, in various sacred documents, including the Lacidem Srenoititcarp Tca. This sacred document was replaced in 2009 by a more recent cultural rulebook known as the Htlaeh Srenoititcarp Tca.

The Naicisyhp are a minority group in British Columbia and number about 10 000 in various settlements. In modern as well as early times their numbers tend to be larger in the urban areas where resources are plentiful. Their culture is quite heterogeneous and it is generally acknowledged that membership is an ascribed status that is only granted to an elite few. Though membership tends to bring elevated status to their members, the rites of passage for entry carry with them lengthy trials including numerous hardships.

Similar to the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, they have also succeeded in developing a pan-Naicisyhp identity. At the national level, their various communities have joined together in a parliamentary-style body known as

the Lacidem Licnuoc. The Lacidem Licnuoc has representatives from each jurisdiction of the country and has been invested with the responsibility to assess the skills and knowledge of Naicisyhp as they seek shamanic independence. When young Naicisyhp have been socialized to become full members of their local tribe, they are then invited to undergo a rite of passage. If successful in passing the ordeal, they are granted the ability to practise their tradition independently.

The political structure of the Naicisyhp is presided over by an assembly of elders known as the Egelloc fo Snaicisyhp. In turn, an elder's council, known as the Licnuoc, with 15 members, govern the Egelloc. Ten of the Licnuoc members are elders elected by region from the various Naicisyhp communities in BC and five are appointed from the wider BC culture as part of an attempt at cultural integration.

The Egelloc is headed by two revered figures among the Naicisyhp. The first supreme chieftain receives earnings from tithing and is known as the Rartsiger. The second venerated leader, the Tnediserp, receives only symbolic wealth and is elected from the local Naicisyhp community.

### Protecting the cherished values of the Naicisyhp

Shamans occupy the uppermost social positions. As a result, healing ceremonies connected to birth, death, and illness are of central importance. As these traditions are very close to the inner web of belief of the Naicisyhp, only acknowledged shamanic practices are allowed. Rogue healing practices are not tolerated and such conduct can bring about notice by the elders of the Egelloc. If the elders become alarmed about imminent danger arising from rogue healing practices, then they will bring to a standstill the ability of a Naicisyhp to practise healing rituals. Such action is rare and is only taken in urgent episodes of extremely questionable healing.

If a complaint is made against a shaman regarding his or her honor or healing rituals, the Egelloc explores the validity of the grievance. When it is suspected that one of their members may be engaged in precarious curing rituals, the goodwill of two shamans of high standing within the same clan as the shaman are called upon. Invested with the authority of the elders, these shamans determine the authenticity of the healing methods in question. These considered opinions are inspected by the Licnuoc elders and the assembly rules as to whether the healing practice is valid and whether further action is required.

Curing sacraments are of central importance to the shamanic identity of the Naicisyhp, and they do not always take kindly to attempts to discontinue or curb their sacred powers. In some situations, they will not comply with the wishes of the elders of the Egelloc. If a Naicisyhp chooses to disobey the wishes of the elders of the Egelloc, a conflict may ensue.

As the Naicisyhp are typically healers rather than warriors, they take warriors into service when struggles escalate. When under threat, each shaman has the right to seek asylum with a special association of elders, known

as the Naidanac Lacidem Evitcetorp Noitaicossa that has been established for defence and safeguard against danger. The Naidanac Lacidem Evitcetorp Noitaicossa retains a war chest and a steady supply of powerful warriors known as Reywal.

### Individual shaman who choose not to show allegiance to the sacred cultural values do so at their own peril.

When a Naicisyhp engages a warrior to challenge the elders, the Egelloc turn to their war ambassador. The war ambassador is called the Lagel Rartsiger and is a special Reywal that has taken up residence in the temple of the Egelloc. The principle aim of the war ambassador is to seek a treaty without open combat. If a peaceful resolution cannot be obtained, then they summon a powerful warrior from outside the temple, Lanretxe Licnuoc, who goes into battle with rebel shamans to protect the Naicisyhp culture.

Individual shaman who choose not to show allegiance to the sacred cultural values do so at their own peril. When a conflict between a shaman and the elders is looming, the conflict tends to take one of two courses. Either the shaman in question makes admissions to the errors of his or her ways and agrees to make amends, or the elders can call for an Yriuqni, an ordeal with the possibility for public disgrace for the individual Naicisyhp. In such situations a special assembly of elders is appointed by the Egelloc

to hear the allegations as well as the defence of the shaman's healing rituals.

These Yriuqni used to take place in secret, and the healing ways of individual Naicisyhp were never examined in the public eye. Today Yriuqni are open to the public. Although many Yriuqni are convened, few actually go forward. The vast majority of Naicisyhp shaman choose to sign a treaty with the Egelloc making admissions regarding their cultural infractions rather than face the potential shame of a public Yriuqni.

The Egelloc encourage culturally appropriate healing practices with guidance and teaching as well as informal and formal sanctions that can consist of public shaming or reprimand. If a particular shaman is unrepentant, unskilled, or dishonorable, they risk being expelled from the Naicisyhp culture temporarily or permanently. A public announcement is made that outlines the circumstances of their exclusion.

### The great chamber

The Egelloc elders hold their meetings in a grand chamber where ceremonial costumes are mandatory. All the male elders wear a thin garment of various colors that ties around their necks. They are fastened with an elaborate knot. The garments are usually made of silk although on rare occasions are made of synthetic materials. Women elders are not required to wear the band of fabric around their necks but adorn themselves with ceremonial garments intended for formal occasions.

The outerwear of these formal costumes may be removed, temporarily, during private meetings of the Egelloc. During this brief period, the outer garments are hung on back of the chamber seats. As the arrival of guests is announced, the elders arise immediately and put on their outer coverings so that they are in full costume. If

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one of the elders has loosened the knot of their ceremonial trimming during the private session, then he or she must also tighten the loop.

The preparation or ingestion of food is strictly forbidden in the great chamber. All beverages are outlawed as well, with the exception of water. Water is sanctioned when taken from vessels provided for this purpose.

At times the elders request a face-to-face meeting with a shaman. Such meetings afford the elders an opportunity to gain a sense of the demeanor of an individual Naicisyhp and to hear details of the shaman's curing practices that they may not have seen in written accounts. For these occasions, the Naicisyhp are called to the great chamber.

During the meeting, the elders sit in a rectangle with their most revered healing figure, the Tnediserp at the head, flanked by the supreme chieftain, the Rartsiger, and the elders. The outermost position of the table, furthest from the Tnediserp, is left for the Naicisyhp in question. When the Naicisyhp arrives, they are welcomed by the Tnediserp and offered water. The first questions of the Naicisyhp are always asked by the Tnediserp and usually begin by requesting that the visitor describe the scope of their shamanic practice. When the Tnediserp has finished, then the elders ask questions.

### The five key questions

The questions explore five key areas. First, does the shaman have the skill and knowledge to practise healing rituals? If not, what actions need to be put in place to protect the public? Second, is the shaman honorable and well intentioned? If not, what actions need to be put in place to protect the honor of the Naicisyhp culture? Third, if the shaman does not have sufficient skill, knowledge, or honor, can he or she gain these attributes through further support? Fourth, is the Naicisyhp open to advice or is he or she adversarial? If adversarial, a warrior may need to be involved. Finally, is the shaman injured in some way and requires healing? Once these areas have been explored, then the Naicisyhp is invited to leave the chamber so the elders can deliberate.

When a shaman plainly acknowledges a mistake and demonstrates willingness to work toward a remedy in the healing customs, elders of the Egelloc fo Snaicisyhp have a propensity to look upon the shaman favorably. In contrast, if the shaman is adversarial, it is more challenging for the elders to find a peaceful resolution.

If the Naicisyhp comes alone, then the elders are more likely to engage in a healing relationship. If he or she comes accompanied by a Reywal, this hampers the flow of cultural exchange between the individual and the shaman brethren. In such situations, the

elders request that their Lagel Rartsiger attend.

If a shaman brings dishonor to the overall group, through unchaste relations or improper commerce with subjects of healing rituals, then this also brings the attention of the elders. Similar to infractions with respect to healing practices themselves, these offences can bring about a range of cultural consequences. Rogue Naicisyhp may be compelled to undergo concentrated observation by their peers, receive help in complying with conventional customs, have their healing privileges taken away temporarily, or be assigned a Naicisyhp chaperone. In severe cases, when a shaman is particularly unrepentant or cannot learn the healing rituals according to accepted custom, he or she may be expelled from the Naicisyhp culture altogether.

At times, it is necessary for the elders to reprimand rogue shamanic practice. A public reprimand occurs with the Tnediserp actually reading the charges aloud to the particular healer in question. In such rare cases, the healer in question stands in front of the elders. Even the most mischievous of healers find this experience deeply unpleasant and typically fix their eyes on the floor in embarrassment. The transgressions are written into a sacred document read by all of Naicisyhp known as the Egelloc Ylretrauq.

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### Reference

1. Miner H. Body ritual among the Nacirema. *Am Anthropologist* 1956;58:503-507.

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