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Comment on R. J. Priest "Missionary positions: Christian, modernist, postmodernism"

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If it is true, as Robert Priest asserts, that the expression 'missionary position' came into existence through Kinsey's slovenliness (one wonders how accurate the remainder of his book is), we should be grateful to Kinsey, because he provided us with an irresistible metaphor. I say "If it is true", because I would not be surprised if – in spite of Priest's meticulous search – one day an old ethnographic text crops up in which this coital position is indeed coined 'missionary'.

Why is this metaphor irresistible? Because it joins two worlds within one image which in 'real life' hardly tolerate one another. It flourishes on the soil of one of the most powerful classic figures of style: the *contradictio*. A missionary having sex! It is both shocking and amusing. From its beginning, this expression was destined for success. Priest's long list of titles from articles, books and seminars bears testimony to its popularity. And so does his own essay. There is only one thing which can halt its popularity: its overuse and it becoming a cliché. In fact that phase may have been reached after publication of his essay.

Priest should be commended for his clever way of bending the 'missionary position' back to suit those who love to use it – I mean the metaphor. Popular among anthropologists because of its criticising and ridiculing capacity towards missionaries and their ethnocentrism, the expression shows its boomerang effect, revealing the complacency and intellectual ethnocentrism of the anthropologists themselves (cf. Van der Geest 1990).

Unfortunately for our discussion, the European whose sexual movements were ridiculed by the Trobrianders was neither a missionary nor an anthropologist but a Greek buccaneer (Malinowski 1929: 284). Malinowski even knows his name: Nicholas Minister. (Hey! 'Minister'! Could this be a clue?). Why did they not imitate the wooden movements of the anthropologist staying in their midst? My tentative answer follows in the next paragraphs.

There are at least three aspects of fieldwork on which anthropologists are less than informative: their tagging along with missionaries, their sex life, and their defecation. Priest's essay playfully deals with two of these topics.

There may be several reasons to account for anthropologists' lack of openness on these subjects. One, I suspect, is that revelation of these practices in their daily life in the field would not enhance their carefully built-up image of being almost integrated members of the community where they conduct their research. Anthropologists in the field had and still have much more contact with missionaries than they like to admit in their publications. They enjoyed the missionary's company, his beer and his toilet.

And why so taciturn about sex? I have pondered this for a long time. Could it be prurience, cowardliness, disgust, racism, anxiety about relatives at home, inhibition to expose intimate experiences, fear of disease, methodological strategy, or simply the fact that they had no sex life to speak of? Only dreams and desires? Evans-Pritchard

(1976: 240) writes that his teacher Seligman told him “to take ten grains of quinine every night and to keep off women.” The almost complete absence of any reference to the sexual part of participant observation (for some exceptions, see: Cesara 1982, Krumeich 1994, Kulick & Willson 1995, Markowitz & Ashkenazi 1999) makes one wonder about the anthropological position.

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PUBLIC TOILETS AND PRIVACY IN GHANA

By Sjaak van der Geest, University of Amsterdam

Waste management is a crucial issue in preventive health. In 1980 the World Health Organization (WHO) launched a decade which was to lead to proper toilet facilities for everybody in the world by the year 1990. The medical implications were clear, but there was insufficient understanding of the social and cultural aspects of people's habits of defecation. This brief note draws attention to toilet behavior in Ghana; I admit, an unusual topic for anthropological research, but not unimportant.

Coincidentally, Ghanaian toilets are at the center of discussions in the Netherlands. Researchers from the Institute of Planning and Demography of the University of Amsterdam, in cooperation with the Department of Planning of Kumasi's University of Science and Technology, have studied the management of public toilet facilities in Kumasi (e.g., Frantzen 1997). They argue that these facilities have improved substantially, thanks to the privatization of their management, but that they are in great need of further improvement.

Members of the departments of Geography and Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, the Geography department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and researchers from the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in Accra are collaborating on a waste disposal and decentralization of services project in the Accra Metropolitan Area. The Ghanaian chief investigator is Nelson Obirih-Opareh. The project focuses on political, economic and logistic problems in waste management and on social and cultural attitudes towards dirt in public places (Obirih-Opareh 1999).

Two researchers from the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam are also investigating the extent to which farmers in African societies are willing and interested in using human excrements as manure on their land. The objective of the research is to find a solution for two urgent problems: ineffective waste disposal and depletion of agricultural land. First impressions tell that in most African cultures people find the use of human manure disgusting (Timmer & Visker 1998). The pilot research of this project has been carried out in Mali, but future research is planned in various African countries, including Ghana. The first findings suggest that although people are generally appalled by the idea, use of human manure does in fact take place, usually without the knowledge of the consumers (Visker 1998).

The author of this note has written a few brief articles about ideas and practices regarding human faeces in Akan society. He was struck by a peculiar paradox in people's dealing with human dirt. On the one hand they seem very concerned about cleanliness, on the other hand, they prove remarkably careless and inefficient in getting rid of the dirt they detest most: human feces. As a result, they are continuously confronted with this filth in private bucket latrines and unpleasant public toilets (Van der Geest 1998). During a recent symposium on "Shit, culture and well-being" at the Anthropological-Sociological Center of the University of Amsterdam, two papers on Ghana were presented. One dealt with the ups and downs' of the public toilets in Kumase (Frantzen & Post 1999) and the other paper was on toilet behavior of elderly people in a Kwahu rural town (Van der Geest 1999). Both papers noted the common use of public toilets in Ghana.

Frantzen and Post write that about 40% of the Kumase population rely on public toilets. Although people complain about the filthiness and discomfort of these facilities, it is unlikely

that that percentage will change in the near future. In the Kwahu community where I did my fieldwork, over 5000 inhabitants had at their disposal about eighty private toilets (sixty of them bucket latrines which were emptied once a week) and four public toilets (only two of which were functioning during my research). At least two schools have semi-public toilets in their compound. A rough estimate suggests that anywhere between forty and eighty percent of the population uses semi-public latrines.

During the discussion of the two papers at the Amsterdam conference, participants familiar with other African countries expressed their surprise about the popularity of public toilets in Ghana. It was suggested that in the surrounding Francophone countries as well as in other African countries public toilets are far less common. None of those present at the symposium was however able to confirm or disprove this claim with more certainty. This is the main reason for writing this note for the GSC ***Newsletter***. I would like to present the readers of the ***Newsletter*** the following questions:

- Is it true that Ghana is exceptional in its widespread reliance on public toilets?
- Does the common appearance of public toilets apply to Akan society alone or does it apply to the entire country?
- How should the commoness of public toilets in Ghana be explained? Should its roots be sought in the Ghanaian /Akan culture or in colonial sanitation policy?
- Is it true that Ghanaians are not worried about lack of privacy during defecation? If so, how can this be explained?
- Why are people reluctant to build a private toilet near or in their own house?

Historical accounts suggest that in 19th century Kumase people had private latrines, at least the well to do. Donna Maier (1979: 68) quotes Bowdich, who visited Kumase in 1817:

> What surprised me most... was the discovery that every house had its cloacae, besides the common ones for the lower orders without the town. They were generally situated under a small archway in the most retired angle of the building, but not infrequently upstairs, within a separate room like a small closet where the large hollow pillar also assists to support the upper story: the holes are of small circumference, but dug to a surprising depth, and boiling water is daily poured down, which eventually prevents the least offence.

Sanitary conditions in Kumase at that time were exemplary and impressed many visitors to the city. In 1874 a certain F. Boyle wrote: "The smells of Coomassie are never those of sewage" and "The town was kept scrupulously clean" (Maier 1979: 69). These observations sound intriguing. Did those observers only visit the houses of the elite, or was Kumase indeed such a hygienic place? Have the people in Kumase - and elsewhere - moved from a predominantly private style of defecation to a more public one? And if so, why?

The apparent absence of concern among Ghanaians/Akans about the lack of privacy in their toilets is indeed puzzling. If they are so horrified about dirt *(efi, atantanee),* especially human feces, one would expect them to be very particular about safeguarding their privacy during a visit to the toilet.

The puzzle is directly related to the conception of 'dirt'. If dirt, in May Douglas' fortunate phrase, is "matter out of place", we should keep in mind that it is always in the eyes of people that something is either in or out of place. The experience of dirtiness is inherently social. Other people's body excretions, with which I am confronted are endlessly more dirty' to me than my own because they are relatively more out of place'. Most people have no problem managing their own feces but are disgusted by the idea of having to handle other people's *ebin.* They may be willing to take care of the excreta of close relatives, for example small children, but not of strangers'. Feces are intimate substances which should remain in place', i.e. in the intimacy of the person who produces them. Being confronted with other peoples' excreta is an extreme case of seeing - and smelling - matters out of place. That is probably the reason that in most - not all - cultures defecation is done in private. It saves members an extremely dirty experience.

In the light of Douglas' theory, the seemingly insouciant public style of defecation in Ghana is puzzling. Or have visitors to the public toilet other - mental - solutions to preserve their privacy in a crowded toilet? How do they survive the painful moments of public exposure of a most private activity? Voila the paradox of the Ghanaian public toilet. I would be grateful for suggestions to solve this riddle

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Note

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Hoe vies is ontlasting?

Antropologische opmerkingen

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In een discussie over encopresis dringt zich onmiddellijk de vraag op, waarom deze 'kwaal' zoveel emotie en ongemak oproept. Het lijkt tegelijkertijd een overbodige vraag want voor iedereen is het toch duidelijk dat het niet onder controle hebben van ontlasting uiterst pijnlijk en vernederend is? Als antropoloog, voor wie het de taak is het vanzelfsprekende ter discussie te stellen, verbaas ik me over deze wijdverbreide afkeer en schaamte rond menselijke (en tot op zekere hoogte: dierlijke) ontlasting. Hoe wijdverbreid en algemeen is die afkeer eigenlijk? Zijn er culturele en sociale situaties waarin men meer ontspannen omgaat met ontlasting? En hoe kan dat dan?

Ontlasting als vuil

Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1970) wordt algemeen beschouwd als een van de belangrijkste antropologische publicaties van de vorige eeuw. Douglas laat op overtuigende wijze zien hoe gevoelens van afkeer en ongemak, ideeën over 'vuil', verbonden zijn met de meest wezenlijke aspecten van menselijke cultuur. Haar studie vond zijn inspiratie zowel in het antropologisch milieu (heersende opvattingen over 'primitieve' religie) als in haar eigen huishouden (de geringe vuil-tolerantie van haar echtgenoot dwong haar zich te bezinnen op de relativiteit van vuil).

De hoofdthesis van haar boek is dat 'absoluut vuil' niet bestaat. Vuil bestaat alleen 'in the eye of the beholder'. Vuil is wanorde. Afschuw van vuil is niet een ingeboren angst, zoals sommige oude godsdiensantropologen beweerden. Vuil is een inbreuk op de orde ("Dirt offends against order", p.12). Het verwijderen of vermijden van vuil is daarom niet een negatieve gebeurtenis maar een positieve handeling waarmee mensen hun omgeving trachten te beheersen. "Schoonmaken is feitelijk niets anders dan 'cultiveren', een manier om de gevaren van buiten... te bezweren en onder controle te brengen" (Van Beek 1996:20).

Het begrip 'vuil', met andere woorden, biedt mensen de gelegenheid hun leven te ordenen. Nog precieser gezegd: het onderscheid tussen 'vuil' en 'schoon' *is* een daad van ordescheppen, van cultuur-produktie. Met behulp van dat onderscheid kunnen mensen grenzen trekken, classificaties maken en besluiten nemen. De culturele bruikbaarheid van het begrip 'vuil' is, volgens Douglas, instrumenteel en expressief. Zijn instrumentele waarde ligt in het feit dat een gemeenschappelijke angst en afkeer ten aanzien van vuil mensen bij elkaar houdt binnen één sociale en culturele orde. Tegelijkertijd behoren uitspraken over 'vuil' en 'schoon' tot de krachtigste expressies van culturele identiteit. Een van de effectiefste manieren om het verschil tussen wij en zij, binnen en buiten, eigen en vreemd aan te geven, is dat te doen via de kwalificaties 'schoon' en 'vuil'.

Is vuil inderdaad een relatief begrip, zoals Douglas opmerkt? Hoe zit dat dan met menselijke uitwerpselen? Is ontlasting niet altijd en overal vies? Bestaat er een cultuur waar men er geen afkeer van heeft? Is er ooit zo'n cultuur geweest? Is ontlasting niet gewoon vies van zichzelf, waar het zich ook bevindt: in een luier, in een wc-pot, in het riool, of op een boterham?

De laatste vier voorbeelden suggereren al dat er bij ontlasting gradaties van vies-zijn bestaan. Ontlasting in het riool is gewoon vies maar op een boterham is het - althans voor de meeste mensen - buitengewoon smerig. In het laatste geval is het duidelijk 'out of place'. Maar waarom is ontlasting

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[1] Deze tekst is gepubiceerd in: A. Snijdewind (red) *Als poepen niet gewoon gaat.* Badhoevedorp: Mension™, pp. 29-52 en voor een groot deel ontleend aan een eerdere publicatie (van der Geest 1998a), een voorbeschouwing op een lijvig themanummer van *Medische Antropologie* (1999; 11/1) over "Poep, cultuur en welbevinden" .

ook vies als het op zijn plaats is, in de wc-pot of - even later - in het riool? Zou het volgens Douglas dan niet juist ‘schoon' moeten zijn?

Ik weet niet of Douglas ooit op deze vragen gereageerd heeft, maar ik zou daarop het volgende antwoord geven. Strikt genomen is ontlasting die zich het riool bevindt schoon; het is waar het hoort te zijn. Hoe komt het dat we ontlasting toch als vuil blijven zien, terwijl het op de juiste plek ligt? Omdat ontlasting niet alleen in ruimtelijke zin ‘opgeborgen' hoort te zijn maar ook in sociaal opzicht. Ontlasting is een intiem product waar men zich privé van scheidt en waar men verder ook geen mededelingen over doet. Ontlasting ter sprake brengen in een conversatie of er over schrijven, zoals nu gebeurt, is dus ook een ‘matter out of place', een verstoring van de goede orde, een inbreuk op de etiquette of, zoals we straks zullen zien ‘dikke pret'. Ontlasting die veilig weg is, uit het zicht, uit de gedachte, is ‘schoon' omdat hij niet bestaat. Ontlasting waarover gesproken wordt, is vuil. Om die reden is een muur waarop met grote letters staat geschreven "Hier niet urineren" even vies als een muur waar men daadwerkelijk tegen piest.

Ideeën over ontlasting

Om met Lévi-Strauss te spreken: Ontlasting is goed om mee te denken. Gedachten over ontlasting zijn derhalve ook gedachten over andere zaken; over identiteit, zichzelf versus anderen; over saamhorigheid en vijandschap, vreemdheid en vertrouwdheid, mooi en lelijk, liefde en haat.

Als Ndonko (1993:100) over de Yasa in Kameroen schrijft, verwerpt hij Goethe's omschrijving van *Erdenrest*, een beetje aarde. Ontlasting is geen neutrale substantie, maar vol vitaliteit en persoonlijk verbonden met een bepaald persoon, een verlengstuk van de mens. Lea's vergelijking tussen excretie en haar dissertatie is meer dan een stilistisch grapje. Beide zijn een metonymisch product, een *pars pro toto*, dat de identiteit draagt van degene die het product heeft voortgebracht. Ze dragen de kenmerken van die persoon en waardering voor of afkeer van het product impliceren waardering voor en afkeer van die persoon. Gelukkig besparen mensen elkaar de pijnlijke situatie van afkeer van elkaars ontlasting te voelen door hun uitwerpselen aan het oog en de neus van anderen te onttrekken. Alleen de baby en de behoeftige zieke of oudere zien zich gedwongen hun feces aan anderen te tonen. In de wijze waarop een ouder de poep van zijn/haar kind behandelt, toont deze zijn/haar gevoelens voor het kind. In gelijke zin toont de verzorger of verpleegkundige zijn/haar genegenheid voor een zieke of oudere in de wijze waarop hij/zij omgaat met de ontlasting van die persoon.

Dat de ontlasting van een kind minder vies - of helemaal niet vies - is dan die van een volwassene is geen toeval. Het kind is nog een deel van de ouder, de moeder, en groeit daar slechts langzaam vandaan. De ontlasting van het kind *is* in zekere zin nog die van de moeder en de moeder die de billetjes van haar baby schoonmaakt, maakt zichzelf schoon. Zindelijkheidstraining impliceert derhalve verwijdering tussen moeder/vader en kind.

De feces van een volwassene, daarentegen, roepen bij de meeste mensen instinctief afkeer op.[2] De feces van die ander opruimen is ofwel een doorbreking van de persoonlijkheidsgrenzen ofwel een technisch-professionele daad. In het eerste geval impliceert de handeling een verlegging van de grenzen en een delen in de intimiteit van de ander; in het tweede geval is er sprake van zakelijkheid waarin iedere persoonlijke betrokkenheid juist ontkend wordt. Door geen persoonsgerichte aandacht te tonen blijft de verzorger buiten de intimiteit van de patiënt hoewel hij/zij strikt genomen de meest intieme delen van die persoon aanraakt. Die zakelijke opstelling is te vergelijken met de ontveinzing van lichamelijke aanraking in overvolle treinen. Die instelling wordt treffend verwoord door een verzorgster in een verpleegtehuis tijdens een interview in de Groene Amsterdammer. Boom (1998):

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2. De verbreking van de intimiteit tussen ouders en kinderen bij het opgroeien vindt niet overal in die mate plaats. Malinowski (1929:133) schrijft over de Trobrianders in Paupa New Guinea dat als een man gestorven is zijn botten door zijn zonen worden uitgezogen. Ze leggen daarbij een directe verbinding met de wijze waarop de vader vroeger voor hen heeft gezorgd. Hij was niet vies van ons, wij zijn niet vies van hem: "It is right that a child should suck the father's ulna. For the father has held out his hand to its excrement and allowed it to make water on his knee."

> Je leert je gedachten uit te schakelen. Ik mag niet met mijn gedachten bij dat lijf komen. Wel met mijn handen.

Dieren hebben die identiteit en intimiteit niet. Hondenpoep is vies maar een hondendrol die ik aantref op de stoep van mijn huis is minder een invasie van mijn privacy en dus minder vies dan wanneer die drol van mijn buurman zou blijken te zijn. Hetzelfde geldt uiteraard voor kattenstront. De feces van paarden, koeien, geiten, schapen, konijnen en kippen hebben nog minder identiteit en wekken nauwelijks afkeer op. In de dorpjes van Beieren - en elders - liggen de mesthopen vóór het huis, naast het café en de kerk. Ze verfraaien het dorpsgezicht en ruiken lekker. In Ethiopië wordt elke koeienvla met zorg verzameld, gedroogd en opgestapeld: het bruine goud. Om de huizen treft men pitoresque muurtjes aan die uit gedroogde koeienvla's blijken te bestaan. En de lekkerste *enjerra's* (lokale 'pannenkoeken') worden op koeienstront gebakken. Feces en voedsel raken hier elkaar zonder dat dat problemen oplevert. Dat gebeurt trouwens ook bij de bemesting van het land. Het is geen toeval dat menselijke feces veel minder voor bemesting worden gebruikt.[3]

Praktijken rond ontlasting

Er zijn diverse - vaak anekdotische - voorbeelden bekend waarin de toiletgang als een communale bezigheid wordt voorgesteld. Het voorbeeld van de Franse koning die in gezelschap zijn behoefte deed maar er de voorkeur aan gaf alleen te eten wordt in talloze publicaties aangehaald. Ook antropologen melden dat men in bepaalde samenlevingen geacht wordt *gezamenlijk* zijn behoefte te doen, maar in verreweg de meeste culturen lijkt men toch privacy op prijs te stellen. In Nederland mag men dan een volksgezegde hebben dat "Hollandse jongens (niet: meisjes) nooit alleen pissen (niet: poepen)" maar die wijsheid lijkt eerder te slaan op de aanstekelijkheid van het urineren dan op een culturele regel dat men zoiets samen *behoort* te doen.

In onze eigen cultuur is de toiletgang waarschijnlijk de meest solitaire activiteit. Seks praktiseert men - in de meeste gevallen - met zijn tweeën, maar je behoefte doen doe je alleen, wil men alleen doen. In het openbaar zijn behoefte doen is een van de grofste inbreuken op het publieke fatsoen. Het komt nauwelijks voor want er zijn weinig mensen die het willen of zouden kunnen. Ook onder daklozen en zwervers die nauwelijks toegang hebben tot een private gelegenheid zijn er vrij strikte regels voor waar en wanneer men zijn behoefte kan doen (Rensen 2001). Voor ontlasting heeft men in onze cultuur ruimtes ontworpen waar men echt alleen kan en mag zijn. De techniek heeft zich uitgesloofd om de privaatheid van dat vertrek steeds verder te vervolmaken. Het ideaal is dat de gebruiker van het toilet niet alleen door niemand wordt gezien terwijl hij zijn behoefte doet, maar dat hij ook niet gehoord wordt en geen enkel spoor achterlaat, zelfs niet een luchtje. Slechts dan blijft het private in alle opzichten privaat, alsof het er nooit geweest is; zoals bij de perfecte misdaad.

Die haast volmaakte privaatheid heeft iets vanzelfsprekends gekregen in onze maatschappij. We zijn ons die behoefte nauwelijks bewust, totdat we in een situatie komen waar de privacy van dat moment bedreigd wordt, in een vreemde omgeving waar we de weg niet weten of in een openbaar toilet, waar we moeite hebben ons onzichtbaar, onhoorbaar en onruikbaar voor anderen te maken en waar we tegen onze wil geconfronteerd worden met de intimiteit van anderen, dus met vuil. Die ervaring is goed beschreven door Hofland:

> De zwaarste, de meest weerzinwekkende onder de kleine invasies is de stank van (anderen). De onzichtbare muur van walgelijkheid waar je doorheen moet als je kort na je voorganger de wc binnenkomt, de latrines van de kazernes en de stations.... Via de neus wordt het hele wezen belaagd, en hetzelfde gebeurt met je oor als je gedwongen bent een wc te gebruiken die deel uitmaakt van een batterij, waarbij de schotten tussen de compartimenten niet tot het plafond reiken.... Ze zijn in strijd met al onze moderne zorgen om wat we noemen de

3. Voor een overzicht van praktijken en ideeën betreffende menselijke mest, zie Timmer & Visker 1998.

> onaantastbaarheid van de persoonlijke levenssfeer. Maar wat de neus en oren kan overkomen, is gering vergeleken bij het allerbrutaalste wat soms de ogen te wachten staat: de aanblik van de drol van je voorganger op het witte porselein. Dit is, dunkt mij, het gemeenste wat op dit gebeid het netvlies kan raken.... (geciteerd in Van der Bruggen 1991:45).

Behoefte aan privacy is er ook in andere culturen. Malinowski (1929) merkt fijntjes op dat wat dat betreft de Trobrianders in Papua New Guinea heel wat beschaafder zijn dan Zuid-Europeanen. Zij hebben een speciale plaats waar ze hun behoefte doen, een plek voor de mannen en een plek voor de vrouwen, op een redelijke afstand van het dorp. Nooit zullen ze gezamenlijk naar die plek gaan en als twee personen gelijktijdig hun behoefte doen zullen ze discreet afstand van elkaar houden.

Ndonko (1993:124) benadrukt diezelfde zorg om privacy bij de Yasa in Kameroen. Wie aandrang voelt, hoort zich zonder iets te zeggen te verwijderen.

> La règle est d'aller sans rien dire; on se doit d'être le plus discret possible, surtout si l'on est en présence des parents, des aînés ou des beaux-parents; on quitte l'assemblée sans rien annoncer et c'est la direction empruntée qui informe les autres sur les raisons de ce départ.

Zonder dat zij over de geavanceerde technieken van geurverdrijvers, geluidsisolatie en diepspoelers beschikken, slagen ook de Yasa erin hun behoefte bijna onopgemerkt te doen. Waar die vrije ruimte en frisse lucht en de golven van de zee ontbreken en men gedwongen is in elkaars gezelschap zijn behoefte te doen, bijna op elkaars lip gezeten, zoals in de publieke latrines van het Ghanese dorp waar ik onderzoek verricht, daar heeft men sociale technieken om de gewenste privacy tot stand te brengen: men negeert elkaar zoals in de overvolle trein waar men tijdelijk beroofd wordt van het stukje privé domein. Als in de fysieke werkelijkheid de gestelde grenzen overschreden worden en gevoelens van afkeer dreigen, hebben mensen nog de mogelijkheid die werkelijkheid anders te *denken*.

Elias (1982) ziet de toenemende verheimelijking van poepen (en andere lichamelijke verrichtingen) in onze Westerse cultuur als een beschavingsproces dat zich over een lange periode voltrekt. ‘Schaamte- en pijnlijkheidsstandaards' verschuiven. Met name die verrichtingen die mensen met de (andere) dieren gemeen hebben, worden zoveel mogelijk aan het oog onttrokken. Cultuur is zich onderscheiden van het dier. Als het dier zich kenmerkt door gulzigheid, is vasten een teken van beschaving; als het dier seksueel promiscue is, is monogamie - en meer nog seksuele onthouding - beschaafd; als het dier zijn uitwerpselen overal - en voor het oog van iedereen - deponeert, doet de mens dat slechts op speciale, verborgen plaatsen. Mensen lopen niet met hun dierlijkheid te koop: ze bedekken hun lichaam en verrichten hun meest dierlijke handelingen in het verborgene. Eten en drinken, maar vooral urineren, defecatie en seks worden steeds intiemer. In een etiquette-boekje uit 1729 wordt deze trend op treffende wijze geïllustreerd:

> Wanneer men moet urineren, hoort men zich altijd terug te trekken op een afgelegen plek; en ook wat betreft de andere natuurlijke behoeften die kunnen opkomen schrijft de wellevendheid (zelfs aan kinderen) voor om deze slechts daar te verrichten, waar men niet gezien kan worden. Wanneer men in gezelschap is, is het zeer onbeleefd lucht uit het lichaam te laten ontsnappen, hetzij van boven, hetzij van onderen, zelfs wanneer men dit geluidloos zou doen, en het is beschamend en ongepast om het zo te doen, dat anderen het kunnen horen (geciteerd in Elias 1982:184).

De eis van respect voor andermans privacy tijdens het defeceren wordt duidelijk gesteld in een *Die galante Ethica* uit 1720/1731:

> Komt men aan een persoon voorbij die doende is zich te ontlasten, dan gedrage men zich alsof men dat niet opmerkt, en het is dan ook in strijd met de hoffelijkheid om deze persoon te begroeten (geciteerd in Elias 1982: 185).

Samengevat: de activiteit van zich ontlasten veroorzaakt geen problemen zolang deze onttrokken wordt aan de waarneming van anderen. Zodra mensen geconfronteerd worden met de ontlastingsaktiviteit of de uitwerpselen van anderen, zal dat gewoonlijk leiden tot een acuut gevoel van afkeer. De

feces van een *ander* zijn in *mijn* leven ‘out of place', ze doorbreken de grenzen tussen mij en de ander. Ze verstoren de orde en zijn om die reden vies.

Getuige zijn van het defeceren van een ander bedreigt ook een andere grens, die tussen mens en dier. Wie in het openbaar zijn behoefte doet gedraagt zich als een beest en roept weerzin op. Het is deze weerzin die de grenzen bewaakt tussen mens en dier.

Het spreken over ontlasting

‘Spreken over' is een metoniem van waar men over spreekt. Als de substantie en activiteit van ontlasting niet in de openbaarheid thuis horen, dan geldt dat ook voor de woorden die er naar verwijzen. In de meeste culturen en gezelschappen behoort men niet over uitwerpselen te praten. Met name tijdens de maaltijd is het zeer ongepast dit onderwerp aan te roeren. Via het woord komt de substantie als het ware tussen de warme gerechten op tafel te staan en bederft de eetlust.

Woorden die naar excreta verwijzen zijn met name ongepast (ze ‘passen' niet, zitten op die plek niet goed) in deftig gezelschap. Hoe hoger de persoon, hoe kwalijker het is die te confronteren met poep of woorden van poep. Malinowski (1929: 376-77) citeert een verhaal over een gevecht tussen twee Trobriand hoofdmannen. Tijdens een pauze in het gevecht klom een man in een boom en schreeuwde naar de hoofdman van de andere partij een verwensing die Malinowski deftig vertaalt als "To'uluwa, eat thy dirt", maar in het Nederlands waarschijnlijk zou klinken als: "Vreet je eigen stront op!" Het was een zeer ernstige belediging, schrijft Malinowski: "It was addressed to a chief, it was said aloud and in public, and the personal name was added." Toen de oorlog voorbij was en de vrede getekend, werd de man die de belediging had geuit alsnog door enkele mannen van To'uluwa "in broad daylight" met een speer doodgestoken. Niemand protesteerde; iedereen begreep dat de man deze straf had verdiend.

Samen met seksuele onderwerpen en ziektes zijn feces en defeceren favoriete ingrediënten voor schelden en verwensen. In een groot aantal Europese talen levert ‘stront’ de inhoud van de meest gebruikte uitroep die teleurstelling of ergernis uitdrukt, in ieder geval in het Deens, Duits, Engels, Frans, Pools, Russisch, Spaans en Zweeds.[4]

In het Twi, in Ghana, is *ebin* (‘stront') een grof woord waarmee men extreme afkeuring uit. Uitdrukkingen als *mene wo so* (‘ik schijt op je') en *mene w'anom* (‘ik schijt in je bek') zijn eigenlijk te vulgair om op te schrijven, maar ik heb ze wel horen gebruiken in hoogoplopende ruzies (van der Geest 1998b). Malinowski (1929: 377) meldt dat Trobrianders hun afkeer van homoseksualiteit uitdrukken in een feces-metoniem: "This man copulates excrement".

Het taboe-karakter van poep- en strontwoorden leidt tot twee reacties: enerzijds het gebruik van eufemismen en anderzijds de populariteit van poep/stront-woorden en poep/stront-verhalen. Van beide reacties vindt men talloze voorbeelden in het tijdschrift *Maledicta*.

Wat het eerste betreft; eufemismen voor poep, stront en ontlasting (zelf reeds een eufemisme) en de plek waar men zich ontlast (idem) bestaan waarschijnlijk in alle talen, en in grote getalen. De meest gangbare eufemismen voor urineren en ontlasting in de medische wereld zijn respectievelijk ‘mictie' en ‘stoelgang' of ‘def’. "De weg naar de wc in geplaveid met verhullend idioom", schrijft Reinsma (1929:68).

Ndonko (1993:130-27) geeft een aantal voorbeelden van de aantrekkelijkheid van het spreken over ontlasting: poep-verhalen en -raadsels bij de Yasa in Kameroen. Het speciale genoegen dat men in deze verbale bezigheden schept hangt direct samen met hun taboekarakter. Spreekwoorden krijgen extra kracht als zij een verwijzing naar feces bevatten. "Als een man schijt, ziet de vis het, maar niemand ziet de vis schijten" wordt gezegd als men iemand zijn geheimen toevertrouwt, terwijl deze zijn eigen geheimen voor zich houdt. In een populair kinderprogramma op televisie in de jaren zeventig zong Ome Willem elke aflevering met veel bijval en afgrijzen van de kinderen: “Lus jij ook een broodje poep?” Mijn grootmoeder, die op een boerderij in Oud-Ade woonde, gebruikte vaak een spreekwoord waarin het negatieve van stront - en zijn lucht - werd gecontrasteerd met de schoonheid

4. Het is merkwaardig dat men in het Nederlands voor een dergelijke uitroep de voorkeur geeft aan het vrouwelijk geslachtsdeel of het Engelse ‘shit'.

van gepoetst goud. Het spreekwoord zelf was een afkeuring van het roddelen: "Hoe meer men goud poetst, hoe meer het blinkt; hoe meer men stront roert, hoe meer het stinkt." Maar ‘ontlasting' leent zich ook voor de taal van de tederheid. ‘Mijn lekkere scheet', ‘mijn drolletje' zijn termen die men kan gebruiken voor iemand die haast even nabij is als de eigen ontlasting.

Ontlasting als cultureel symbool

Het is al gezegd: Juist omdat ontlasting getaboeïseerd wordt, oefent het onderwerp aantrekkingskracht uit op diegenen die zich van de officiële regels en omgangsvormen wensen te distantiëren. Poep-verhalen drukten een milde vorm van verzet uit, van jongeren tegenover ouderen, van ondergeschikten tegenover gezagsdragers, van lage klassen tegenover hoge klassen. Zoals eerder al is opgemerkt, poep laat zich goed ‘denken' en ‘spreken'. Dundes (1984) tracht het Duitse ‘volkskarakter' te schetsen in scatologische termen en beelden: "The German may pay lipservice to cleanliness, but deep down he continues to revel in dirt" (p. 103). De Duitse preoccupatie met stront aldus Dundes, is te vergelijken met de sleutelsymbolen die antropologen als Benedict, Mead en Kroeber voor andere culturen hebben beschreven. Hij zoekt naar stront in liederen, spreekwoorden, raadsels, kinderversjes, legendes en geschreven literatuur (bijv. Dürrenmatt, Lenz en Thomas Mann). In de titel van zijn boek, "Life is like a chicken coop ladder", wordt met behulp van stront de maatschappelijke ongelijkheid kernachtig weergegeven. De kippen die hoog zitten, zitten goed; de lagergezetenen krijgen de stront van de hogergezetenen op hun kop.

Uitgaande van stront, meent Dundes, kan men veel in de Duitse cultuur begrijpen, van modderbaden en eetgewoonten tot de muziek van Mozart. Overigens lijken Duitsers en Nederlanders op dit punt op elkaar. Legman schrijft dat Duitsers èn Nederlanders grappen over poep en stront de leukste vinden (geciteerd in Dundes 1984:88), in ieder geval zo’n veertig jaar geleden toen Legman (1968) zijn studie over de schuine mop publiceerde. De Duitse schoonmaakwoede verschilt niet zoveel van de Hollandse properheid zoals die door Van Ginkel (1997) wordt beschreven. De filosofische uitspraak "Das leben is wie ein Kindernachthemd: kurz und beschissen" bestaat ook in een Nederlandse versie.

De plek

Het toilet of de plek waar men zijn behoefte doet, is in de meeste gevallen een private ruimte. Diverse woorden voor ‘toilet' die in de Nederlandse taal gebezigd zijn vanaf ongeveer de zestiende eeuw drukken dat private karakter uit: heimelijk, privaat, heimelijkheid, sekreet, huisje, bestekamer, achteraf en kabinet (Reinsma 1992:69). Maar, zoals we gezien hebben, ook in andere culturen, zelfs op het open veld of aan de zee, zijn er strenge regels die privacy garanderen voor de mens die zijn behoefte doet. De geschiedenis van het toilet in onze eigen maatschappij is het verhaal van steeds groter technisch vernuft dat een steeds ‘schonere' en meer private manier van ontlasting mogelijk maakte (cf. Gastelaars 1996).

Het toilet heeft zich ontwikkeld tot een ruimte waar men zich ten alle tijde kan terugtrekken en de deur kan afsluiten zonder argwaan te wekken. Het ‘recht' op een ongestoorde private stoelgang heeft daarmee een bijdrage geleverd aan de infrastructuur van de individualisering. Het belang van zo'n toevluchtsoord voor alle mogelijke privé-aktiviteiten mag niet onderschat worden. In het toilet kan men ongezien ‘verboden' dingen doen: een sigaret roken, drugs gebruiken, masturberen, huilen, een boek of krant lezen, opruiende of obscene graffito's schrijven, mediteren en een bom verstoppen (zoals in 1992 in de Londense metro gebeurde). In een toilet van de Amsterdamse Universiteit las ik ooit: "The toilet solves all you problems". Het is overdreven, maar niet eens zo veel. Zwartrijders in de trein gaan op het toilet zitten en inbrekers laten zich op het toilet insluiten. Het moderne water closet is een oxymoron: dankzij een ingenieuze constructie staat het meest private direct in verbinding met het meest publieke, de totale anonimiteit, het stelsel van rioleringen. Door die vereniging van tegenstrijdigheden biedt het water closet speciale mogelijkheden. In het toilet kan men zich in het verborgen ontdoen van alles wat men wil laten verdwijnen, niet alleen uitwerpselen en andere lichaamsafscheidingen maar ook de pillen die men niet wil innemen of gestolen, illegale belastende

voorwerpen, mits zij niet te groot zijn. Door zijn speciale constructie biedt het toilet een ideale mogelijkheid om er een ander persoon te worden. Het is een plek van transities, de geografie van de liminele fase: men kan er zich opknappen, van kleren verwisselen (de gevangene kan er bewaker worden; een patiënt een bezoeker), en ook wie er ‘slechts' zijn behoefte gedaan heeft, komt er ook uit ‘als een ander mens'.

Wc's zijn een teken van beschaving. Ze drukken een stukje volksaard uit. In een boekje over de eigenaardigheden van het Nederlandse volk weiden de Amerikaanse auteurs breed uit over dat merkwaardige kleine hokje in Nederlandse huizen met zijn primitieve wc-pot waarin de drol nog een tijdje blijft liggen om zijn lucht te verspreiden. Typeert dat toilet de Nederlander die zijn uitwerpselen wil zien voor zij voorgoed verdwijnen? Een correspondent van NRC-Handelsblad in Londen heft in die krant (2/8/97) een lofheid aan op het Britse diepspoel toilet: "Een triomf van hygiëne, schoonheid en techniek tegelijkertijd."

Wc's zijn ook symbolen van status, stand en gender. In de meeste samenlevingen zijn er dames- en herentoiletten die gender-verschillen benadrukken. Ook is er een groot verschil tussen de graffito's in mannen- en vrouwen-wc's. In een interview in een krant meldde de Amsterdamse socioloog Wertheim ooit dat er vroeger op het Ministerie van Justitie in Batavia vier soorten toiletten bestonden die nauwkeurig de hiërarchie weerspiegelden: de directeur, de ambtenaren boven de rang van refendaris, de ambtenaren beneden die rang en de ‘inlanders'. Als Mr. Biswas in Naipauls (1969) beroemde roman een nieuwe hoofdredacteur krijgt, eist deze een aparte wc voor zichzelf: een onmiskenbaar teken dat de hiërarchische verhoudingen bij de krant drastisch veranderd zijn.

Ontlasting, gezondheid en welbevinden

Een geregelde stoelgang met een drol van goede kleur en substantie is een teken van goede gezondheid (cf. Van der Bruggen 1991:73-88). Dundes haalt in dat verband een Zuid-Duits volks-gezegde aan: "Guat geschissen ist halbat gevöglt" (‘goed gescheten is half geneukt'). Volgens een tweede gezegde dat hij citeert is een goede stoelgang echter nog meer waard: "Gut Scheissen das kan sehr beglücken, viel mehr nog als manchmals das Ficken (= ‘neuken'). In een ander verband heb ik al eens een wijsheid van een oude oom van mij (hij is 103 jaar oud geworden) geciteerd: "Als je drol nog goed is, is er niks aan de hand." In diverse landen wordt druk gediscussieerd over wat voor type drol nu het beste, het gezondste is, de ‘floater' of de ‘sinker'. De meerderheid is van mening dat de ‘floater' de gezondste drol is. Overigens is er een diepspoeltoilet voor nodig om de diagnose te stellen. Onze voorouders, die het met vlakspoeltoiletten moesten doen, hadden geen benul van ‘floaters' en ‘sinkers'.

In zijn *Groepsfoto met dame* voert Böll een non ten tonele die het produceren van perfecte drollen tot een kunst heeft verheven en ook de drollen van haar leerlingen inspecteert. Zij wordt daarom "Zuster Haruspica" genoemd. Wie een perfecte drol legt, hoeft zijn achterste niet eens schoon te maken. De perfecte drol symboliseert het perfecte welbevinden, de opperste control over het lichaam.

Maar als "de drol niet goed is", is dat een onmiskenbaar teken van een probleem, van ziekte of een andere vorm van onwelbevinden. Diarrhee, buikloop, wijst op een verstoord-zijn van de ingewanden of is het gevolg van te grote spanningen. Constipatie is eveneens een slecht teken. In de Ghanese gemeenschap waar ik onderzoek verricht, is men gefixeerd op dagelijkse stoelgang. Wie één dag ‘niet geweest is' spreekt al van constipatie en neemt iets om de verstopping op te heffen: een laxeermiddel of een klysma. Constipatie, zo redeneert men, betekent een opeenhoping van vuil in het lichaam. Het vuil gaat broeien en gisten, zoals men dat ziet bij een mesthoop; het verspreidt zich via het bloed door het hele lichaam en veroorzaakt allerlei ziekten en ongemakken zoals aambeien, maagzweren, hoofdpijn en huiduitslag.

Naast bloed worden ontlasting (‘stoel') en urine op grote schaal onderzocht voor diagnostische doeleinden. Dat gebeurt niet alleen in moderne laboratoria, ook in het verleden werden faeces en urine vaak bij de diagnose betrokken. Hippocrates beval zijn leerlingen reeds om bij een zieke diens stoel, urine, sputum en braaksel te onderzoeken (Lloyd 1983:100).

Een goede en geregelde stoelgang is het teken van een goede fysieke gezondheid en duidt op psychisch en sociaal welbevinden (cf. Van der Geest 2003). De regelmaat van de stoelgang representeert, metaforisch en metonymisch, de regelmaat van iemands leven in algemene zin. "Goed

poepen" symboliseert controle zoals Lea (1993:28) schrijft. Kinderen wordt geleerd zo snel mogelijk zindelijk te worden; zindelijk-zijn is mens-zijn. In de Nederlandse cultuur kan men zeker spreken van een preoccupatie met zindelijkheidstraining bij ouders met kleine kinderen[5]. Niet zindelijk-zijn is een van de ernstigste bedreigingen van iemands sociale en psychische positie. Wie niet zindelijk is, is òf nog geen volwaardig mens, òf is dat niet meer. Het geen controle meer hebben over de ontlasting is een aanslag op iemands algehele gevoel van welbevinden. Het impliceert de pijnlijkste vorm van onzelfstandigheid. Zelf-controle en privacy moeten prijsgegeven worden; men wordt afhankelijk in het meest intieme en meest noodzakelijke van het dagelijks functioneren. Die afhankelijkheid, meldde een dwarslaesiepatië in een televisie-interview, is veel erger dan bijvoorbeeld het niet meer kunnen lopen.

Het is niet verwonderlijk dat de industrie zeer veel hulpmiddelen heeft ontwikkeld die de ongemakken van incontinentie en andere problemen rond mictie en ontlasting verminderen. Die middelen zoals katheters, stoma-zakjes, speciale luiers en hulpmiddelen op het toilet reduceren op de eerste plaats het ongemak voor de betrokken persoon maar verlichten ook het werk van eventuele verzorgers.

Voor verzorgers in de thuissituatie kan het incontinent-worden van de zieke of afhankelijke persoon het ‘breekpunt' worden, het moment waarop zij denken hun taak van verzorger niet meer aan te kunnen. Òf het een breekpunt is, hangt niet alleen af van de fysieke krachten van de verzorger maar ook van de relatie tussen verzorger en verzorgde. Naarmate er meer afstand tussen beiden bestaat, stijgt de viesheidsgraad van de ontlasting en wordt de belasting zwaarder.

In een gezondheidsinrichting of verpleeghuis wordt de aanwezige staf geacht een ‘professionele' houding ten opzichte van ontlasting te hebben, dat wil zeggen dat ze er neutraal mee leren omgaan waardoor de betreffende patiënt of bewoner niet het gevoel krijgt dat zijn privé-wereld wordt geschonden. Vaak lukt dat echter niet. Een arts toelaten tot de meest intieme delen van het lichaam is blijkbaar minder pijnlijk dan hulp en aanwezigheid te moeten accepteren van anderen bij het poepen of plassen, vooral als daar ‘ongelukjes' bij gebeuren.

De Lange (1991:96) beschrijft de situatie in een verpleeghuis voor dementerende ouderen.

> In het begin schamen dementerenden zich, wanneer ze incontinent zijn en wanneer de ziekenverzorgenden hen verschonen. Dat kan ook een reden zijn om niet te durven vragen waar de wc is, of om te zeggen dat ze niet hoeven. Ze voelen dat hun waardigheid in het geding is.... Later zoeken ze een stil plekje op om hun behoefte te doen. De ziekenverzorgenden vinden het dan later in een hoekje van de kamer, in een nachtkastje, in de prullenmand of in een waterglas.

Het ‘vieze', schrijft De Lange (199:97) "staat soms lichamelijke nabijheid in de weg, bijv. iemand wordt niet op schoot genomen omdat ze wel eens nat zou kunnen zijn"[6].

Van der Bruggen (1991) heeft een proefschrift gewijd aan de stoelgang van patiënten in het ziekenhuis. De auteur wijst er terecht op dat veel patiënten die voor geheel andere aandoeningen zijn opgenomen, in het ziekenhuis er nog klachten bij krijgen die betrekking hebben op hun ontlasting. Uit zijn onderzoek bleek dat 41% van de patiënten zich zorgen maakte over hun stoelgang. Van der

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5.’ Kind en poep' verdient veel meer aandacht dan hier mogelijk is. Voor Freud speelt de drol een cruciale rol in het proces waardoor het kind zich bewust wordt van zijn eigen identiteit. De fascinatie van het kind voor zijn eigen uitwerpselen heeft terecht vele wetenschappers gefascineerd. Erikson (1965:76) beschrijft de kringspier als een metoniem van twee wezenlijke menselijke gedragingen: ‘retention' en ‘elimination', vasthouden en loslaten. Het vinden en leren beheersen van een goed evenwicht tussen beide is het begin van een ‘gezonde mens'. Die gedachte staat ook centraal in de studie van Lea (1993, 1999).

6. Het onderwerp poep wordt veelvuldig gebruikt in uitspraken over mentale stoornissen. Mensen die ‘vies' zijn, worden bij uitstek gezien als mensen die in de war zijn; anders zouden ze immers wel schoon zijn. Schoon = cultuur; vuil = deviant. Gekken smeren hun stront op de muur. Wilson (1957:49) meldt dat bij de Nyakyusa het eten van uitwerpselen gezien wordt als het karakteristieke kenmerk van de gek.

Bruggen onderstreept dat dit probleem veel meer aandacht zou moeten krijgen van de verpleegkundigen. Een comfortabele stoelgang komt het welbevinden ten goede en bevordert het genezingsproces. De schrijver benadrukt dat vooral de privacy van de patiënten beter gerespecteerd dient te worden. Meer privacy leidt tot een meer ontspannen stoelgang en vermeerdert het welbevinden van de patiënt.

In een andere publicatie (Munnichs 1984) worden de problemen van toiletgang bij ouderen besproken en doen de auteurs eveneens concrete aanbevelingen om gerieflijker en waardiger condities te creëren voor ouderen die hulp nodig hebben bij hun bezoek aan het toilet. Van der Plaats (1984), die over toiletgang in Nederlandse verpleeghuizen heeft geschreven, laat zien hoe problemen rond toiletgang bij ouderen angst en onrust te weeg brengen en bij de verzorgers irritatie en agressie. Het verlies van zelfstandigheid en de emotionele verwarring die dit veroorzaakt, wordt het meest intens ervaren in de afhankelijkheid van anderen bij de gang naar het toilet. Zowel verzorgers als verzorgden kunnen de stress en het decorumverlies van deze ontwikkeling ondervinden (cf. Van Dongen 1999; Van der Geest 1999). Voor kinderen die problemen hebben op dit gebied geldt uiteraard hetzelfde.

Tot besluit

Ontlasting is vuil, maar, zoals Douglas heeft opgemerkt, slechts in relatieve zin. Hoe meer ontlasting de orde verstoort, hoe viezer het is. De vuilheid is ‘in the eye of the beholder’ (and in the nose of the smeller). Ontlasting die niet vuil gevonden wordt, is naar alle waarschijnlijkheid afkomstig van een intieme bekende. Ontlasting en de plek waar ontlasting plaats heeft, vormen het centrum van veel culturele en maatschappelijke productiviteit. Via ‘ontlasting' worden uitspraken gedaan over goed en slecht, mooi en lelijk, gezond en ziek, eigen en vreemd, en over maatschappelijke ongelijkheid. Problemen rond de ‘orde’ van ontlasting zijn hardnekkig en worden intens gevoeld, zowel door degenen die het probleem ‘hebben’ als door degenen die er mee te maken krijgen, beroepshalve, wegens familieverbondenheid, of anderszins. Voor kinderen met encopresis dient men zowel bij onderzoek als bij behandeling deze gevoeligheden uiterst serieus te nemen (Ligthart 1988; van der Plas 1998).

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NIRP Research for Policy Series 22

The effects of decentralisation and privatisation on
urban environmental management:
waste management in the Accra Metropolitan Area

**Nelson Obirih-Opareh, Eran Razin,
Sjaak van der Geest and Johan Post**

Colophon

NIRP Research for Policy Series

Part 22: The effects of decentralisation and privatisation on urban environmental management: waste management in the Accra Metropolitan Area

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Preface

This study deals with new institutional arrangements for solid waste management in Accra, the capital of Ghana. It was carried out with the aim of making clear how government's decentralisation and privatisation policies affect the practices and performances of service providers in the Accra Metropolitan Area. The outcome is the result of a collaborative research effort carried out under the Netherlands-Israeli Research Programme (NIRP) by Ghanaian, Israeli and Dutch researchers between 1997 and 2001.

NIRP aims to encourage development-related research focused on socio-economic and cultural change. Being policy-oriented in nature, NIRP aims to make the results of research accessible to anyone interested in solving the problems investigated. The target groups for such knowledge include policy makers, representatives of non-governmental and donor organisations, and the scientific community. With this aim in mind, the Publication Board has launched the NIRP Research for Policy Series as a channel for the publication of "user-friendly" summaries of more than 30 scientific reports.

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Last but not least, the Publication Board wishes to thank the research team for the successful completion of this study.

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I. General information

I.1 Framework of the study

The overall project of which the present study forms a part evaluated the relationship between governance of the greater Accra Metropolitan Area and management of environmental problems. The roots, attributes and policy outcomes of local government reforms in Ghana and in the Accra region were outlined with an emphasis on the latest decentralisation reform, distinguishing between political, functional and fiscal decentralisation. The impact of the reforms on solid and liquid waste management was then studied in detail.

The first phase of the project included a qualitative assessment of changes and reforms in governance of the greater Accra region since the termination of colonial rule. Detailed information was gathered on the functioning of the present structure, which has been in place since the 1988 decentralisation reform. The Ghanaian system was defined in a comparative perspective of local government systems in the developed and developing world (Razin, 2000). Detailed financial data was then gathered and analysed on each of the District Assemblies in Ghana, before and after the decentralisation reform. This revealed variations in the fiscal capacity of Ghana's district assemblies: local governments in the capital city region and in the second largest Metropolitan Area were the most financially sound, whereas those in remote regions and in rural areas were at the other end of the scale (Razin and Obirih-Opareh, 2000). The early years of structural adjustment were associated with growing disparities, in particular since poorer districts are at a very substantial disadvantage when it comes to self-generated revenues such as taxes and fees. However, the fiscal centralisation that accompanied the decentralisation reform (particularly since the introduction of the substantial District Assembly Common Fund development grants in 1993) has reversed this trend. Grants from the central government did not favour the poorer districts, but disparities in grant allocations were far smaller than the disparities in the capacity to generate revenues. Hence, a substantial increase in the

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component of central grants in local governments' budgets will lead to reduced disparities in the financial situation of poorer and stronger regions.

The second phase of the project included an analysis of waste management in the Accra Metropolitan Area, with an emphasis on solid waste collection. A qualitative assessment of the effect of the decentralisation and privatisation policies on liquid waste management (Van der Geest and Obirih-Opareh, 2001) was followed by a more extensive study of solid waste collection. The study on new institutional arrangements for solid waste collection in Accra shows the impact of the government's decentralisation and privatisation policies on urban governance and environmental management in the Accra Metropolitan Area. It also discusses implications for the debate on decentralisation and privatisation and formulates policy recommendations. This booklet focuses on this part of the project, which formed the core of the overall research project.

I.2 Objectives and research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate the functioning of institutional arrangements in solid waste collection in the Accra Metropolitan Area, as a case study of the broader issue of the impact of decentralisation and privatisation on the management of urban environmental problems. Five research questions are discussed:

1. What is the magnitude and what are the major causes of the solid waste collection problems in the Accra Metropolitan Area? (Section II.2)
2. What is the scope and what are the characteristics of the various public and private institutional arrangements for solid waste collection? (Section II.3)
3. How do stakeholders perceive or respond to the arrangements in solid waste collection, in terms of accompanying and conflicting interests at the various levels of organisation? (Section II.4)
4. What is the impact of decentralisation and privatisation policies in Ghana on the institutional setting for solid waste collection in the Accra Metropolitan Area? (Section II.5)
5. What is the performance of the various institutional arrangements in solid waste collection? (Section II.6)

For a proper understanding of the specific context in which changes in solid waste management have taken place in Ghana, we will first pay attention to Ghana's decentralisation process as implemented since 1988 (Section II.1). In Part III, we will attempt to link the research findings to the theoretical debate about decentralisation and privatisation in the African urban context. We will also aim to indicate some policy lessons with

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regard to waste collection in Accra, focusing on what can be done to overcome the identified constraints (Part IV).

I.3 Methodology

The assessment of reforms in governance of the greater Accra region since the termination of colonial rule was based on a thorough survey of local government units, central government agencies and other relevant organisations. The survey included written material obtained from these organisations, as well as open interviews with staff affiliated to these organisations. Detailed financial data was gathered for each of the District Assemblies, before and after the decentralisation reform.

The assessment of the impact of decentralisation and privatisation on waste management problems in the Accra Metropolitan Area consisted of three steps. First, an assessment was made of solid and liquid waste management arrangements in the Accra Metropolitan Area, based on open interviews with actors involved and secondary material (reports by government agencies etc.). Secondly, surveys were carried out of stakeholders in solid waste management in the Accra Metropolitan Area. Eight research localities were chosen, based on the prevailing institutional arrangement of solid waste management (Box 1). In the eight research localities a structured survey of 400 households was carried out, focusing on attitudes and perceptions related to solid waste management. The data collected covered such issues as mode of storage, disposal and collection, payment of service, frequency of collection, cost of collection, cleanliness of service, collection methods, preferences, preparedness to pay, affordability, cross-subsidisation and people's opinions on the performance of service providers.

Box 1 Institutional arrangements in solid waste management

Eight institutional arrangements for solid waste management were found and these formed the basis for the selection of research locations:

1. Central communal containers provided and run by the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA);
3. Central communal containers provided and run by private contractors;
3. Central communal containers provided by AMA but run by private contractors;
4. Central communal containers provided by AMA but run by a community-based organisation;
5. House-to-house collection by AMA using high technology;
6. House-to-house collection by private contractors using high technology (*e.g.* compaction truck);
7. House-to house collection using low technology (*e.g.* open trucks);
8. House-to-house collection by a private contractor using low technology; a mixture of house-to-house collection and central communal containers whereby waste pickers collect waste from some houses and dump them into central communal containers provided by the AMA.

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Thirdly, a quantitative and qualitative survey was carried out among twelve service providers.[1] The questionnaire sought their opinion on key issues such as (i) mode of collection, (ii) the technology used for collection and disposal, (iii) payment of service, (iv) suitability of collection vehicles and equipment to the area and (v) the economic viability of their business. Special attention was paid to the economic viability of waste collection. Data was also collected on ideas, attitudes and experiences of service providers with regard to solid waste collection.

In addition to this data, the study also used information (open interviews and secondary material) from the AMA, the Ministry of Local Government, the Ministry of Environment Science and Technology, the Office of the Administrator of District Assembly Common Fund (DACF), the Ministry of Finance, and Ghana Statistical Services (GSS).

I.4 Theoretical orientation

The basic theoretical concepts on which this study is based are decentralisation and privatisation and solid waste management. An extensive discussion of these concepts can be found in Obirih-Opareh (2003). Below we focus on their definition.

I.4.1 Decentralisation and privatisation

Generally, four major variants of decentralisation are distinguished, *i.e.* deconcentration, delegation, devolution and privatisation have been identified (Bird *et al.*, 1995; UNHCS, 1996).

Deconcentration is the transfer of functions from a central unit to a local administrative office. It involves the dispersal of some amount of power of central government ministries with decision-making authority either vested in the regional offices or maintained by the central office. Delegation involves in most cases the transfer of certain powers to parastatal agencies of the central state. While the parastatals have some autonomy in day-to-day management, government usually controls them ultimately.

Delegation of authority lies between deconcentration and devolution, and involves independent sub-national jurisdictions, which are given service-delivery responsibilities. They are, however, subject to supervision by the central government with regard to the level and quality of service to be provided, how the service is to be provided, and/or how the service is

[1] Two main types of solid waste service providers have emerged in Accra. These are public (AMA) and private service providers, the latter comprising Gee Waste, Daben Cleaning Service, J.S. Owusu, Ako Waste, ABC, Liberty Waste, Meskworld, Almanuel, Yafuru, Yama and Zontec.

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financed. Many politicians as well as social scientists consider devolution as "real decentralisation" since power and functions are actually transferred to sub-national political entities which, in turn, have real autonomy in many important respects.

Devolution involves independent sub-national governments, which are given the responsibility for determining the level and quality of services to be provided, the manner in which those services are provided and the source of funds to finance the delivery of those services. Arguments in this study with regard to decentralisation will largely relate to this third form of decentralisation – devolution – unless otherwise stated.

Privatisation ultimately, involves the transfer of power and responsibility for certain state functions (productive activities or services) to private groups or companies. It is a term associated with the transfer from the public to the private sector of assets in terms of ownership, management, finance or control (Bach, 2000). In its narrowest sense, it has been used to describe the sale of public assets to the private sector. It has also been used to refer to an increase in the individual's responsibility for his or her own welfare. In its broadest sense, privatisation includes all efforts to encourage private sector participation in running public affairs.

I.4.2 The concepts of urban management, governance and environmental management

The urban management model deals with the development and day-to-day running of cities (Devas and Rakodi, 1993: 43; Devas, 2001, 1999: 2) and includes topics such as economic and physical planning, education, health, public works and public service delivery such as water supply and waste collection. It is an attempt of using business-like approaches to management and finding better ways of running a city, recognising the dynamics and uncertainties of development and the need to adapt rules, regulations and working attitudes swiftly to changing circumstances. The concept is borrowed from business management and applied to the organisation of public affairs, calling upon non-public actors whenever and wherever possible in order to benefit from their resources and comparative advantages.

In the course of the 1990s, urban management developed into urban governance, which recognises that the (local) state is only one of the actors involved in running the city and shaping its future development. It is an attempt to broaden the scope of attention and to disconnect it from the predominance of public management. Urban governance tries to break with the top-down, state-led ideas of running cities to emphasise the role of

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partnerships (including public-private partnerships) and diverse institutional arrangements. Governance includes the whole range of actors within civil society, such as community-based or grass-roots organisations, NGOs, trade unions, religious organisations and businesses, both formal and informal, alongside the various branches of government and governmental agencies, both national and local (Devas *et al.*, 2001). Generally, governance can be thought of as a means to establish order among stakeholders whose interests may conflict.

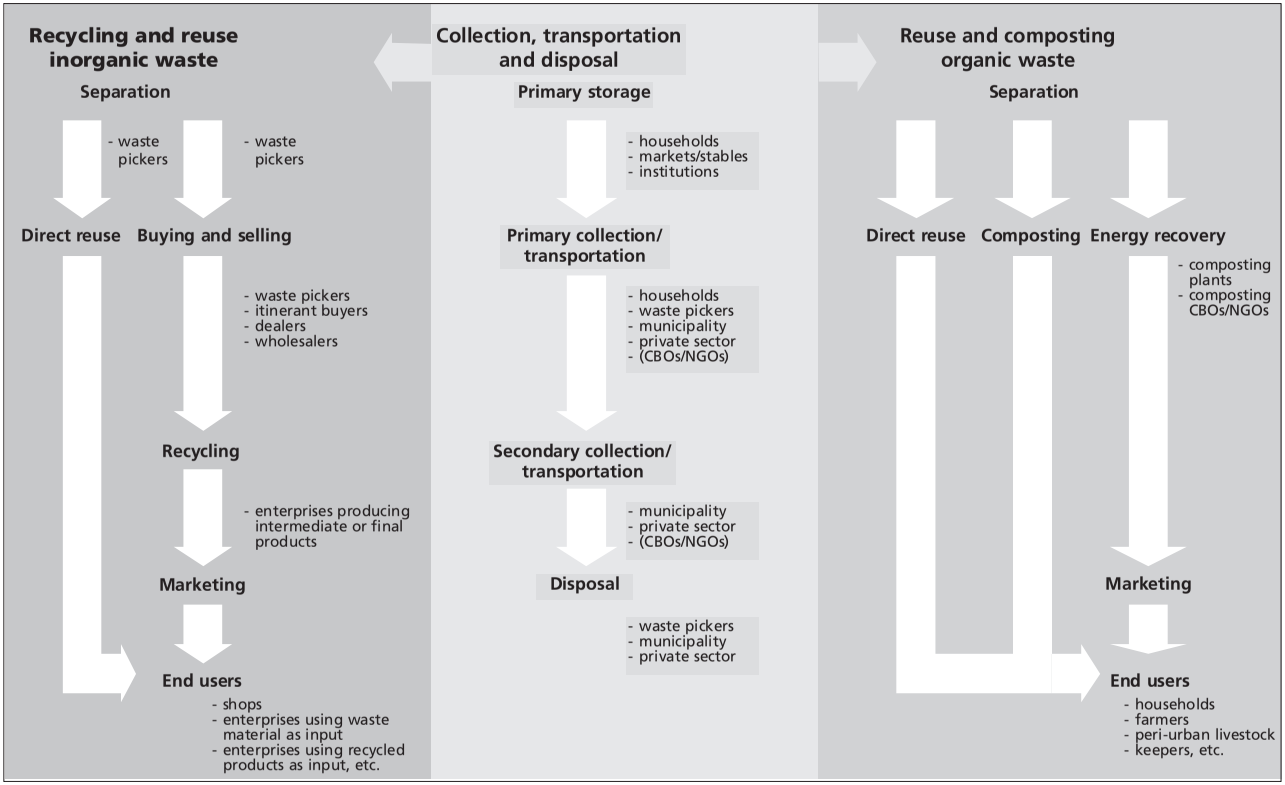
Urban environmental management is based on similar principles as urban management, the most important difference being that urban environmental management looks beyond the city boundaries more, especially in terms of environmental consequences of urban development. In the case of urban management, environmental concerns are often narrowed down to "brown agenda" problems (*i.e.* environmental health issues), paying only lip service to broader environmental concerns. Urban environmental management takes a broader approach of sustainable development. It includes four major elements: satisfaction of the "brown" agenda, notably access to decent housing and services; healthy working conditions and a healthy living environment; a development pattern that reduces the use of natural resources and does not deplete sinks and hence respects ecosystems and biodiversity; and seeking to include all actors in planning, decision-making and implementation as well as to integrate different sectors of the economy.

I.4.3 Solid waste management

The third part of the theoretical background deals with solid waste management (Obirih-Opareh, 2003). Solid waste management comprises different actors and activities, including household storage, waste collection, transportation, re-use, recycling, composting and waste disposal (Figure 1). Problems of solid waste management abound in many cities in the developing world, notably with regard to collection and disposal. House-to-house collection is too expensive for many households and the streets of many poor neighbourhoods are too narrow for modern collection vehicles. Collection points can easily become small garbage dumps, especially when collection is intermittent. Solid waste collection often creates one of the most visible environmental problems in low-income communities.

In recent years there has been a considerable shift and major differences in opinion as to how solid waste should be managed. One of such thorny issues is whether solid waste management should be decentralised, privatised, under community participation or managed under

Figure 1 The solid waste management cycle



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a combination of these. The mainstream neo-liberals argue that solid waste management is a service, aspects of which could best be handled by the private sector (Cointreau-Levine, 1994; Batley, 1996; Rondinneli, 1997). This view is connected to their belief in a slim minimal state and the efficiency of the market in resource allocation. Some critics oppose this view and contend that because of the nature of solid waste management as a public good, it cannot be left entirely to the market and should be under public control. The third school of thought reflects the debate on decentralisation, privatisation and public-private partnerships. It argues for partnership between public, private and other non-public organisations – NGOs, community-based organisations, and particularly the informal sector (Ostrom, 1996; Baud *et al.*, 2001; Hordijk, 2000; Post and Obirih-Opareh, 2002). This school recognises the increasing role of the informal sector, waste pickers, itinerant buyers, retailers and wholesalers in liquid and solid waste management. As a result of this line of thinking, new institutional arrangements in waste collection are emerging. Box 2 illustrates this for liquid waste management; Part II of this booklet illustrates this for solid waste management.

II. Results

II.1 Decentralisation in practice since 1988

In order to understand the present arrangements in solid waste collection in Accra, we will first focus on Ghana's decentralisation process as implemented since 1988. Decentralisation has become a dominant feature of Ghana's return to a liberal-democratic system of government. Although it is certainly not new[2] on the country's political agenda, it was newly justified, according to Richard Crooks (1994), with a set of much broader and ideologically rooted arguments deriving from the prevailing neo-liberal orthodoxy (rolling back the state, promoting people's participation, etc.). In addition, decentralisation seemed the only feasible way to stabilise the political system and to mitigate resentment towards the government in Accra. The system that was introduced in 1988 was clearly initiated from above by the central government, perhaps under some pressure from international organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Ghana's approach to decentralisation was based on four macro objectives:

- To democratise state power in a manner that would create an opportunity for a majority of Ghanaians to take part in collective decision-making and have access to political authority. The system that came into being in 1988 was based on the idea of empowering the people through the district assemblies.
- To restructure the machinery of government and reform local governments to take responsibility for local administration and development and to make public administration more efficient and responsive to local needs.
- To restructure the allocation of resources and reassign functions and responsibilities to the three levels of government (national, regional and district) in order to promote the efficiency of management.

2 It has been tried before (*e.g.* in 1974), but without success due to a change of government and the lack of political will to implement the original proposals.

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- To promote local development, with involvement of the people, as a special pre-occupation to improve living conditions in all localities in the country.

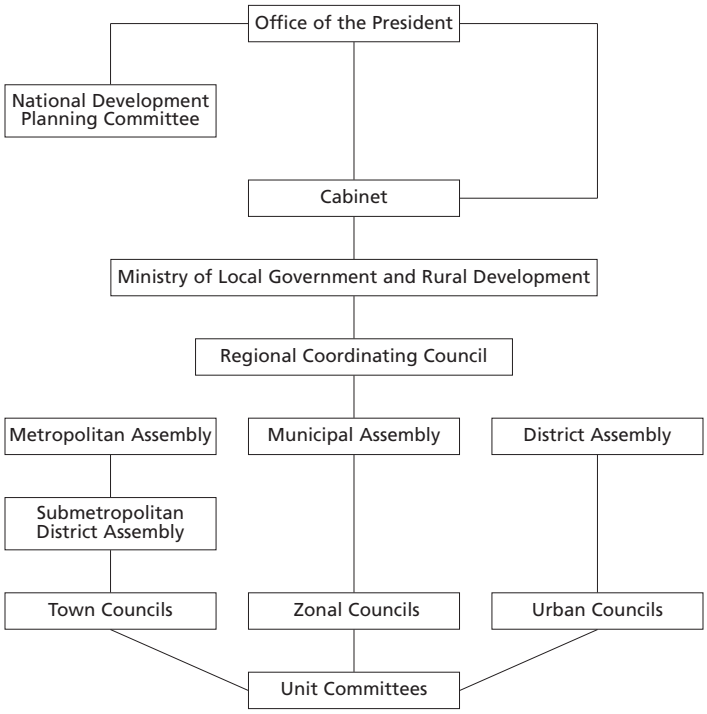
The country's decentralisation policy defines the district as an operational unit where the key strategies for development can be harnessed. The district assembly is therefore the focal point for planning, decision-making and implementation of development policy in the district. It is composed of 70% elected members and 30% unelected officials appointed by the President of Ghana. The appointed officials include technocrats, chiefs who are the custodians of the land and representatives of civil organisations (including trade unions). Members of parliament from the district are non-voting members of the assembly. Decentralised organisations operating within the area are expected to be integrated into the district assembly and the staff of the departments comes under the direct supervision of the District Chief Executive to ensure better coordination of development activities in the district. The district is expected to have one composite budget for its departments, including the decentralised departments. The new structure is expected to completely eliminate the concept of line departments with branch offices at the regional and district levels for the implementation of programmes and projects.

Ghana's 1992 constitution makes comprehensive provisions for local government decentralisation, confirms the system established in 1988 and strengthens the role of district assemblies in the governance of their districts. Since the implementation of the district assembly concept in 1989, Ghana's system of public administration has been basically a five-tier one (but six-tier in the case of metropolitan assemblies), with the central government at the apex. This is followed by a regional coordinating council (RCC) occupying a hybrid position of being both an extension of the central government and the coordinator of the activities of the local government (see Figure 2).

The fulcra of the local government system are the district assemblies, described in the 1992 constitution as the "highest political authority in the district". The Local Government Act of 1993 (Act 462) designates the district assemblies as the political, administrative, planning, development, budgeting and rating authorities in their respective geographical areas of jurisdiction. The sub-district structures comprise a series of urban, zonal, town and area councils and a countrywide network of unit committees. The metropolitan assemblies have an additional structure just below the

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Figure 2 The organogram of local government administration in Ghana, since 1988



assembly – the sub-metropolitan assemblies. The new local government system is a four-tier metropolitan system with three-tier municipal and district assemblies, *i.e.* metropolitan assemblies have four levels, whilst municipal and districts have three.

The 1988 reform mainly involves the creation (from 65 district councils) of 110 district assemblies, including three metropolitan assemblies. The new structure caters for the cross-sectoral coordination of policies and plans at national and district level through the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) and the district assemblies. It has led to the election of members for the district assemblies and the unit committees. These processes are intended to enhance grassroots participatory democracy further, or to bring the system of government to the "doorsteps" of the people. The reform has led to the creation of the Ceded Revenue and, more importantly, the District Assembly Common Fund (DACF). The decentralisation also involves the transfer or integration

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of the line departments within an area into the district assemblies and a composite budget to include all the line departments.

The decentralisation reform not only entails a transfer of political administration and decentralised public services delivery from the centre to the district assemblies, but also within the district assemblies to the lower levels and structures of authority. In the Accra Metropolitan Assembly, for example, this involves the transfer of responsibilities for the provision of some public services from the AMA head office (*i.e.* the centre) to the six sub-metropolitan assemblies (Ablekuma, Ashiedu Keteke, Ayawaso, Kpeshie, Okaikoi and Osu-Clottey). Each of these sub-metropolitan assemblies handles, or has a supervisory role for specific public services within their area of jurisdiction. These include revenue collection (such as market toll, land poll and property rates), primary schools, maintenance of roads, solid and liquid waste management, maintenance of public toilets, etc. The sub-metros have made tremendous impacts in some areas (such as the collection of market tolls) and are constantly improving their skills in delivering these services. District assemblies are constantly training and equipping personnel, particularly those in the lower structures to perform decentralised service delivery. However, in general, the sub-metros in Accra have proved incapable of discharging their duties in some decentralised public services. One of such failures is in solid waste collection. Despite the logistics given to the sub-metros, they could not cope with the escalating volume of solid waste being generated in the city. Other services in Accra with regard to which the sub-metros have failed woefully include sanitation, the sanctioning of offenders, the enforcement of bye-laws and contract agreements. Although the decentralisation programme has indeed brought some positive results, it is fraught with difficulties.

Closely related to the 1988 decentralisation exercise is the policy of privatisation. The latter is part and parcel of the same neo-liberal paradigm that aims to reduce state power and give greater prominence to the market. Privatisation has become a key component of Ghana's reform policy. How this affected solid waste collection will be highlighted in Section II.3

II.2 The magnitude and major causes of solid waste collection problems in the Accra Metropolitan Area

There is a clear relation between the waste management practices and the cleanliness in the various residential areas of Accra. Though a greater part of the city is fairly clean, particularly the rich and some middle-income areas, some parts of the poor-income areas and market places are filthy,

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littered with plastics bags and gutters often blocked by all manner of waste due to poor waste practices. Many factors act in concert to reinforce and perpetuate the problems.

Firstly, the volume of waste generation is huge compared to the available capacity for its collection. Given that the per capita solid waste generation in Accra is 0.51 kg/day[3] (AMA, 1992; Ghana Vision 2020, 1996) then in 2000, when the population was over 1.65 million people (GSS, 2000) and the unofficial figure being about 3 million inhabitants, Accra produced between 841.5 and 1,530 tonnes of solid waste daily respectively. Moreover, the total maximum solid waste collection capacity (by both the public and private sectors) is only 60% of the volume waste generated (WRI, 2000: 278; AMA, 1992). According to the AMA, as at 2000 the remaining 40% is collected either irregularly or not at all. Although these figures are, at most, crude estimates, it is very obvious that collection performance, at least until recently, is far from adequate. This results in periodic formation of mountains of uncollected garbage particularly in the poor and middle-income areas. These heaps are potential sources of epidemics and other communicable diseases to residents. As the Ghana Vision 2020 document[4] (1996) noted, tonnes of domestic refuse spills into open fields, streams, creeks or sewage systems in the Metropolitan Area each day. Large quantities of household organic matter generated in Accra flow straight into the river basins and water bodies creating serious public health problems (Ghana Vision 2020, 1996). According to the Ministry of Health of Ghana, the causes of most illness in these areas are attributed to poor sanitation and inadequate environmental awareness. If sanitation could be improved, sanitary-related illness would be reduced significantly. Ghana's health statistics show that many of the illness could be prevented through proper sanitation.

Secondly, a major factor affecting efficient and effective solid waste collection in the metropolis is the attitude of residents towards waste in general. Residents have a paradoxical attitude towards waste. Few people seem to care about waste unless it ends up near their front doors. Indiscriminate dumping takes place at the same time as protests against the placing of communal containers nearby the houses. Officials do not set a good example. They do little to enforce regulations and a lack of resources, capacity and political will do little to improve the situation.

3 There has not been any comprehensive empirical study on the per capita waste generation in Accra. Therefore all such per capita waste generation figures are estimates.

4 Vision 2020 is the policy document of the government of Ghana (under the Rawlings administration) on its vision for Ghana's development from 1996 to 2020.

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Thirdly, most houses in the deprived areas are inaccessible by road. This means that it is difficult to remove garbage from those areas, at least by way of the standard motorised vehicles. Usually, the inaccessible areas are serviced by the central communal container (collective container collection) system, but considering the effort people have to put into bringing their garbage to the reception points and the substantial average distance to the container sites, many people are inclined to opt out from the official system. Although people would like to have more facilities, they simultaneously object to the containers being located near their houses. Existing sites are neither properly cleaned nor maintained and containers are often collected untimely, thus resulting in spillage, horrifying stench and flies.

Fourthly, enforcement procedures for offenders of bye-laws for waste and sanitation are weak.

Fifthly, the waste management sector faces an acute financial shortage (Table 1). Poor cost recovery, inadequate funding and over-dependency on financial grants from the central government put the long-term financial sustainability of the system into serious jeopardy. In some cases, the resources have been diminishing in real terms, when discounted against inflation. Lack of transparency and accountability in revenue collection and disbursal affect the success of the operation. The collective container collection system, which accounts for about 70% of total waste collection in the metropolis, is free of charge to consumers. This puts a severe financial burden on the local authority and its ability to pay waste contractors regularly, resulting in irregular and often unreliable services. User fees from the house-to-house services are not enough to pay for the entire waste

Table 1 Income and expenditure of solid waste collection in Accra Metropolitan Assembly

Year	Total income (mln. cedis)			Total expenses (mln. cedis)			Variance (inc.–exp.) (mln. cedis)	Expenses of solid waste collection
	AMA	SWC (revenue)	SWC % of AMA's revenue	AMA	SWC (expenditure)	SWC % of AMA's expenses		
1995	8,778.30	494.1	5.60%	7,882.23	1,266.60	16.07%	-772.50	156.30%
1996	14,974.85	492.8	3.20%	13,378.66	1,524.80	11.40%	-1,032.00	209.40%
1997	16,707.03	749.1	4.48%	16,469.70	2,070.00	12.57%	-1,320.90	176.30%
1998	29,614.98	949.0	3.20%	27,352.83	2,242.70	8.20%	-1,293.70	136.30%

Source: Based on data from the AMA and Local Government Finances Section of the Controller and Accountant General, Ghana, December 2000.

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collection in the city. This makes financial considerations the most obvious constraint to an effective solid waste collection system in the city.

The absence of efficient land-use and building permit policies and the fact that they cannot be effectively enforced and implemented is a sixth factor which hinders efficient waste collection in the metropolis. The lack of an effective land-use policy and ineffective enforcement of building permits ensure continuous haphazard housing development, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating the waste collection problems. A lack of decent housing, congestion and overcrowding also generate filth.

The seventh factor refers to the high rate of population growth and the migration to the city which puts severe pressure on existing infrastructure for waste collection. The rapid population growth rate in Accra is estimated to be in excess of 4.1% per annum – which is several times higher than the national average of 2.3% (GSS, 2000) – and is responsible for at least an equivalent increase in volume of waste generation. In addition to the population growth, the nature of the waste itself is also changing because of development-related changes in consumption patterns (Doan, 1998: 28). For instance, consumers in Accra have begun to make extensive use of both polythene bags and other plastic packaging, which create a whole new category of waste and its associated disposal problem.

The eighth factor refers to the low regard for waste collection workers and high labour turnover. Labourers engaged in waste collection services are not interested in the work, which they consider filthy and a "temporary" means of survival whilst they search for a "better job" elsewhere. As a result, besides the fact that workers do not do their best in this sector, the industry has to contend with a rapid turnover of staff. This severely affects efficient delivery of service in waste collection.

Finally, there is the problem of the shortcomings of the waste collection vehicles. The type of equipment used for waste collection can have a significant effect on the effectiveness and efficiency of solid waste collection. The types of equipment used by some waste service providers also create other environmental problems such as littering from open trucks, which do not use nets, as required by the AMA bye-law, to cover the waste during transit to the disposal sites.

Considering the extent of the solid waste problem, it is ironic that in the planning stages, the local authority pays inadequate attention to waste collection, which is the largest single item in its recurrent expenditures, in addition to being the most visible environmental problem and a potential threat to public health if uncollected. Planning in Accra is biased towards

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physical development and development control (albeit very ineffectively) rather than the full range of aspects included in development. It still demonstrates a traditional view on the role of planning in urban development and a virtual neglect of the problems of service provision (Adarkwa and Post, 2001).

In fact, the major causes of solid waste collection problems in Accra can be attributed to ineffective urban governance. The policies fail to link up with the current governance perspective of having stakeholders jointly work towards achieving collective goals. They do not sufficiently link to promising successful actions on the ground (such as self-organised house-to-house collection in parts of Adabraka, using waste pickers in areas where officially the communal collection system is operating) that could perhaps be scaled up so that it could acquire official approval. This inadequacy translates into a vicious circle of waste collection problems, in which one problem affects or leads to another, reinforcing each other and perpetuating the problem. Four main dimensions can be distinguished in this respect:

- The failure to empower the district assemblies due to shortcomings of the decentralisation policies, including poor cost recovery mechanisms and poor monitoring.
- A lack of involvement and participation of the community in the design of waste collection arrangements, a lack of civic responsibility towards waste collection and lack of trust in the local authority.
- A lax attitude among the residents (exemplified in free riding and indiscriminate dumping into open spaces, streams and river bodies), as well as among policy makers (exemplified in lack of commitment and ineffective enforcement of bye-laws).
- A focus on service efficiency and effectiveness rather than concern for the environment (*i.e.* public health aspects, environmental deterioration and lack of attention to waste as a resource).

II.3 The scope and characteristics of the institutional arrangements for solid waste collection

Two broad modes of solid waste collection operate in Accra. These are the house-to-house and the central communal container (collective container) collection systems. Each of these modes of collection has both publicly and privately provided institutional arrangements. Thus, there are four basic types of institutional arrangements for waste collection systems in Accra, namely (i) publicly provided house-to-house collection; (ii) privately provided house-to-house collection; (iii) publicly provided communal container collection; and (iv) privately provided communal container

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collection services. The house-to-house system operates in rich and some middle income areas, whilst the collective container collection system operates mainly in the poor areas and the remaining middle-income areas of Accra. In terms of percentages, by mid 1999, the collective container collection and house-to-house collections serve 70% and 30%, respectively, of the areas with waste collection coverage within the metropolis. A comparison of house-to-house collection and communal container collection is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Major characteristics of institutional arrangements[5]

Variables	Institutional arrangement	
	House-to-house collection	Collective container collection
Standard collection frequency	Weekly	Daily
Dominant waste storage container	Plastic bins	Metal containers
Mode of transporting solid waste	Multi-lift truck, open truck, three-wheeled tractor, pushcart, and wheel barrow	Skip-loader
Mode of lifting waste bins/ containers	Multi-lift trucks (mechanically) and manually	Skip-loader
Dominant places where it operates	Rich and middle income areas	Poor and middle income areas
Characteristics of area	Good road network, excellent accessibility to houses	Poor road network and often poor accessibility to houses
User fees	Yes	No
Service provider paid by	Service consumer	Local authority (AMA)
Private contractor pay dumping fees to AMA	Yes	No

In rich areas where the house-to-house collection system operates, the service is comparatively more reliable with fewer interruptions and the service consumers pay the user fees regularly. These high-income areas have all the trappings for a house-to-house collection service: a good road network, accessibility to houses, a preparedness to use approved containers and a willingness to pay user fees. In general, all the institutional arrangements for house-to-house collection are viable for both the local authority and the private service providers because they have adequate cost-recovery measures. Most of the service consumers in the house-to-house collection system are satisfied with service provision. In contrast,

[5] For more detailed information about mode of storage, disposal and collection, collection methods and other characteristics of solid waste management under various arrangements, the reader is referred to Obirih-Opareh (2003).

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the communal container collection system, which operates predominantly in low-income and some middle-income areas and covers more than two-thirds of the waste collection system in Accra, is free and financially unsustainable for the local authority which bears the cost. It is characterised by communal collection points and communal containers and suffers from service unreliability and a lack of cleanliness. There is a general dislike of the current communal container collection system largely because of the low incidence of container sites and irregular collection. At the same time, the residents in low-income areas (Achimota, La and Nima) acknowledge almost unanimously (100%) that they cannot afford the current rates of servicing in the house-to-house collection system. For an improved communal container collection system, however, most residents seem to be willing to pay ¢100 per day (US$ 0.03 in 1999 prices) without jeopardising their acceptance and participation.

In terms of institutional arrangements, it is not only the communal container collection versus the house-to-house collection arrangements that indicate major differences, but also the public versus private arrangements. The public system usually has better technology, which it often receives from the central government and also from the donor community. The privately provided house-to-house collection services use all manner of vehicles, including power tillers and open trucks. However, the trucks of the better-funded private contractors such as Gee Waste and Daben Cleansing compare favourably with the public ones. Despite this difference, the private providers were found to offer good quality services, well attuned to the variation in the local situation.

II.4 Stakeholders' perceptions and conflicting interests with regard to the arrangements in solid waste collection

There are three main stakeholders in solid waste collection, namely the local government authority, service providers and consumers. Each stakeholder has its own interests, which invariably influence its perceptions on how solid waste collection should be carried out (see Box 2). In Accra, the conflict of interest is obvious and self-evident. People have private interests in public institutions or services and no matter where and in whatever position they find themselves in a public sector, they do whatever they can to maximise their private interests and those of their families and relations. The personnel responsible for solid waste collection in Accra are no exception. The conflicting interests in solid waste collection as a "public good" pose a policy dilemma for public officials. Officials want a clean environment, but do not put enough funding and effort into

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Box 2 Perceptions of stakeholders in solid waste collection

Perception of consumers
According to the consumers, the most important problems facing their areas, ranked in order, are low frequency of waste collection (including the unreliability of service provision), the cost of collection and the cleanliness of service (including problems related to vehicles and equipment which are inappropriate for waste collection). These problems are the first most important for 61.8%, 14.0% and 61.8% of the respondents respectively. The improvements people desire are therefore primarily related to increased frequency and the reliability of the service. Areas where the collective container collection system is operative have the additional problem of inadequate communal containers. Consumers in these areas would like there to be more collection sites, containers and labour. A lot is expected from privatisation, though some fear increased prices due to greater private sector participation in solid waste collection. The frequency of collection is a larger problem in areas serviced using house-to-house systems, whilst cleanliness of service is more problematic in the areas with collective container collection systems. In the areas serviced by the WMD (AMA), 23.0% of the consumers perceive the frequency of collection as too low and 35.0% think cleanliness is poor. In areas operated through private contractors, these percentages amount to 32.5% and 45.5%, respectively.

As regards user fees, there is a major distinction between the collective container collection and house-to-house systems. Collective container collection is free of charge, but in some neighbourhoods residents pay fees to the assemblymen and waste pickers. In areas under collective container collection, 19.6% of the residents perceive the costs as too high. House-to-house collection is carried out in return for user fees, perceived as too high by 13.3% of the residents of these areas. The most remarkable finding is that the majority of the respondents in all the localities are willing to pay for improved services – even those in areas which officially enjoy free collective container collection.

Perceptions of service providers
The service providers operating under the collective container collection system mentioned that they encounter seven main problems. These are an inadequate number of containers, tardy payment by AMA, low contract fees set by AMA, labour problems, a lack of site cleansing by AMA, a lack of AMA support and the frequent interruption of services due to the breakdown of vehicles. The problem of an inadequate number of containers is one of the major causes for spillage and untidiness at the collection points. It is also a contributing factor to the dumping of waste at open spaces and other unauthorised sites. Where containers are inadequate, residents have no other alternative than to dump too much waste into the available containers, thereby creating overflows and spillage and the overloading of trucks during transportation. Tardy payment by AMA leads to frequent interruptions to service due to a lack of money to pay workers, buy fuel to run the vehicles or repair vehicles and equipment. The lack of AMA support extends to the granting of monopoly to City and Country Waste Ltd (CCW) since July 1999 and the failure to sanction free riders and irregular payers. Many of the service providers think that refuse collection is good business (though profitable thanks only to extremely low wages and through using very old equipment), but an unhealthy job. They acknowledge the fact that poor people cannot afford commercial tariffs, as a result of which there should be government subsidy and cross-subsidisation. They think that the community should take greater responsibility, not only in the cost-sharing arrangement for refuse collection, but also by ensuring that they do not litter the area.

Perceptions of government officials
The AMA is satisfied with the institutional arrangement for house-to-house collection. It is, however, worried about the financial burden of the collective container collection system, which constitutes more than 70% of the waste collection in the metropolis. Since stopping the Pay-As-You-Dump system in 1991 – introduced in 1985 with a view to generating additional income for waste collection – the AMA has

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tried in vain to devise better cost-sharing arrangements to mitigate its acute financial problems. In terms of performance, the AMA thinks the indigenous private companies are doing their best albeit with occasional interruptions to services. According to the AMA, the delay in the payment of private waste collection contractors is not deliberate but due instead to insufficient funds at the time they have to be paid. The AMA thinks the granting of a monopoly to the CCW was intended to afford the latter economies of scale. Besides, it felt the performance of most of the private contractors was below par. Since the AMA was divesting itself from waste management, it became necessary to find an organisation to fill the vacuum. Officially, the AMA felt that the CCW, which has the expertise and logistics at its disposal, was better placed to take up that responsibility than the poorly resourced local contractors.

ensuring that. Service providers want high tariffs for their services in order to acquire more profit. Consumers, on the other hand, want a clean environment and regular collection of their waste, but they do want to minimise their contribution to that goal. Consumers prefer private service providers, but fear that privatisation could lead to increased prices. Such conflicting interests among stakeholders hamper the performance of the institutional arrangements.

The problem is that nothing much is done to harmonise conflicting interests and to negotiate solutions. There is no proper management of the problem. Under current conditions, the local government should take the lead, but for various reasons they are incapable or unwilling to do so. The fact that there are few efforts being made to bring these interests together is another demonstration of the lack of effective governance. It is interesting to note that the franchise system in house-to-house collection provided an arrangement that linked providers and consumers (harmonising conflicting interests between these stakeholders) and performed very well, albeit from a narrow perspective of service efficiency and effective removal of waste from the areas concerned.

In recent times, local private service providers have complained of the relatively lower rate of tariffs the local government authority set for them compared to what was paid to City and Country Waste Ltd (CCW) for similar services. The CCW was a joint Canadian and Ghanaian company which the central government imposed on the Accra Metropolitan Assembly in July 1999, and which was granted a monopoly status to collect waste in Accra. It operated until July 2001 when its contract was abrogated by the government. The local authority, on the other hand, decries the increasing costs of solid waste collection and its inability to shoulder the cost alone, particularly for the communal container collection system. The findings from this study suggest that partnerships, involving all the

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stakeholders, would be a better option out of this predicament. This study indicates that the public-private arrangements in solid waste collection have performed best, at least until one of the partners failed to deliver (*i.e.* the AMA failing to pay the contractors).

II.5 The impact of decentralisation and privatisation policies in Ghana on the institutional setting for solid waste collection in the Accra Metropolitan Area

The institutional arrangements that evolved in solid waste collection in Accra since 1992 and 1997 were a result mainly of the decentralisation and privatisation policies. More basic services have been transferred to local governments and the lower structures in the district assemblies. However, the operational difficulties that have characterised the partial implementation of the decentralisation policy in solid waste collection in the AMA demonstrate the fact that laudable as this policy might be, it does not clearly reflect issues on the ground. Moreover, though decentralisation has brought major institutional changes such as making the district assemblies the pivot and focal point of planning and development, public administration in the AMA, like in many district assemblies in Ghana, continues to be weak. Central government ministries, departments and agencies continue to wield tremendous authority and make spending decisions in a highly centralised fashion. As a result, local governments have little authority to make strategic decisions and few methods of raising the tax revenues they need to be effective, for instance, in solid waste collection. The correlation between funding gaps and poor service delivery, particularly in the areas serviced by the communal container collection system serviced is quite obvious. Better cost-recovery measures seem the only means to bring about improvement in the functioning of waste management services.

The findings also point to a big gap between formal rules and actual practices in all aspects of the solid waste collection policies. Decentralisation of solid waste collection in Accra was simply a matter of a de-concentration of responsibility from the centre to the sub-metros. Decentralisation did not achieve the expected results in solid waste collection because the problem was more one of inadequate funds to operate solid waste collection rather than centralisation per se. In the absence of adequate funding, the decentralised bodies (*i.e.* the sub-metros) performed poorly in solid waste collection. Unfortunately, though decentralisation promises to give more powers and responsibilities to the local level through participatory democracy and consultations, the

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communities have neither been involved in the design of the institutional arrangements for solid waste collection, nor have been sensitised and motivated to contribute to its successful implementation.

However, there is a clear distinction between the impacts of decentralising solid waste collection services to the six sub-metros constituting the AMA (*i.e.* the public administration of the service) and the impacts of privatisation of the service. The privatisation policy came in as the best available option, since it involves bringing in additional resources and private sector managerial thinking. Since 1997, the system of solid waste collection in Accra has undergone a fundamental shift from public to private provision. The transition was motivated by the apparent failure of the city's waste management department (WMD) to deal with the mounting problems of waste collection and the prevailing belief that the market would help to overcome these. The privatisation of solid waste collection has been a top-down exercise, decided upon by the local government, but with considerable influence of international donor institutions, notably the World Bank, in view of local government's incapacity to deliver the services adequately. The indigenous private sector was called upon to improve service performance. It is important to note that the local government's decision to privatise the service was not taken from a genuine belief in the potentials of privatisation. On the contrary: there was considerable opposition from within the local administration and the assembly of the AMA – but rather because there was no other option available and because AMA's WMD was put under considerable pressure from the central government and donors.

A striking feature of solid waste collection in Accra is the impact of extra-local pressures. There is a high tendency for central government interference in the affairs of the assembly due to the fact that Accra is the seat of the central government. Furthermore, Accra is also the seat of the Greater Accra Regional Administration. Therefore, there is interference from these levels of government as well. In addition, the donor community that pushed for privatisation of solid waste collection (in exchange for technical and logistical support) has strongly influenced policies in Accra. However, political commitment to the idea of privatisation is still minimal and the administrative machinery is totally unprepared to guide such a process.

Though the contracting approach, in principle, enables the local authority to keep a firm grip on the entire process through specified contract performance measures, enforceable contract sanctions, rigid performance monitoring and cost accountability, this has not been fully

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realised in Accra. Furthermore, although privatisation of solid waste collection became official policy, the lack of appropriate provisions on the part of the local authorities proved to be the Achilles' heel. It was not so much poor performance by the private sector, but rather the AMA's endemic financial and managerial weaknesses that turned against the incipient local business class. An overzealous central government thought it could solve these shortcomings in a technocratic manner. Contrary to the widely admitted need for competition to make privatisation work, the state granted monopoly rights to a foreign firm. This intervention, despite possible gains in service effectiveness, is extremely costly and seems to be far beyond what local authorities and inhabitants can contribute.

II.6 The performance of the institutional arrangements in solid waste collection

Until mid-1999, public and private modes of solid waste collection co-existed, enabling a systematic comparison between them. Obirih-Opareh (2003) and Obirih-Opareh and Post (2001) showed that privatisation has benefited consumers in terms of a wider coverage, higher frequency and more reliable services. A number of drawbacks have also been observed, notably worsened labour conditions and increased environmental dangers. The greatest flaw, however, is its lack of financial sustainability. This is related to the non-commercial nature of the service, particularly the social and political sensitivity of cost recovery in a poor country. The central government's decision (taken in 1999) to impose a private monopoly in solid waste collection in order to speed up the process and solve the waste collection problem in the metropolis once and for all is criticised by the general public and policy analysts. This decision compounded the financial problems of the local authority, hampered the development of an indigenous business sector and failed to build on the potentials of a system that seemed very promising.

The most important financial problem service providers encountered in the privatised communal container collection service was tardy payment of their invoices by the AMA/WMD, leading to occasional interruption of services. The financial viability of the arrangements based on house-to-house collection is considerably better than that of the communal container collection system. In Accra, the allocative efficiency is poor in the areas using the communal container collection system, as this type of service still does not attract user fees. Allocative efficiency is substantially better if local contractors provide the house-to-house collection service. At the same

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time, the record of cost recovery was extremely good in the privatised house-to-house collection system, reaching a level of 95%.

The private contractors are also more productively efficient than their public counterparts. In the communal container collection system, contractors are paid for each recorded trip of waste to the designated dumpsites, while in the house-to-house collection system the willingness of residents to pay their dues depends on whether they receive value-for-money. As far as service effectiveness is concerned, privatisation has produced mixed results in Accra. In the communal container collection system, the major reason for this is the irregularity of services leading to waste piling up at the container sites. There is a significant difference between communal container collection performance under public and private provision. Local contractors generally provide better services, probably because they are being paid according to the number of containers they actually transport to the disposal sites. This incentive is lacking in WMD operations.

Appreciation of the cleanliness of services (degree of littering) is considerably lower in the communal container collection system compared to the house-to-house collection system. In theory, the latter ensures effective removal of waste from premises, whereas the communal container collection service – especially in the event that services are unreliable and/or container sites are far removed from houses – incites people to dump indiscriminately. Across the board, privatisation has produced higher levels of employment within the sector, largely by the extension of services. At the same time, labour conditions in the private sector are inferior to those in government service where wages are lower, job insecurity is higher and non-wage benefits and facilities are fewer. In view of the high level of labour turnover it looks like employment in the waste sector in Accra is a last resort option. Waste collection workers in Accra seem to consider their job and labour conditions to be worse than those of many other people with similar backgrounds. This helps to explain why labour turnover in the indigenous private sector is very high.

As Rondinelli and Iacono (1996) and Burgess *et al.* (1997) pointed out, private sector involvement in service provision raises issues of public interest and acceptability. The law supports all four basic arrangements in solid waste collection in Accra. Public outcry at the City and Country Waste's contract (*cf.* Section II.4) provides an excellent illustration of the legal and social legitimacy of institutional arrangements.

Illegal and unhygienic waste practices constitute a threat to public health and the environment. The communal container collection system is

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most likely to generate environmentally unsound practices. The inadequacy of collection points and containers, the irregularity of waste collection and the distance people have to travel to dispose of their waste encourage illegal dumping, constituting a potential source of environmental degradation and a public health hazard, especially for children (dumpsites frequently serve as playgrounds). Uncertainty about the responsibilities as regards the cleaning of collection points is another problem the system faces. Both the WMD truck drivers and those working for private contractors just lift the containers, without cleaning litter and spillage. The idea is that residents will be charged for the collective container collection service and, eventually, that AMA will collect rates from the households. Low frequency and the irregularity of solid waste collection also have a detrimental impact on public health and the quality of the environment. In the house-to-house collection system, people normally use appropriate containers. Poor public health inspection and a lack of sanctioning against sanitary offenders are additional reasons for these negative environmental impacts.

Furthermore, contractors predominantly use open trucks, but scarcely cover the waste with a net to prevent littering during transportation. Some private contractors and/or drivers active in house-to-house collection avoid going to the dump and paying dumping fees to the AMA by unloading their vehicles at unauthorised places. In such instances private gain ends up in public loss. Such practices exist due to weakness as regards public monitoring and sanctioning by the WMD. The authorities are primarily concerned with the effectiveness of solid waste collection in high-income neighbourhoods, but much less with the overall urban environment. Despite numerous complaints by residents in Accra about private contractors unloading their vehicles at unauthorised places, the offenders are never sanctioned.

Privatisation has definitely helped to improve solid waste collection output in Accra with about 70% of waste being collected by early 1999. The low-income settlements suffer largely from the paucity of container sites and containers provided by the AMA/WMD, a problem that could not be offset by contractors merely charged with the removal of the waste from official vantage points. None of the institutional arrangements tries to link up with other domains of solid waste management, *e.g.* to move beyond waste collection and link it to other important aspects of solid waste management such as re-use, recycling and composting. The (local) government's attitude towards re-use, recovery and recycling of waste materials has usually been very ambivalent.

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II.7 Conclusions

This study of solid waste collection in Accra provides an illustration of micro impacts of macro policies of decentralisation and privatisation. It points to a number of important elements such as large gaps between formal rules and actual practices due to the poor organisation of decentralisation and privatisation policies, inadequate fiscal transfers from the central government to decentralised bodies to match increased responsibilities, weak internal revenue mobilisation capabilities of the district assemblies, the tendency of the central government to interfere in purely local matters despite the decentralisation policy, the lack of effective urban governance and its effects on service provision, the distinctive role of the informal sector, the preference of consumers for private service providers and inadequate attention to environmental concerns in the development programmes.

Though Ghana has taken clear steps to pass legislation creating new local government institutions, these are not sufficient to reap the potentials of decentralised local government. Being denied sufficient revenues, local governments have performed their statutory functions poorly. Thus, while structural adjustment and decentralisation were initially associated with a reduction in central transfers, the deepening financial crises at local level compelled central governments to surrender to pressures to form improved central grant systems.

The decentralisation and privatisation policies in Ghana have had a direct bearing on the quality of life, particularly in the urban areas. The private sector was supposed to take the lead in urban development, following the inability of the local authority to deliver urban services, but has largely held back for political and economic reasons. Private sector involvement in urban service delivery is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, some experiences have been gained in privatising solid waste management and sanitary services in Accra and several larger cities in Ghana. These initiatives demonstrate that the private sector has a real potential for providing improved services. However, most privatised public service delivery suffers from several drawbacks. Because some public services have the nature of a public good, there is a good case for continued financial involvement by the central and the local governments to mitigate the negative consequences should individual consumers opt out of the service or be excluded from the service. If rates are artificially set at uneconomic levels and the local government does not sufficiently compensate this, the financial sustainability of a privatised public service will be compromised. Apart from corruption, cronyism and political

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patronage, this is probably the greatest threat to successful privatisation of urban services.

Institutional weakness, inadequate financing, poor cost-recovery measures and the lack of clearly defined roles for agencies in charge of solid waste management seriously hamper solid waste collection in the Accra Metropolitan Area. Deficiencies in solid waste collection services in Accra are not only a reflection of absolute resource constraints and constraints related to the institutional arrangements of urban services delivery, but are also related to the attitudes of residents and officials to solid waste collection. In general, people serviced through the house-to-house collection system are more satisfied with the service than those serviced through communal container collection. The most common solid waste collection problems perceived by the residents are related to dissatisfaction with the low frequency of collection, the costs and the cleanliness of the service. Consumers of the communal container collection service would like to have more collection sites, containers and labour available. Much is expected from privatisation, though some fear increased prices if private sector participation in solid waste collection increases. The service providers view solid waste collection as profitable if the tariffs could be reasonable and payment is regular. Policy makers, in turn, are generally satisfied with the arrangements that emerged after decentralisation and privatisation, particularly in house-to-house collection. What worries them, however, is the financial burden of the communal container collection service. The survey shows that there is a growing realisation among even the poor that the status quo (*i.e.* free solid waste collection services for collective container collection) cannot continue.

The analysis shows that privatisation has brought advantages to the consumers in terms of wider coverage, higher frequency and more reliable services (*i.e.* enhanced regularity of container haulage in areas working with the collective container collection system and regular payment of service fees by residents in the house-to-house collection system). Furthermore, there is tremendous public support for privatised solid waste collection. However, there are also a number of drawbacks. The environment and the labourers are paying for some of the benefits. The major flaw of the entire system is, however, the lack of financial sustainability, which is related to the service having a non-commercial nature or the nature of a public good. The financial viability of solid waste collection at city level partly depends on the success of cost recovery. In order to enhance participation in solid waste collection services and

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improve cost recovery, it is vitally important to give people a say in the design of the arrangements in their areas.

In conclusion, decentralisation and privatisation have become almost universally embraced policy devices. Their shape and performance continue, however, to be shaped by local relationships and the whims of local politics. The dynamics of the privatisation of solid waste collection in Accra show that genuine political commitment to the idea, as well as political guidance of the process, were sadly lacking. For the situation to improve, attention has to be paid to the creation of an enabling framework and appropriate regulatory provisions. Furthermore, much needs to be done to widen the social and political legitimacy of the reforms. Successful public-private collaboration requires a bottom-up approach and consultation with other stakeholders on the basis of equality and mutual respect. Without basic institutional adjustments, sound financial mechanisms and change in attitude, it will be impossible for decentralisation and privatisation to prove their value.

III. Discussion

III.1 Scientific relevance

This investigation produced quite a number of empirical findings. To assess the theoretical implications of these findings, we have to return to the three theoretical angles of the study[6] and to discuss them in terms of (i) drawbacks of decentralisation; (ii) better performance by private providers; (iii) the urban governance approach; (iv) the partnership approach; (v) the guiding hand of the state and (vi) lack of concern for the environment.

III.1.1 The drawbacks of decentralisation

The various decentralisation efforts – strengthening the district assemblies and creating sub-metropolitan assemblies within the Metropolitan Assemblies – have performed far below expectation. This is due to a lack of transfer of resources from the central government to the district assemblies and from the district assemblies to the sub-metropolitan assemblies, in order to match the transfer of responsibilities. In addition, departments such as the WMD do not have financial autonomy and continue to depend on the highly politicised allocative policies of the local authorities. These issues illustrate very familiar theoretical themes of impediments associated with decentralisation (Rondinelli, 1990; Bennett, 1990, 1993; Smith, 1985, 1996; Wolman, 1990; Martin, 1993; Hesse, 1991; Hovrvath, 1997; Batley, 1996; Helmsing, 2000).

In Accra, two factors combine to explain the flaws of the reform. The first refers to the failure of the decentralisation policy to empower the people through the district assemblies, to restructure the government machinery and reform local governments to take responsibility for local

[6] As was seen in Section I.4, the first of the theoretical debates looks at decentralisation and privatisation within the broader development debate that at present is dominated by the principles of neo-liberalism and from the perspective of the African state (particularly Ghana). The second one examines urban management, urban governance, environment and partnerships in the African context. The third one focuses on solid waste management.

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administration and development and to make public administration more efficient and responsive to local needs. The second refers to the lack of restructuring of the allocation of resources and reassignment of functions and responsibilities to the three levels of government (national, regional and district). The lack of elaboration of local government laws in terms of new working procedures, etc. not only points to a lack of political guidance, but also results in confusion and battles of competence between various levels: the Accra Metropolitan Area and sub-metros; and the WMD and Accra Metropolitan Assembly). Administrative opposition, a lack of financial independence (solid waste collection in Accra is funded partly by central government resources) and the fact that there is still no composite budget for the district assemblies compound these problems.

Secondly, Accra is the capital city, the seat of the central government and regional government, which implies a continuous interference from the cabinet in local affairs (*cf.* the CCW contract).

Our findings support the idea that for decentralisation to be successful, genuine political commitment at the top is required as well as strong political guidance in its elaboration. However, the "silent coalition" of opposing forces reluctant to alter the power structure and the inheritance of authoritative and centralised governing – the administrative establishment (civil service) and the ministries (including the Ministry of the Local Government) – has managed to slow down the process of empowering the local assemblies. The same mechanisms frustrate decentralisation efforts within the district assemblies, where established elites find ample reasons to hold on to the limited power in their hands (Bayliss, 2001; Wunsch, 1998, 2001).

III.1.2 Private providers perform better

The findings show that an overwhelming majority of consumers (*i.e.* 98%) in all localities prefer private service providers to the WMD. They also believe that private service providers perform better services than the public ones. The dissatisfaction about past governance performance translates into a strong pro-privatisation attitude. This is not only an opinion, but was supported by our findings on efficiency and effectiveness gains through privatisation of solid waste collection, which support the general theoretical claims that the private sector performs better. The findings point to better performance by the private sector in terms of high rates of user charge collection in house-to-house collection (up to about a 95% success rate), improved cleanliness (*e.g.* by CCW) and higher productive efficiency. The ability of private contractors to work with very

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limited resources as compared to the public sector ones echoes familiar theoretical claims of private sector managerial capabilities, its dynamism and superiority over the public sector (Batley, 1994, 1996; Cointreau-Levine, 1994; Lee, 1997; Rondinelli and Kasarda, 1993; World Bank, 2001). Besides, the private providers are not bothered by political interference and seem to have less overhead costs, partly because these are externalised and carried by the AMA/WMD. However, the better performance by, and the comparative advantage of, the private sector largely come from savings on labour costs and partly from the use of very old vehicles and technologies that fit the qualities of the areas concerned.

The findings also support the assertion that the inefficiency of the public sector in the provision of services has been the chief reason for pushing for privatisation. The findings show that competition helps to ensure quality at minimum cost (Stiglitz, 1998; Walsh, 1995; Samuelson and Nordhaus, 1985) and support the fact that competition consistently reduces the cost of public performance and results in significant economic savings to the taxpayer. It results in better value and improves performance by bringing viable, responsive, innovative and cost-effective competitors (public and private) to the "table" (Styles, 2001). The findings also show that the process of competition provides an imperative for the public officials to focus on removing obstacles to better performance and greater efficiency. The objective is to focus on the most effective and efficient way of accomplishing the tasks, regardless of whether it is done by civil servants or contractors.

The findings show that the local private operators in Accra have proven that they are able to provide good quality solid waste collection services at comparatively low costs leading to high levels of satisfaction among consumers. This underlines the theoretical claim that the private sector has a comparative advantage in terms of productive efficiency and effectiveness. These advantages have been provided through the indigenous business class, a number of small to medium sized enterprises, utilising predominantly simple technologies and large numbers of workers. Very often, the potential of these local enterprises is insufficiently recognised by the authorities. This partly stems from their preference for dealing with big, modern businesses that satisfy basic legal standards, partly because they want to reduce transaction costs as they have to deal with many small providers (*cf.* Baud *et al.*, 2001; De Haan *et al.*, 1998). Furthermore, in Accra (at least until 1999) entrepreneurs were free to arrange their own mix of labour input and technology usage resulting in a certain diversity of approaches well attuned to specific local circumstances. Furthermore, the

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companies involved – especially those providing house-to-house collection services on a franchise basis – were able to generate an acceptable profit. This attests to the flexibility of the private sector in solid waste collection.

The findings show that the desire of the private local contractors to work more to earn more revenue is not in dispute. This was demonstrated by the fact that by the end of 1998 and early 1999, the private local contractors were able to provide more than 70% of the waste collection services in Accra. The weakness of the private sector to deliver as expected in solid waste collection is often due more to the environment within which it operates rather than its capabilities per se. Thus, conditions under which the private local service providers work in solid waste collection in Accra (low tariffs and tardy payments) do not make it possible for private local contractors to reveal their full potentials.

III.1.3 The urban governance approach

If "governance" can be taken to mean, as Stoker (1998) suggests, the successful management of community affairs through a mixing of public, private and voluntary actors, then solid waste collection is an excellent case to test the working and adequacy of governance. Contrary to the idea of governance, policy development in Accra is still based on a conventional public management approach with the local government in the driving seat and acting as the prime initiator (*i.e.* a top-down approach). Other actors are not given a say in the planning and decision-making process (notably a lack of community participation). The study also testifies to the painful neglect of community participation in the design of privatisation policies. As a result, residents are not incited to develop a sense of commitment to the quality and sustainability of solid waste collection in their areas.

The findings of the study attest to the fact that solid waste management is no longer a (local) government monopoly, but a domain opened to various modes of public-private cooperation. Such blurring of boundaries and responsibilities requires governance in which all the key actors and stakeholders come together in partnerships to achieve a common public goal. However, a major prerequisite for the transition towards governance is that actors trust each other. The transition to a new networking style of governing is by no means easy. Despite official commitment to the concepts of participatory democracy, the government and its representatives have difficulty in working along these lines due to the inheritance of authoritarian and expert-driven management practices and the lack of legal provisions for participatory planning. The authorities continue to dictate rather than to negotiate even though they are not really capable of effective dictating.

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III.1.4 The partnership approach

Despite the fact that the majority of the people want privatisation of solid waste collection services, they simultaneously do not want the local authority to divest itself completely of its responsibility in solid waste collection. When public tasks are passed on to the private sector, safeguards have to be built in. Therefore, privatisation usually implies some kind of public-private partnership (Ostrom, 1996; Baud and Post, 2002; Batley, 1996). The findings show that solid waste collection continues to be a public good, which cannot be fully privatised and that the local government has to continue supporting financially, even after privatisation of the services.

The study clearly demonstrates that the importance and potentials of partnerships in ensuring good governance of solid waste collection in the urban setting cannot be taken for granted. The findings show that AMA as the public partner fell short in delivering its expected share of the bargain. The partnering did not lead to a gradual advancement of shared norms and mutual understanding, but reconfirmed mutual distrust. Rather than being credited for providing good quality solid waste collection at comparatively low cost, the local contractors were blamed for not succeeding in cleaning up the entire city. However, they only operated in specifically assigned parts of the city and only started economising on their performance in the communal container collection areas in response to the tardy payment by the AMA/WMD. To a certain extent, the fallacies of decentralisation bounced back on the partnering in solid waste collection in the sense that the commissioner of the service was unable to act as a principal. AMA's endemic financial and managerial weakness, especially its inability to implement an appropriate system of cost recovery, made it lose control. As a result, the central government stepped in, albeit not only for unselfish reasons, but also as a convenient excuse to favour some of its political friends.

Obviously, the local private actors cannot compensate the shortcomings on the public side. Partnerships are based on the idea of complementarities: each partner brings in something unique and together this may produce synergy. It would be naive to expect the private sector to defend the public interest. The indigenous contractors have not, for example, done anything to improve servicing in the most deprived residential areas. Furthermore, one should remember that their comparative success came at some cost, notably poor labour conditions and a lack of concern for the environmental aspects of solid waste collection.

The role of the consumers has been painfully neglected in the design of the privatisation policy. There is some reason to believe that the involvement of communities in the partnership would be beneficial. To take

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an example, residents in the middle-income area of Adabraka have themselves taken the initiative to upgrade the communal container collection system by hiring waste pickers to come and collect the garbage at their doorsteps and bring it to the container sites. Such initiatives have the advantage of being tailored to the needs of the people, rather than being imposed on them. The findings show that in order to select the most appropriate methods it is essential to give residents a firmer say in planning and decision-making.

III.1.5 The guiding hand of the state

The findings show that the private providers perform better than the WMD. However, there were serious shortcomings in the ability of the local authorities to guide the process properly. The local authority was unable to finance the system without resorting to the central government. Furthermore, the public partner is usually seen as the caretaker of the public interest and the promoter of social acceptability. In principle, the contracting approach enables local governments to keep a firm grip on the entire process through specified contract performance measures, enforceable contract sanctions and rigid performance monitoring and cost accountability. It requires the authorities to have an effective monitoring and control system as well as the necessary means to cover the expenses incurred. However, in Accra, these conditions are not fulfilled: the local authority was not able to act as principal in public partnership arrangements.

There will always remain a crucial role for the state to play in arranging for more sustainable ways of solid waste collection. In Accra, like in most cities in developing countries, market conditions for this particular public good are imperfect and many poor households are simply unable to pay according to their consumption. Furthermore, in addition to the need to subsidise the running costs of solid waste collection, the authorities will continue to bear the transaction costs of contract management and the costs of performance monitoring and investments in container sites, sanitary landfills etc. Finally, there continues to be a need for a public actor that sets standards for performance, public health, labour conditions and protection of the environment and that arranges for these standards to be upheld.

III.1.6 Lack of concern for the environment

In Accra, the lack of concern for the environment in the plans and programmes of the local authority for solid waste collection is manifested in many areas. This includes (i) public health aspects; (ii) environmental deterioration; and (iii) lack of attention to waste as a resource. The system

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tends to focus more on narrow perspectives such as efficiency criteria, without due regard for environmental concerns. In Accra, urban environmental management does not really exist despite efforts to move in that direction through the Sustainable Cities Programme (McGranahan *et al.*, 2001). The environment continues to be a closing item. At the local level, responsible actors only think in terms of service efficiency and effectiveness. Moreover, effectiveness is narrowed down to removal of waste from residential areas without any concern for either the safety of its disposal, or the impact of disposal on the quality of the environment (*cf.* open dumping), or for possibilities for reducing waste flows or for diverting them through re-use, recycling and composting. The protests by residents in the Mallam and Kwabenya suburbs of Accra against the use of their land for waste dump and landfill sites respectively, underscore the official neglect of environmental impacts of the city on the built-in environment. Public health and environmental deterioration seem not to receive adequate attention in the local authority plans.

The fact that there is no integrated solid waste management approach in Accra shows a lack of attention to waste as a resource. Integrated solid waste management as a concept is an idea, which is still not practised. The contribution of re-use, recycling and composting as a contribution to urban sustainable development does not feature in policies and programmes of the local authority.

III.2 Recommendations for further research

The study suggests a few areas that are theoretically rewarding and or relevant to future policy. These are grouped into two levels: (i) general and (ii) Accra/Ghana and would address the questions below.

General

1. How can the inclusion of ecological concerns in urban policies and public service delivery be fostered in accordance with an interpretation of urban environmental management that recognises wider responsibilities than simply those of the city and its residents?
2. How can partnerships across the public-private divide defend the public interest or enhance urban sustainable development? More specifically: how can ideas concerning integrated solid waste management be promoted and how can officials and policy makers be made enthusiastic about an approach that seeks to integrate socioeconomic, public health and wider environmental concerns? How can the potential of partnerships across the public-private divide be

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promoted? How can such collaboration be expanded to include community actors and/or informal actors (waste pickers)?
3. Under what conditions could public providers deliver the same quality of services as the private sector?

Accra/Ghana
1. Why is (organic and inorganic) waste not more widely used as a resource? How can linkages between different domains in the solid waste management system such as recycling, re-use and composting of waste be integrated and promoted in Accra and other cities?
2. Is the potential of using waste as a resource sufficiently understood in Accra and, if not, why not and in what respects? How can linkages between solid waste collection and recycling, re-use, and composting of waste be strengthened?
3. What is the most appropriate mixture of production factors (technology choices) for solid waste collection in various residential areas, taking affordability into consideration?
4. How best could cost recovery be organised in Accra?
5. Should the sub-metros continue to have a role in the organisation of solid waste collection and, if yes, what role?
6. How could community involvement in solid waste collection best be promoted?

There is ample reason to engage in broader comparative research in order to further our understanding of the factors that are decisive in explaining the success or failure of decentralisation and privatisation exercises in waste management. Such a broader perspective would not only include other stages in solid waste management, but would include a range of urban areas deferring in their size, geographical attributes, economic well-being and governance characteristics.

III.3 Practical applicability

The research results enable policy makers to be better informed on the issues examined. The examination of fiscal disparities among district assemblies is particularly innovative as such an examination – with clear policy implications – has not been performed in Ghana before. The evaluation of waste management in the context of decentralisation and privatisation also provides new insights that can spark debates on proper solutions and their implementation.

IV. Recommendations

There are quite a number of problems that deserve swift action to ensure an improved and more sustainable waste collection system in Accra. Major constraints to solid waste collection relate to lack of effective urban governance. Policy intervention, obviously, should target the elimination of these constraints. Action should focus on:

1. The need to empower the district assemblies and address the shortcomings of the decentralisation policies. District assemblies should be empowered by (i) making leadership more independent from the central government; (ii) speeding up the adoption of rules and regulations to fit the decentralised structure; (iii) speeding up financial independence of the district assemblies by granting a composite budget; and (iv) supporting district assemblies in their efforts to increase own revenues.
2. The integration of policy design and involvement, moving to a new style of governing that fosters widespread involvement of private and community actors in the preparation, planning, decision-making, design, implementation and monitoring of waste collection arrangements. This might increase civic responsibility towards waste collection and improve trust in local authority.
3. Fostering a positive change in attitude of residents and policy makers towards waste collection.
4. Making the system more viable by various financial and technical interventions.
5. Promoting concern for the environment, including public health aspects, environmental deterioration and regarding waste as a resource.

In the sections below, we present policy recommendations to address these issues.

Policy design and implementation

Policy must be realistic. It should link with the current governance perspective of having stakeholders jointly work towards the achievement

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of collective goals. Local authorities have to work in harmony with other actors and listen to and consult with other stakeholders in the design of policies and arrangements that affect their lives. The local authority should implement initiatives that have already proved successful, such as franchising, contracting out fee collection, and building on people's own initiatives. The enforcement of bye-laws should perhaps be based on the closer involvement of communities, using community leaders and unit committees rather than officials who are underpaid and badly motivated.

Integrating environmental concerns in planning
Environmental neglect is another major problem facing sustainable approaches. Most of the policies tend to focus on socioeconomic perspectives such as efficiency criteria and less on the environment, if at all. Sustainable development approaches in solid waste management mean that environmental considerations should also be brought to the forefront of any development and management programme. It should integrate waste collection with other domains of solid waste management, such as using waste as a resource for re-use, recycling and composting. It should pay a lot of attention to environmental health aspects in the planning and implementation stages.

Change in attitudes
A positive change in attitude towards solid waste collection among all stakeholders is the surest guarantee for a sustainable solid waste collection system in Accra. The general public must be sensitised to their civic responsibility in solid waste collection. This involves public education and awareness creation, in which the media have a unique role to play. Improved solid waste collection requires not individual, but collective and coordinated actions. Residents must abide by basic sanitation regulations. They must ensure that their waste is properly stored and kept away from roaming livestock and must desist from the indiscriminate dumping of waste and littering, which is a particular feature of the low-income areas. Local authorities should not condone and connive with activities that disrupt orderly collection, transportation and disposal of waste. Bye-laws must be enforced vigorously; otherwise they are of no use. The mass media could help to educate and create environmental awareness and make the public aware of the effect of poor sanitation and waste management.

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Supervision, monitoring, evaluating and coordination
The local authority must strengthen its supervisory, monitoring, evaluating and coordinating roles to increase the effectiveness of institutions and institutional arrangements for waste management in the metropolis. It should ensure better coordination between the WMD (the service performance sector) and the Environmental Health Department (EHD) responsible for health inspection, bye-laws implementation and illegal practices by providers. Money has therefore to be set aside for proper inspection and equipping inspectors. This is the hidden or transaction cost of solid waste collection, which the local government authority must bear. Furthermore, the local authority should also give residents a way of monitoring performance, for example through cleaning committees. Residents can play an active role through their community leaders, assemblymen and members of unit committees to monitor and evaluate the performance of waste contractors. Residents demonstrated their capabilities to play this role during the franchised house-to-house system when they demanded value for their money.

The viability of the system and increased funding
Inadequate funding is identified as one of the major causes for poor performance and the inability of the local authority to extend the coverage of the waste collection system to areas presently denied. The need for an appropriate balance between development funds and operational funds is a major policy recommendation that comes out from the evaluation of fiscal disparities. The local authority could increase funding for its solid waste collection through the following mechanisms:

1. Cost recovery.
2. Instituting and implementing differential rates based upon area classification and affordability. It should encourage community participation in the design of the solid waste collection system, notably a right mix between service levels and costs. The rates should be adjusted upwards to take account of inflation over a period of time.
3. Using better methods for collecting fees such as privatising it, engaging commissioned agents, daily or monthly payments, or including the bill in water or electricity bills, as is the case in many other (developing) countries.
4. Sanctioning free riders.
5. Extending house-to-house services (for which people are more inclined to pay).
6. Fiscal discipline.

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7. Sourcing other taxable avenues.
8. Foster privatisation and competition.

We will elaborate these mechanisms in more detail below.

1. Cost recovery

The consequence of the pay-as-you-dump policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s – indiscriminate illegal dumping of solid waste in order to avoid payment – provides a unique policy lesson for the local authority with regard to the negative implications of full cost recovery measures. The study therefore suggests avoiding over-reliance on user fees, but also finding alternative sources to supplement or offset the low cost recovery of solid waste collection. Findings show that people are willing to pay, albeit perhaps not the full costs, if services are reliable and adequate. Free riding can be prevented if appropriate institutional arrangements have been created (such as the franchise system) and provisions for accountability have been put in place. Free riding can also be prevented by social control or government control on the actions of people. This cuts across all segments of the population, including those in poor areas. The local authority should capitalise on this and organise reliable and adequate services. This, however, presents a problem of which should come first: the chicken or the egg riddle. A way out of this is for the local authority to take the lead and demonstrate a willingness to provide reliable and adequate services. This will enable it to collect user fees for its services. Then the local authority could take advantage of the willingness to pay to raise revenue, based upon affordability.

2. Differential rates, affordability and community participation in the design of waste collection arrangements

The issue of affordability as regards paying for solid waste collection services illustrates a familiar social dilemma. The fact that solid waste collection has the nature of a public good also poses a policy dilemma to policy makers and city authorities, particularly those in poor developing countries. If non-payers are excluded, the payers will suffer the consequences such as reduced cleanliness and threats to public health.

The local authority should also investigate the affordability of the rates in combination with the levels of service, with the community deciding on the most appropriate combination. Experiences from initiatives undertaken by some assemblymen in Accra who put attendants at waste collection points in Akweteman and Kaneshie to clean the area and to collect fees from users, could serve as a useful guide in the development of a more

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accountable community-based system that uses community leaders to collect fees. Community leaders know the people well and could keep track of non-payers. Consultation between the local authority and the community with regard to the design of waste collection system facilitates ownership of the process, which invariably contributes substantially to its performance.

3. Better fee collection methods
A better method of fee collection should be put in place to guarantee the durability of the system. Findings show that the franchised house-to-house collection system for the private service providers proved very successful. The problem was with the public sector whose success rate in fee collection was not so high. The success for the franchised system was that the consumers could demand value in return for paying the fees. Following the withdrawal of the public sector from waste collection, it would be appropriate to return to the franchised system in which the service provider collects the fee by himself. However, if the contract system is to continue, then commissioned private firms must be selected through open bidding to collect the fee on behalf of the local authority. A better user fee collecting mechanism must be established for areas where the communal container collection system is operating. This is where community leaders can play an effective role through educating their constituents. Commissioned agents can also be recruited from the ranks of members of the community to help in user fee collection. The unit committees could best handle this in their areas. The authority should beware, however, of introducing new avenues for enrichment, favouritism and patronage. Furthermore, the authorities will always have to recognise that people, especially in the poorer parts of the city, cannot pay according to their consumption. Besides, the authorities will continue to bear the transaction costs of solid waste management at city level, such as for contract management, performance monitoring, etc.

4. Sanctioning free riders
The inability of the local authority to sanction free riders reduces its ability to deter others and perpetuates this negative practice. It also deprives the authority (or in the case of a franchised system, the public or private service provider) the means of raising the money needed to sustain the service. Offenders should therefore be prosecuted in court.

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5. Extending house-to-house services
Major improvements in the cleanliness of residential areas will probably require the introduction of the house-to-house collection system across the city. However, the nature of the system – frequency of collection, technology choices and the rates to be charged – will have to be differentiated to reflect variations in prosperity. The local authority must extend the house-to-house collection system after consultation with the communities and consumers on the design of the institutional arrangement, including the user fees involved. As a start, the local authority could introduce house-to-house collection into all areas with a good road network and accessibility to houses such as in Osu, Adabraka and James Town. This process could continue till all such areas are serviced through the house-to-house collection system.

6. Fiscal discipline
Though solid waste collection is the largest single item in the recurrent expenditure in the overall budget of the local authority, performance on the ground is abysmal. The low productive efficiency stems from objective problems on how the funds of solid waste collection are disbursed. Fiscal discipline is a *sine-qua-non* to improved performance. If the local authority were to use funds more prudently and plug leakages in revenue mobilisation, it could improve waste collection in Accra with the current level of taxation, when adjusted for inflation.

7. Sourcing other taxable avenues
Since revenues from user fees continue to be inadequate to meet the whole waste collection system, the local authority must identify more potential taxable sources, which it has not yet tapped. For instance, it could demarcate most of its major roads in the central part of Accra, including the central business area (CBA) and certain residential areas, as parking lots for fees at differential rates based upon the areas' classification. Part of the revenue from this source could be used to improve solid waste collection services in the city. Parking fees will also help to reduce haphazard parking and ease traffic congestion in the city centre.

8. Foster privatisation and competition
Decentralisation of solid waste management does not lead to significant results, since the major problem in solid waste collection is funding. Privatisation on the other hand proved to be much more effective although the quality of the services still varies widely. The study indicates that a

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majority of consumers are willing to pay more if services are better organised.

This study criticises the monopoly granted to CCW (a joint Canadian-Ghanaian corporation) in waste collection in Accra in 1999. This contract implies that the important advantage of privatisation – competition – is lost. The values of private sector participation could be achieved only under a competitive environment. This phenomenon of a large foreign corporation, backed by its home country, that forms a partnership with people of the local elite, affiliated to the government, in order to receive a large contract for the provision of a service that has been undergoing a process of privatisation, can undermine efforts to reform local governance methods and to improve the quality of urban services in a sustainable manner. Such contracts are usually granted at the expense of the public purse, with the support of the foreign state in financing (but in loans and not in grants). The foreign corporation and the local partners receive the contract largely thanks to their political influence. After a few years of guaranteed profits, the whole system could collapse due to lack of adequate revenues, leaving the local authority and the public with a new burden of debt and the need to restart building the old system of service providers from the beginning. Continued monitoring of the experience with CCW and its financial aspects is therefore of prime importance for the future of AMA as well as for local service provision elsewhere in the developing world.

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Appendix 2

Follow-up of the project: capacity building and project-related publications

The prime beneficiary from the project was Mr. Nelson Obirih-Opareh who gained his PhD degree at the University of Amsterdam thanks to the project. Mr. Nelson Obirih-Opareh has remarkably improved his research skills: his analytical and writing capabilities, his knowledge on how to apply scientific methods, formulate objectives and focus on them, data analysis using Excel and SPSS, reporting skills and management aspects of research projects. The workshops and activities in the framework of the project contributed to the capacity building of other staff affiliated to the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). Prof. Dr. Eran Razin hopes to be able to continue his fruitful relationship with Dr. Nelson Obirih-Opareh and to initiate similar projects on local government and urban development in Ghana and elsewhere. The paucity of financing sources that enable cooperation with researchers from African countries and the high transportation costs involved in flying to Israel, Europe and North America from Accra are impediments to an effective utilisation of international networks by Ghanaians. These are obstacles that need to be overcome.

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Scatological Children's Humour

Notes from the Netherlands and Anywhere

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I still remember the first joke I learned when I was about five years old. There was a mother who had two boys; one was called Yesterday and the other Pudding. Pudding and Yesterday had been naughty and were sent to their room. Pudding said to Yesterday: 'I must poop'. Yesterday replied: 'We are not allowed to leave the room. Do it from the window'. Pudding did so but at that same moment the mayor passed by the house and the poop fell on his hat. The mayor was annoyed and rang the bell. The mother opened the door and the Mayor said: 'Something fell on my head when I passed your house'. The mother asked: 'Was it Yesterday?' The mayor: 'No, today!' The mother: 'Was it Pudding?' The mayor: 'No, it was poop!' Hahahaha.[1]

Shit and other 'dirty' bodily substances are the favourite topics for jokes among children, to be replaced by sex at a later age. A joke is supposed to provoke laughter by presenting a story or a situation that is out of the ordinary and is experienced as funny (tautology is unavoidable when one wants to explain what humour is). Shit on someone's head is unusual, out of place and, in the eyes of some, comical. For children that unusual event is enough to enjoy the thrill of the story. But not only for children. Cartoons and illustrations for a larger public also convey the humour of dirt falling on people from above.

Excrement forms the hilarious denouement of the joke.[2] The children's story is a joke told *because* of the shit and the piss. In this essay I will explore the social context and meaning of scatological jokes in general and among children in particular. I will first dwell on two aspects of humour that are particularly relevant to the topic of this essay. The first is humour's tendency to turn the established order upside down and reveal what

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Figure 1. *Medieval Times*. Origin unknown

is normally hidden and not spoken about. The second is that telling a joke is a context-bound act of social communication. Scatological humour is usually regarded as the domain of children but – as I will argue in the conclusion – it is also a phenomenon that connects children with the older generation. The next section provides examples of scatological humour from various parts of the world and from children as well as adults. It illustrates the different shades of this type of humour depending on the specific context in which it is produced and exchanged.



Figure 2. *The bird's relief*. Wilhelm Busch

By 'scatological' I mean 'humorous by referring to excretion'. The term is often used in a wider sense in reference to anything that is regarded 'obscene', in particular sexual matters. Sexual and excretory topics are often overlapping, as they are in human anatomy.[3] The closeness of the two subjects can be illustrated by another of my earliest jokes, not very different from the one just cited. Jantje was sitting in an airplane when he felt a strong urge to pee. He opened the window to pee but suddenly the window came down again and cut off his willy. The next day people read in the newspaper: 'Little thumb found without nail'. Hahaha.[4]

Another shade of meaning in the adjective 'scatological' is that dictionaries do not make a distinction between human and non-human excretory matters. The same applies to the first overview study of scatological practices worldwide by John G. Bourke (1891). I feel, however, that human shit and urine are far more disgusting – and therefore more 'scatological' – than that of animals. Nevertheless, in this essay I will follow the dictionaries and Bourke, and discuss jokes that relate to both human and non-human excretion.

Humour

Do we need a full-fledged definition of humour in a special issue on the very topic? I trust that several of the other contributors have made an attempt to grasp the ingredients of that ungraspable phenomenon. Another attempt would mainly produce the opposite of humour. Moreover, as Thomas Crump (1988) remarked in the first issue of Etnofoor, we understand a joke in a split second of 'enlightenment'. That moment, he points out with a reference to Capra must come spontaneously; it cannot be achieved by 'explaining' the joke, i.e. by intellectual analysis. The conclusion is clear, in a split second: 'This is a somewhat formidable challenge to an author trying to write about humour' (ibid.: 25). Mary Douglas (1968: 362) used the word 'desiccated' for Radcliffe-Brown's humourless style of treating joking relations, a qualification that also applies to her own (pioneering) treatise on the subject. Martha Wolfenstein (1954: 13), in her introduction to children's humour, asks the readers to excuse her for the lack of humour in her book:

> While the enjoyment of a joke involves an agreeable feeling of ease and effortlessness, the analysis of the very complicated structure of a joke has rather the opposite quality. I make these points so that the reader should not feel disappointed if he does not find this a funny book. [5]

But let me, nevertheless, try to dwell on two aspects of humour, which – hopefully – will not be too boring. Firstly, I agree with Henk Driessen (1997: 222) that humour often has (must have?) a relativizing effect. The joke permits us to look behind the scenes of standard meanings and conventions and shows us another world that can only exist without becoming public and conventional. We know that there is more to life than what directors, ministers, bishops and family heads preach and we share that tacit understanding in several ways, one of them being humour. A large number of views and theories concerning humour fit in this concept of relativity. Douglas remarks: 'Frozen posture, too rigid dignity, irrelevant mannerism, the noble pose

interrupted by urgent physical needs, all are funny for the same reason. *Humour chastises insincerity, pomposity, stupidity*' (1968: 363, emphasis added). Contrasting and comparing the views on humour by Bergson and Freud she concludes: 'The common denominator underlying both approaches is *the joke seen as an attack on control*' (ibid.: emphasis added). 'The joke connects and disorganises. It attacks sense and hierarchy' (ibid.: 370). For Freud, humour offers a brief escape from culture's repression and *Unbehagen*. While Freud thought of sexual restrictions, others have extended this interpretation of humour to other domains of life, in particular political control and economic exploitation. Wertheim's (1974) 'counterpoint' and Scott's (1985) 'weapons of the weak' are examples. In stories and jokes the poor ridicule their oppressors and imagine another world where power and wealth are differently divided. These weapons of humour do not change their material and political living condition, as Billig (2001: 39) rightly remarks, but they do help them to survive and keep their self-respect in miserable circumstances (Scott 1985). Folk rituals and tales have widely been interpreted as humorous rites of inversion (Wertheim 1974: 108-109; Schweitz 1979; Bakhtin 1984; Apte 1985: 156-157; Wittenberg 2014). One quote to illustrate the popular covert defiance of power holders; this one about East Africa: '… Africans delighted to mock their rulers' heroic pretensions. Much was obscene, or scatological, as in distorting party slogans to comment on the presidential phallus, a genre that worked because so much power-play centred on sex and consumption' (Iliffe 2005: 351).

But relativity can also be light-hearted and innocent as in the children's rhyme '*Koning, keizer, admiraal, schijten / poepen doen ze allemaal*' (King, emperor, admiral; shitting / pooping they all do).[6] For children it may be quite shocking (and exciting) to discover that even dignified and holy persons are subject to nature's call. Michael Elias (1999: 38) remarks that 'poop' lends itself eminently for drawing attention to the equality of people.

Another relevant aspect of humour and joke-telling is its relational context and social effect. Giselinde Kuipers introduces her study of good and bad tastes of humour as follows:

> Sense of humor is connected to social milieu and background. There are individual differences in sense of humor, as well as differences between men and women, between people of different social classes and educational levels, between old and young, and of course differences between people from different cultures and countries. What people think is funny – or not funny – is strongly determined by how they were brought up and by the company they keep (2015: 1).

'Sharing humor signals similarity – and similarity breeds closeness. Inversely, the absence of a shared sense of humor marks unbridgeable social and personal distance' (Kuipers 2009: 219). Humour can draw people together in sharing laughter and common ideas about what is funny and what not. But the opposite may also occur and exclude people on the basis of their different taste and intellectual level. Through the study of humour, she throws light on social categories such as class, educational level, gender, age and – to a lesser extent – ethnicity. Her view is relevant for my discus-

sion on the low appreciation of scatological jokes and on children's humour.

Dirt and defecation

My interest in 'scatological humour' derives more from scatology than from humour. For almost twenty years I have been trying to draw attention to the anthropological significance of dirt and defecation and the disgust that surrounds them. My fascination with the topic began – although Freud might have had a different explanation – when I realised that defecation was my 'weakest point' when I was doing fieldwork in a rural Ghanaian town. The public toilet turned out to be a formidable obstacle in my attempt to join the daily life of the family I was staying with (Van der Geest 1998). I was unable to squat next to the other men in the squalid and dilapidated toilet, without any privacy. That awareness led to all kinds of questions about meaning, experience and practice of defecation such as: what makes defecation dirty and uncomfortable to do and speak about in public; whether it is always regarded as dirty; how defecation is managed in everyday life, in sanitation efforts, in ideas about hygiene, in care practices, in gender relations, in power politics, in popular language and so on. Gradually the field widened and I realised that 'shit' was connected to everything, in most diverse manifestations.

Mary Douglas' concept of 'matter out of place' in the seminal introduction to her 'Purity and Danger' (1966) became for me the leading notion in making sense of the ambiguities around 'dirt'.[7] Nothing is dirty by itself; dirt is defined by its context. It is disorder and carries an invitation or rather an obligation to restore order. To make her concept work for shit – which seems to be always dirty, independent of context or place – I added a social dimension to her concept of (out of) 'place.' The social situation, the relatedness of people who are involved in the dirt experience, is a stronger predictor of disgust than physical or geographical places discussed in Douglas' work. That widening of the concept of 'place' made the experience of absence of disgust regarding defecation (for example of one's baby or one's own) not only understandable but also logical. Shit is not a neutral substance; it is linked to people (Van der Geest 2007). It carries the identity of the one who has produced it (Elias 1999: 31).

In this essay I will return to Douglas and argue that 'matter out of place' not necessarily produces dirt; it may also cause fascination and attraction, for example in humorous exchanges, as I will demonstrate further below.

How funny are jokes about defecatory matters?

Toilet humour and jokes about shit, snot and vomit get little attention in Kuipers' (2015) study. The few times they are mentioned they are presented as typical examples of bad taste which is not appreciated by most of her respondents and causes vicarious shame. Their popularity among young children is not discussed. Children appear mainly as innocent and naïve characters in the jokes of adults. One example from Kuipers' collection (I cannot resist citing one):

> Johnny's class has been learning about animals with names ending in "or". The teacher asks the class: "Can anyone name one animal ending in *or*?" Bobby waves his arm in the air and says: "An alligator, miss". "Well done, Bobby, and what does it eat?" "People, miss". "Very good". Then it's Mary's turn: "A condor, miss". "Very good, Mary, and what does it eat?" "Sheep, miss". Then Johnny puts up his hand and says: "A vibrator, miss". The teacher starts to blush but doesn't want to discourage Johnny so she asks: "What does it eat, Johnny?" "I don't know for sure, miss, but my sister says it sure eats up the batteries" (Kuipers 2015: 126).

As a matter of fact, I laughed when I read this joke and told them to a few people in my environment. The joke is good because it establishes an unexpected link between two completely unrelated elements (Kuipers 2009: 221), not because it is about an intimate body-related object although that may also contribute in the sense that Johnny says something funny about a somewhat tabooed topic without realising it.

Apart from disparagement of scatological jokes, Kuipers' high-brow respondents also disliked 'canned jokes' in general, short humorous stories (*moppen* in Dutch), 'ending in a punch line, which the teller usually does not claim to have invented himself' (2015: 2). But they did like spontaneous humour which shows the wittiness of the speaker. I found the following example, which *is* located in a toilet, in an obituary for Alan Dundes, the author of many publications about scatological folk humour in Germany. A colleague remembers that once in a lecture Dundes told his audience that he was driving to Los Angeles,

> … and stopped at a restaurant to use the facilities. No soon was he seated in his stall than he heard a voice from the next stall saying, "Hi, how are you doing?" Although not the sort usually to chat with strangers, Alan found himself saying – a bit embarrassedly – "Not bad". The stranger replied: "And what are you up to?" "Well probably just like you I've been driving to L.A.". At that point, he heard the stranger say in a very agitated manner: "Look, I'll call you right back, there's some idiot in the next stall answering the questions I'm asking you. Bye" (Caroll 2005: 123).

But did Dundes really perform this practical joke on the way to L.A.? Some joke tellers cleverly resuscitate a canned joke by suggesting the event happened to themselves. My oldest brother is a master in this technique.

I share the low appreciation of most shit- and piss-humour of the respondents in Kuipers' study: silly, puerile, embarrassing, bad taste but – as I will argue later on – the bad taste is context-dependent. Midas Dekkers, a Dutch biologist and popular writer about biological topics, has written a richly illustrated plea for more recognition of the importance and normality of faeces in daily life. His style is humorous and seldom of 'bad taste'. Shit, for example, is indispensable for anyone nursing a garden. He illustrates this with a song text of the cabaretière Jasperina de Jong: '*Wat zegt de dahlia? 'Ik wil fecalia"* (What does the dahlia say? 'I want faeces') (Dekkers 2014: 163).

Telling examples of puerile joking can be found in Dutch poet Gerrit Komrij's *Encyclopedie van de stront* (Encyclopaedia of shit) (2006). But his collection also

seems to suggest – note my cautious wording – that faecal jokes were better appreciated in previous (more prudish?) centuries in the Netherlands than they are nowadays (see for example Dekker 1997; Verberckmoes 1998).

Adults write 'scatological laternalia' in toilets in schools, army barrack, train stations and other public places. These are jokes – if they are jokes – that are made anonymously, free from social encounter. The journal *Maledicta* has published several collections of them. They would not reap much appreciation in social conversation but may be enjoyed by some in the solitude and privacy of a toilet. The comical effect – if at all – may be partly due to the rhyme. Two examples of graffiti by Dutch Soldiers, collected by Henk Salleveldt (1996: 55):

> *Hier rust het stoffelijk overschot*
> (Here rest the mortal remains)
> *Van middagmaal en avondpot*
> (Of lunch and evening meal).
>
> *In deze kleine cel*
> (In this little cell)
> *Bereidt men worsten zonder vel*
> (One prepares sausages without a skin)

I am less sure about funny stories relating to excrements and other scatological topics in other cultures. When I asked Ghanaian friends to write to me about such stories and jokes they found it a difficult 'assignment'. Some promised to think about it and never wrote back. Two sent me a list with examples of meanings and uses of shit in daily life that did not seem to be meant as jokes. Other contributions were proverbs and expressions, perhaps a bit funny but not meant as jokes. Below are four brief examples that seem to imply that scatological jokes (stories or riddles) are not shared among Ghanaian children:

> Shitting on top of another's shit brings bad luck. Another person's shit splashing on you is bad luck. It is for this reason that some prefer open shitting or avoid toilets that have water.
>
> Do not point at your village, no matter how poor it is, with your left hand. The implication is that … because the left hand is used to clean shit, it symbolizes shit in that sense. The right hand is thus symbolically for good things. To point to your home with the left hand may suggest disgust.
>
> If someone wants to say that he is a brave man, he may say: "I am a latrine man; I don't fear shit".
>
> A common local proverb says: He who shits on the road will meet flies on his return (meaning you will reap what you sow).

In his introduction to 'Akan-Ashanti Folk-Tales', the colonial ethnographer Capt. R.S. Rattray (1930: vii) warns the reader for 'the apparent vulgarity and coarseness of some of the stories'. A quick look at his collection tells me, however, that there is hardly any vulgarity, at least not according to present standards. Rattray continues to explain that the use of vulgar words does not mean that the Akan people are uncivilized. There are three features of the story-telling that indicate that

the vulgarity is not part of ordinary life: (a) the tales may only be told after dark; (b) the story-teller begins with a disclaimer, saying that he does not really mean what he is going to say; and (c) the spiritual and earthly authorities that are ridiculed continue to be respected in real life (ibid.: x). The tales, in which the spider trickster Ananse is the central character, do show a humoristic inversion of normal life conditions, but scatological innuendos are practically absent.

In Bangladesh I came across the stories about Gopal, a court jester from medieval Bengal. The tales are humorous for children as well as adults, and always teach a lesson. Some of them are about defecation. The tales have been adapted to comics for children and nowadays more than two hundred of them can be found on YouTube. Here is one tale that was told to me by my colleague and friend Shahaduz Zaman. In it defecation is used to teach an important wisdom about a fact of life:

> One day the king's wife gave birth to a male child, and so the king was rejoicing. At that moment, Gopal entered the room, and the king said: "Gopal, on this very, very happy occasion, please tell me what do you have to say? Tell me exactly how you feel at this moment". Gopal replied, "Frankly, at this moment, I feel very happy after passing stool". "Gopal! How could you say such a thing?" The king was mortified. "On this auspicious moment, that's all you have to say? I'm completely disgusted. It's not funny and I don't appreciate your humour at all". After this, the relations between the king and Gopal were strained for some time. But one day, Gopal was rowing the king down the river, when the king suddenly had an urgent call of nature. Gopal said: "On this side there is a very heavy jungle area. It's not very suitable. Let us go a little further down and we'll find a suitable place". The king said, "Go over to the side!" Gopal said, "Not here. There is danger. Thieves and dacoits. Your life may be in danger. There's a place ahead". The king said, "Gopal, I cannot wait any longer. Go over immediately!" Gopal had to go over and the king jumped out. He could hardly contain himself. When the king returned, Gopal asked him, "How are you feeling?" The king replied: "I am feeling very happy after passing stool".

Returning to children's jokes about faecal topics, Apte's chapter on children's humour (1985: 82-107) is the most elaborate anthropological discussion of the topic that I managed to consult. Apte found that most scientific literature derives from psychologists who view children's humour as a major element in children's socialization and enculturation process. This applies particularly to sexual humour. Scatological (defecation-related) humour among children has rarely been studied to any depth. Apte tends to join psychologists and Freudian scholars in asserting that a high occurrence of both types of humour suggests a repressive attitude towards sex and body waste in a particular society, while a low occurrence is likely to apply to a culture with a more casual attitude to sex and body waste (1985: 107). 'Testing' this hypothesis is not possible however, for lack of reliable and substantial cross-cultural data. Even prominent scholars in the Culture and Personality School failed to pay serious attention to children's humour, let alone defecation-related humour (ibid.: 83). 'Sexual and scatological

humour among children, whether verbal or non-verbal, generally provides a channel for satisfying their curiosity about their bodies, bodily functions, and sexual intercourse' (ibid.: 96).

My son-in-law remembered a number of typical children's jokes and riddles from his own childhood that illustrate the thrill of pronouncing 'dirty' terms. An additional aspect is the comic effect of rhyme:

- *Ik ken een mop. Twee drollen in een envelop.* (I know a joke: two turds in an envelope).
- *Heb je dorst? Ik ken een hondje. Dat piest zo in je mondje!* (Are you thirsty? I know a little dog that will pee into your mouth!)
- *Drie mannen – Nederlander, Duitser en Turk – zitten aan de toog en besluiten tot een weddenschap. Wie kan het langst bier drinken zonder naar het toilet te gaan. De Turk wint! En hij verklapt zijn geheim. Turkie Turkie is niet dom, Turkie Turkie luier om!* (Three men - Dutchman, German, and Turk - bet who can drink the most beer without going to the toilet. The Turk wins and reveals his secret: Turkie Turkie is not dumb, Turkie Turkie wears a diaper!)
- *Waar ligt de Atlantische Oceaan Jantje? Onder mijn stoel meester*! (Jantje, where is the Atlantic Ocean? Under my chair, Sir!)

I agree with Helmers (1965: 126) who remarks that the small children's interest in poop jokes is not the 'forbidden fruit aspect', the pleasure of doing something against the rules. 'What generates laughter is rather the comically perceived evasion of the norm as to what may be said in the standard spoken idiom' (quoted in Neuß 2006).

The anthropological and sociological literature on children's faecal humour may be scarce but concrete examples of children's enjoyment with poop stories abound. The absolute favourite is the story '*Vom kleinen Maulwurf, der wissen wollte, wer ihm auf den Kopf gemacht hat*' (About the little mole who got pooped on his head) (Holzwarth and Erlbruch 1989). I assume that nearly everyone with a child owns a copy of the booklet and has read the story several times to their child while pointing at the pictures of different animals with different shapes of poop falling to the ground. The little mole wants to find out who dropped a turd on his head. He goes from animal to animal but each proves not to be the one by demonstrating his type of poop. Finally two flies, as shit experts, tell the little mole that the turd came from the butcher's dog. The little mole takes his revenge and deposes a tiny little turd on the head of the dog and happily disappears underground. The dog does not even seem to notice his action.



Figure 3: *The little mole visiting the cow and watching its pat.*

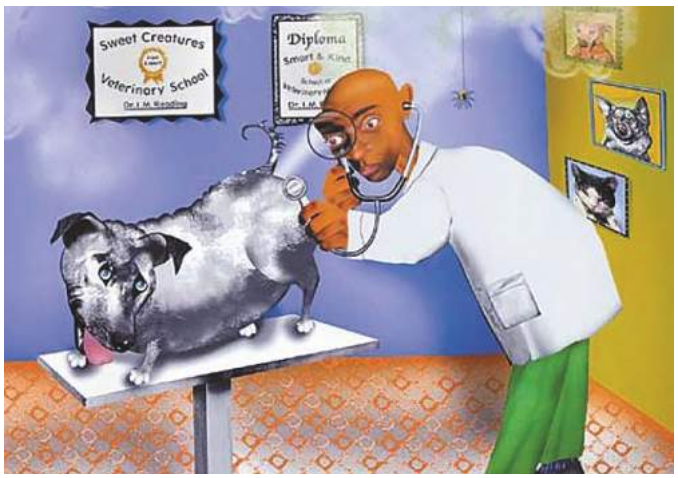


Figure 4. *Walter being examined by a doctor*

Another celebrated children's story in the same category is 'Walter the farting dog' (Kotzwinkle et al. 2001). By now there are five parts about Walter, a sweet dog with one problem: his vicious farting. In part one, Walter becomes a hero when he chases away two burglars with his awful farts. The story has been translated in about fifteen languages and sold more than a million times. It took the authors eleven years before they found a publisher willing to print their story. No wonder, because, as Wikipedia reports,

> The books have been criticized by some as an example of "poop fiction" for children (in the same vein as titles such as Captain Underpants and Zombie Bums from Uranus); they have been subjected to occasional complaints and attempts to have the books withdrawn from libraries, and some librarians and bookstores have refused to carry the series.[8]

When my children were small they loved to watch a television programme called *De film van Ome Willem* (Uncle William's film), a kind of talk show of Ome Willem with a group of children. There were sketches, songs, and funny interactions with the musicians and the actors, adults playing children's roles. Ome Willem made naughty poop remarks which the children enjoyed. His opening song always ended with the line '*Lusten jullie ook een broodje poep*?' (Would you like a sandwich with poop?), followed by loud protesting of the kids 'Bahhhhhh'. The programme was broadcasted between 1974 and 1989 and was repeated in 2000, 2004 and from 2007 to 2012. I enjoyed the show as much as my children, for two reasons. First, I watched the sketches and interactions as a father through the eyes of my children. In fact, I imitated some of Ome Willem's jokes in daily conversations with my children. I felt that the little poop jokes benefitted their sense of a humorous dimension of life, a glimpse of an imagined 'fake' world, and their fantasy. The second reason was that Ome Willem's humour was of a good – or excellent, I should say – taste, also for adults, because of his clever tapping into the children's world.

Concluding remarks

There is no smart punch line to conclude this essay. My anthropological interest in defecation as an omnipresent but hidden ingredient of human life, led me to the use of scatological terms in jokes that young children exchange among each other. I did not enter the world of child psychology to offer an explanation for the popularity of defecation-related jokes and riddles

among children. Nor did I carry out serious fieldwork on the topic, let alone carry out a quantitative research. My observations were mainly drawn from my personal experiences in concrete situations with my own children and children in my immediate surroundings, especially in the Netherlands and Ghana.

The term 'children's humour' usually refers to the humour that children produce but it could also apply to humour about children. In this essay I tentatively suggest that these two meanings may somewhat merge in actual experiences. Contrary to psychological explanations that emphasise the taboo-breaking and confrontational character of scatological joking, I wanted to draw attention to the sharing of these jokes between children and adults. Poop and pee – or for that matter shit and piss – are not really tabooed in human interaction and conversation, at least not the Netherlands. They are rather considered childish in the mouth of an adult, especially for a professor in anthropology. They may be out of place, but rarely to a serious degree. Regulation of bowel control is a rather ubiquitous topic in the communication between young children and their parents. Parents make jokes about it in order to prevent traumatic consequences in their children. Poop, one could say, constitutes a normal substance in the parent-child relationship. Adults do not frown upon children when they crack 'dirty' jokes but rather enjoy them as a sign of their children growing up and they encourage them. Depending on the context in which the joking occurs, parents may also initiate poop and pee jokes to challenge their children to respond. Moreover, children's jokes are 'apt to amuse adults mainly by their ineptitude … which may produce a comic effect, but different from the one the child gets' (Wolfenstein 1954: 13).

In addition to Kuipers' (2015) remarks about bad taste as expressed in scatological jokes, we must realise – risking to labour what is obvious – that good and bad taste are not fixed to the type or content of the joke but depend on the context in which the joke is told. A 'dirty joke' by a child in the close family situation or in the presence of friends is likely to amuse and mollify the parents. The same joke told by an adult to a child may also be of a very good taste. But in another context that joke may raise eyebrows.

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Notes

1 I am quite sure that I used the more accepted term '*poep*'. '*Stront*' (shit), a more vulgar word which was and still is used among adults, would have been too rough and too daring. I have the impression that this children's joke (*mop*) was widely known at that time among the children of my generation and the next one. My own children – now around forty – also knew it.

2 Bourke (1891: 175) quotes an ancient funny incident which occurred to '… good Socrates, who, when Xantippe had crowned him with a chamber-pot, he bore it off single with his head and shoulders, and said to such as laughed at it, "It never yet was deemed a wonder / To see that rain should follow thunder"'.

3 An old priest used to assert to me in my youthful days that sex was dirty; the Creator had decided so by placing sex and excretion so close together in the human body.

4 Interestingly, the main character of a 17th century collection of pornographic stories is called Jan Stront (John Shit) (Leemans 2000, 2002).

5 This raises an important question for anthropologists. Should there be more humour in our writing about humour? And more religion in our work on religion, more sex in our sex theorizing, more music…, more poetry…, more emotion…, et cetera?

6 A producer of tissue paper, Popla, cleverly used the rhyme for its advertising: '*Koning, keizer, admiraal; Popla kennen ze allemaal*' (King, emperor, admiral; Popla they know all). See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3bzvGs0k-A

7 Seminal? Perhaps, but not entirely new; in a personal message (2/12/2003) Mary Douglas 'confessed' to me that she took the idea of 'matter out of place' from a book of quotations. She probably referred to the following quotation from John Chipman Gray's collection: 'Dirt is only matter out of place; and what is a blot on the escutcheon [shield-shaped emblem bearing a coat of arms] of the Common Law may be a jewel in the crown of the Social Republic', (included in the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations).

8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_the_Farting_Dog

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[uit: Aya Musa (red) Spinhuisboek. Diemen: Uitgeverij AMB, 2014, pp. 144-149]

Spinhuis, toilet en huiselijkheid

Dit is een korte oefening in geanticipeerde nostalgie. Het Spinhuis verlaten… Dat ik dat nog mee moet maken…

Bij buluitreikingen kreeg je altijd een spiekbriefje waarmee je als voorzitter van de plechtigheid de gasten een korte rondleiding kon geven door de roemruchte geschiedenis van het gebouw. Intussen keek het publiek nieuwsgierig om zich heen naar de hoge lambrisering, de betegelde schouw met de spreuk “Treck u niet aen wat yeder seght. Maar doet dat billyck is en recht” en de geheime deur naar het privé-toilet van de Commissaris (nooit gecontroleerd of dat klopte). Ik voelde me als de gids in het Muiderslot en besloot met de versleten kwinkslag dat het Spinhuis, ooit gebouwd voor dievegges en andere gedevieerde vrouwen, nu zijn glorieuze eindbestemming had gevonden: toevluchtsoord voor opnieuw (vooral) vrouwen, maar van een heel andere slag (beleefd lachje van het publiek).

Over toilet gesproken. Wat het Spinhuis tamelijk uniek maakte, was dat alle toiletten voor mannen èn vrouwen waren. Aanvankelijk was dat beangstigend. Ik voelde me altijd ‘matter out of place’ als ik het toilet betrad en daar een studente zich mooi stond te maken voor de spiegel of net tevoorschijn kwam uit een van de drie deuren, begeleid door het lawaai van het doorspoelende water. Toiletten op publieke plaatsen zijn immers wereldwijd, net als mensen, te verdelen in M/F (transgenders, etc. – hoe antropologisch ook – daargelaten). Maar in het Spinhuis was dat anders; als je er eenmaal aan gewend was, werd het toilet het sprekend bewijs van de huiselijkheid van ons Spinhuis, in het oude rommelige centrum van een van de mooiste steden ter wereld. Maar alles, alles gaat voorbij.

Sjaak van der Geest

Life After Dark In Kwahu Tafo

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ABSTRACT The author reflects on four nocturnal topics he observed during his research in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural Ghanaian town: witchcraft, sex, human waste removal and sleeping. Yet little of his fieldwork was in fact nocturnal. He also asked school students to write about their views of life after dark in their town. From these reflections, the night in Kwahu-Tafo is revealed as both the 'enemy' of the day - a realm for activities that were not allowed or possible during the day - and as the day's indispensable companion. The night solves the moral dilemmas of the day. The night provides the coulisses of the day.

Introduction

For almost forty years I have been visiting the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo in Ghana for anthropological fieldwork. Much of my ethnographic work has dealt with activities that took place during the night, but I never paid attention to that 'dark side' of my data. In this paper I will. The night is the preferred space for lovers, witches, the town's two night-soil collectors and - of course - sleepers. I will relate my attempts to follow all of them through the night, and argue that the night has both a protective and an excluding/rejecting character for those who deal in evil, love and dirt.

My first research was about tensions and conflicts within one (extended) family (*abusua*). Many of my conversations with members of that family ended in hushed accusations of witchcraft (*bayie*) between close relatives. Witches work at night, I was told in these daytime conversations. It was the first indication that the night's evil extended into the day. I did not adjust my research approach, however. I did not conduct nocturnal fieldwork to directly observe the work of witches. I continued to listen to stories and gossip that reached me during daytime.

My second research period focused on sexual relationships. Sex, as I knew, was mainly a practice of the night, but the love affairs that interested me most were doubly nocturnal because they were secret relationships with an extra reason to seek the cover of the night. Personal involvement in 'secret love' did draw me into some night-time ethnography, but I never intended it to be ethnographic. It only became ethnography in hindsight.

More recent fieldwork, on hygiene and sanitation, led me to the work of the collection of liquid waste, which, in English is fittingly named 'night soil'. As with witchcraft and secret love, these activities are only carried out in the darkness of the night. The collection of human waste was the first topic that caused me to conscientiously conduct nocturnal fieldwork, albeit to a limited extent, as I will explain further below.

Finally, and most recently I took an interest in sleeping as a cultural activity. This again lured me to the night but, paradoxically, sleeping proved a less nocturnal affair than I had anticipated. Much sleeping goes on during the day (Van der Geest 2006),

and some people are too busy to sleep during the night, as I will show below.

Is it coincidence that the night played such a prominent role in the topics of my fieldwork or does anthropology have a 'natural' inclination towards life in darkness? Or is it my own character, if not aberration? It is probably a bit of both. Anthropologists seem to be most interested in things that are hidden: subterranean, obscure and marginal phenomena, which unavoidably lead to the night, in its literal or metaphoric appearance. (It is perhaps ironic that we claim to write about every*day* life). I will argue, however, that one needs to know the night to understand the day.

This intertwinement of night and day is impressively documented in the most complete ethnography of the night I know: a historical study of Paris in the 19th century by Simone Delattre (2003). 'The nocturnal city creates its own sensory space,' writes Corbin in his preface to Delattre's book (2003:12). Delattre writes about the many activities that take place in the night, from the pleasures and entertainment, to the security work done by police and other guards, to the work necessary before the new day breaks such as cleaning and the delivery of food.

In this essay, I revisit my notes and memories of fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo to enter its night. In addition, I returned to the town itself a few months ago to talk with friends about the night. I also asked 43 students at the local senior secondary school to write a composition about activities that take place at night in their town.

The night as metaphor

It is the absence of light, the darkness, which makes the night truly night. The night creates a space where things and people are not seen – or not fully seen. It is the great cover that protects secrets, private and public ones, benign and evil ones. The night, therefore, represents danger as well as for intimacy; it attracts and frightens.

In the biblical narrative, darkness falls over Jerusalem when Jesus dies. 'Darkness at noon' is the powerful anomaly that underscores the ominous character of the event. The German painter Matthias Grünewald chose that same darkness for his gruesome crucifixions. The bright landscapes and sceneries of which Grünewald's contemporaries were so fond of for their biblical images are conspicuously absent. The black sky represents the evilness that led to this death.

The night is also seen as the time when burglars and murderers are active. It is an unsafe period during which peace-loving citizens ought to stay at home in the security of their beds. Ekirch (2005) in his anthology of quotations about night-time offers numerous sayings that point at the hazards of the dark. His first chapter bears the title *Terrors of the night*. A long parade of writers and moralists compete in condemning the night as the favourite topos of evil. It is associated with violence, theft, disease, death and hell. A bush in the dark is easily taken for a thief, and nightly sounds easily scare us, as the Jacobean writer George Herbert remarked in 1657:

> The night is more quiet than the day and yet we feare in it what we doe not regard by day. A mouse running, a board cracking, a dog howling, an owle scratching put us often in cold sweat (in Ekirch 2006: 9).

Of course, this is Jacobean style of rhetoric; a poetic exaggeration for the sake of the argument. The night is rarely moonless. Moreover, electric lights have chased away the darkness in most corners of the world. The boundaries between day and night are fading and in some cities the streets may be busier (and brighter) in the night than during the day. And yet, the night still carries that negative aureole of danger, doom and destruction, certainly in the language of poets and priests.

The Completes that Roman Catholic monks sing – or used to sing – before they retreat to their beds for the night also express apprehension to the dangers after dark. The prayers start with a verse from the first letter by St Peter, exhorting the monks to: '… be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith'.

The night is also the domain of wild beings: animals, humans and spiritual agents. News items on radio, TV and in the newspapers encourage this view of night-time as 'crime time.' A clipping taken arbitrarily from a Russian daily reports on a group of crime watchers who guard a street in St Petersburg. The journalist sums up those who threaten the peace of the night:

> They thrive under the cover of darkness, craving anonymity. They are prostitutes and johns, dealers and addicts, burglars and thieves. They operate in neighbourhoods while fearful residents sit behind double-locked doors, some too scared to call the police (Maharrey 2007).

Wikipedia describes the dangers of the night as follows:

> Night is often associated with danger and evil, because bandits and dangerous animals can be concealed by darkness. The belief in magic often includes the idea that magic and magicians are more powerful at night. Similarly, mythical and folkloric creatures such as vampires and werewolves are thought to be more active at night. Ghosts are believed to wander around almost exclusively during nighttime. In almost all cultures, there exist stories and legends warning of the dangers of nighttime.

Thus, the night becomes a symbol of immorality versus the virtuousness of the day. Terms like 'dark side', 'shady', and 'obscure', which literally refer to an absence of light, all carry negative connotations when applied to human activity.[1]

But the night, with its candlelight and closed curtains also stands for hominess, intimacy, love and romance. Ekirch writes and cites:

> … darkness generated an intimate atmosphere in which words of affection glowed more freely. Low levels of light, whether from a candle or lamp brought couples closer together, physically and emotionally… 'How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night,' Romeo proclaims to Juliet. Ekirch (2005: 192)

Vogler, who described nightlife in a Thai refugee camp, writes:

> Darkness may impact social relations and hierarchies. The evenings and early night hours may actually bring those members of the refugee community together who are separated during the day. These can be families, friends and lovers within the community, but also refugees and security personnel. Vogler (2006: 3)

Both metaphors, evil and intimacy, appeared in my research in Kwahu-Tafo, often in a mixed form, as two sides of one coin: improper intimacy or intimate evil. *Bayie fri fie* (Witchcraft comes from the [one's own] house) says a proverb.

Bayie

The night is the territory of witches. In the 1950s, a Swiss missionary to Ghana, H. Debrunner, collected witchcraft stories from his students and wrote the first monograph of witchcraft (*bayie*) among the Akan of Southern Ghana (Debrunner 1959). In those stories, the night figures prominently. In opposition to the day, it is part of an elaborate complex of reverse qualities that are ascribed to witches. Witches are active when normal people sleep; they like the darkness where others prefer the light of the day; they fly; they walk on their heads, they eat human flesh, and '… they have their eyes at the back of the ankle joints' (ibid: 20). 'During the day […] witches are poor - but at night they are kings, captains and elders' (ibid: 29). 'In the night, many times between midnight and one o'clock, the woman who is a witch rises, takes certain leaves […] and puts these on her husband or children, and nobody notices her absence' (ibid: 19). There are countless reports of people who saw a suspicious light in the night and concluded it was a witch (which is akin to Herbert's remark above that in the night, simple observations assume hideous appearances).

One year after the publication of Debrunner's book, the British anthropologist and psychiatrist M. J. Field published an ethno-psychiatric study based on 146 cases of patients with mental or emotional problems, who sought help from a traditional healing centre in the Brong-Ahafo Region of Southern Ghana (Field 1960). *Bayie* is repeatedly diagnosed as the root cause of the complaints and although the stories do not describe in detail the ways of witches – they are assumed to be known – several of them do explicitly mention the night as the moment that witches carried out their destruction.

During my own research (Bleek 1975, 1978),[2] I lived for six months with one extended family to observe the daily routines of family life. I was particularly interested in the 'cracks' of the reputedly harmonious lineage system.[3] Accusations and insinuations about evil *bayie* practices between close relatives were rampant, as I was soon to find out. The accusations took the form of malicious gossip that revealed anxiety and mistrust in the heart of the family. It seemed to the family that I was a relatively safe person to speak to about these matters. Nearly everybody I spoke to privately shared with me that destructive gossip. Only a few older family members declined to discuss the matter with me; they were precisely the ones most frequently

accused by the others of practising *bayie*. My understanding of their reticence was that *bayie* was too close for them to speak about it.

Most *bayie* gossip referred to events in the past, but during my stay a dramatic death occurred that sparked off a wide range of (hidden) accusations. I heard eight of these accusations and tried to analyse them from the point of view of gossip (Bleek 1976b). The night as the realm of witches was always mentioned directly or implicitly assumed. I quote one accusation by a young woman that I called Bridget:

> Amo [the lineage head] is a witch. In the night he becomes very active and the lower part of his body changes into that of a fish. My mother, one night, went outside to urinate and saw him. She ran away for fear. Because she was in his [Amo's] power, she could not see whether he had changed into a fish or not (Bleek 1976b: 533).

By referring *bayie* to the darkness of the night, it remains both a vague and ominous phenomenon. Darkness implies not seeing – or not seeing clearly – and leaves room for imagination; an ideal opportunity for gossip. It is only in the night, with its obscurity, that one may encounter a witch.

The only time that Evans-Pritchard saw a witch during his renowned stay among the Azande was at night. He was taking his usual nocturnal stroll when he noticed a bright light. He ran to follow it, when it passed over the house of a man called Tupoi, and then he lost sight of it. He knew there was only one man in the village who had a lamp that could have produced such a light, but the man told him the next morning that he had not been out with his lamp. That same day someone in Tupoi's homestead died. Evans-Pritchard's informants were convinced the light had been a witch. The anthropologist concluded: 'I never discovered its real origin, which was possibly a handful of grass lit by some one on his way to defecate, but the coincidence of the direction along which the light moved and the subsequent death accorded well with Zande ideas' (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 34).

I never saw a witch in the night, but I became one myself when one night, shortly after my arrival in the town, I made a silly mistake to write on the outside of my room "*Ofie biara bayie wom*" (there is a witch in every house). It was meant as a joke. I had learnt the proverb during my Twi conversation the day before and liked it, not aware of people's strong belief in witchcraft and the proverb's deeply offensive meaning. I just wanted to add my own text to the many (pious) inscriptions that were already on the walls of the houses around. The next morning I woke up from agitated voices. My landlord knocked on my door and asked me if I had written the words. I immediately realised my mistake and denied it. It made the case worse. The landlord became more worried and hurried to remove the ominous words.

Love and sex

Why should love be made in the night? Because of respect, some friends explained to me. It would be shameful to have sex in broad daylight. It is not only secret or forbidden love affairs that take place at night, they said; all sex belongs to the night. The

night is the time that people sleep, so lovers can meet without being seen and disturbed by others. Married couples who sleep with their children in the same room wait until the children are asleep for privacy. Interestingly, having sex at night does not necessarily mean that it takes place in the darkness. Most people in Kwahu-Tafo sleep with the light on (Van der Geest 2006: 79), albeit dimmed, if possible. Turning off the light before having sex would rather wake the children up, someone explained.

For secret and forbidden love, the darkness of the night is crucial. Young people try to meet their lovers unseen by parents and other relatives who may disapprove of their affair. The architecture of the houses considerably facilitates nightly secret meetings between lovers. The houses are rectangular, with rooms around a courtyard. The main gate that gives access to the courtyard is bolted from the inside at night, but all the rooms have a window to the outside. A soft knock on the window suffices as a signal to a young man that his girlfriend has arrived; he can then tiptoe to the main gate to let her in. Thus, the gate provides secure protection against (rare) thieves but not against (frequent) lovers. Houses that are open and have no gate are even more amenable to secret love.

At the crack of dawn, before sunrise, the girl will sneak back home to join her brothers and sisters on their bed or mat. Her mother may have been spending her night outside the house as well, in her husband's or lover's house. In that case the girl must especially hurry, in case she returns at the same moment as her mother does.

During my research in 1973, a teacher to whom I gave the pseudonym Manu was beaten up by four men in the town where he was teaching. The men suspected him of having an affair with someone's wife. Manu's version of the story was that the woman was going to the toilet in the night (the public toilet was at the edge of the village) when the light of her kerosene lamp was blown out. She went to Manu's house only to ask for matches. He gave her some, but when she came out of the house, four men accosted her and questioned her about her purported quest for matches. They then beat up Manu (Bleek 1976a: 252). The story confirms that a nightly visit can mean only one thing in the local opinion: sex.

Research on lovers meeting in the night poses obvious problems. Participant observation would be awkward. Apart from my personal experiences, about which I do not want to write in more detail than I have done before, I had to rely on love stories of some friends (see Bleek 1975) and on a young boy in the house who helped me with various domestic activities. Every morning, during breakfast, he reported to me who had slept with whom that night, both in our house and in a few surrounding houses. But he too had not been an *observer* of the nocturnal love-making: he had only seen the supposed lover entering the house.

'Everyone likes the night!,' one student of the secondary school sighed in his essay. The night offers the occasion for romantic encounters. Moreover, as one of my friends remarked, the half-darkness makes things more exciting and people more beautiful. This certainly holds true for love-making. He said that a naked body in bright light put him off, but seeing the body in a claire-obscure turned him on.

Romance often begins by dating (at night) in front of bars and other places that attract people with their music. When students organize 'study evenings,' they may simply plan a cover-up for meeting friends.

I asked a friend if the many lights in the streets and the houses today had not rendered the cover of night ineffective, since a woman can now be seen slipping into the house of her friend. He agreed that the darkness is no longer 'safe', but that it did not really matter. Visiting your lover in the night indicates that you respect the norms of decency. You have shown your intention not to offend others by publicly doing what should be concealed, by darkness. If someone does see you, the person understands that you acted respectfully and he or she should in return respect you by not revealing what he saw. Flaunting your love and relationship in the daylight, however, would be a provocation. It implies that you do not care about what others think; that is where the disrespect lies. The fact that a married man has an extramarital lover (even if it is not someone else's partner, as in the case of Manu) is usually condoned, as long as the affair is carried out decently: in the night. Indeed, 'night knows no shame' (in Ekirch 2005: xxvi).

The night-soil collector

My first encounter with a night-soil collector took place in the night without the man noticing me. Once a week, I was awoken in the middle of the night by an intense stench drifting into my room. When it happened the first time, I stood up and looked out of my window. I saw a short figure emptying my neighbour's latrine bucket, just four metres from my window. His movements were steady and almost soundless. He poured the contents of the bucket in his own container and then cleaned the bucket with a cutlass and a broom. He put the bucket back in its place, closed the little door, lifted the container on his head and walked into the night.

Most houses in the town did not have their own toilet. Their inhabitants depended on public toilets or found other solutions, such as the school latrines or the bush on their way to the farm. About one third of the houses had a private toilet, most of which were so-called bucket latrines. In 1996 the sanitary inspector estimated their number at sixty.

Most 'buckets' are square wooden containers that are emptied about once a week. A bucket latrine can be inside the house but in such a way that the bucket can be removed from the outside, through a little door at the back of the house. A bucket latrine can also be built as a separate wooden shed a few metres from the house. Users of the bucket latrine are not allowed to urinate in it, or to throw paper in it, as people are supposed to urinate in the bathroom where the urine is later washed away by the bathing water. The toilet paper is deposited in a basket and someone will burn the paper when the basket is filled up.[4]

Because the bucket is emptied only once a week - or rather, once in six days -, the number of users needs to be limited. Children, for example, can be told to use the public latrine. In several houses where I stayed, access to the key of the bucket latrine was restricted to a few privileged people (including me, though I hardly used that privilege).

It was some years after my nocturnal observation that I met the night-soil collector in daylight. One of my friends, who was also a research assistant, lived close to the

man's house and introduced him to me. I felt uneasy at first, assuming that he would feel uncomfortable about his work and my interest in it, but I was mistaken. Mister Atia, as his name was, took pride in his work and had no inhibitions telling me about it.

He explained that at first, he worked during the day, but people complained about the nuisance, so he started to operate in the night. Usually he began around 11.30 p.m. and continued until 4 or 5 a.m. In that time span he is able to 'do' six or seven buckets. 'Doing' a bucket entails walking approximately one kilometre from the house to a dumping place outside the town. He does not work when the soil is wet and slippery as slipping with such a load on his head would have extremely unpleasant consequences. In fact, one night when we had agreed to accompany him during his round, he cancelled the appointment because the ground was too wet.

Mr. Atia's equipment consisted of a 15 litre bucket, a soiled white shirt, and a sack in which he carries his cutlass, broom, and a hat with a layer of foam rubber (on which the bucket is placed).

We asked him if there were particular risks in the work he was doing. There were. Apart from the heaviness of the load and the danger of falling, he mentioned the roaming of witches in the night. He recounted how he once saw a white image about ninety metres away from him. When the figure spotted him it diverted its course and disappeared in the bush.

To protect himself against both witches and the stench, he used a medicine he called *mɔtɔ*. When I asked him to show it to me, he retrieved from his house a black lump wrapped in paper; it looked like charcoal. I tasted some of it, and the taste too reminded me of charcoal. He told us that he got the *mɔtɔ* from his hometown in Northern Ghana. It did not really protect him against witches, he later explained, but it did prevent him from being afraid.

Later that evening my friend and colleague accompanied him on his nightly tour, while I went to bed. I quote from my friend's notes:

> At 11.25 p.m. exactly, I knocked on his window and he came outside in his 'uniform', a stained white shirt, a sack over his shoulder and a cutlass inside the sack. We went to the first house where his bucket was waiting. He hung the sack over a nearby flower hedge. He opened the door and pulled the full bucket towards him. He then pushed his own empty bucket against the full bucket. I began to feel [smell, svdg] the stench of the *ebin* (shit). Mr. Atia dipped his left hand (without gloves) into the shit of the bucket and scooped some of it into the empty bucket. He did this four times, because the other bucket was too full to lift without spilling. Then he took the full bucket, and poured the contents into his own bucket. He wiped his hand on the grass to clean it and took his small hat with the foam layer from his sack and put it on. He lifted the full bucket from the ground, rested it a moment on his lap and then placed it on his head, with ease. He then started walking to the dumping ground.[5]

A few years later, I interviewed Mr. Atia for the second time and he told me again about the dangers of his work, about witches who disturbed him and about an evil person who tried to stop him. I decided to make a film of the night-soil collector both to capture what I suspected to be a dying profession and to bring into the daylight what was condemned to stay in the dark.

But my attempts to film him during his work at night failed. He did not turn up at the agreed time. I do not know the reason. After he missed the second appointment, we contacted his younger colleague and asked him if we could film him during his work. He agreed but did not turn up either. We then went to his house to call him. He was asleep and grudgingly came out to start the work. He dressed in his working clothes and collected the same tools: a bucket, a torch, a broom and a cutlass. There was now an intense stench of faeces about him, which I had never noticed during the day. He was conscious of this and felt uneasy about our presence. When I walked next to him he asked me to keep some distance because of the bad smell. I said I did not mind and he slowly became more at ease with us.

We accompanied and filmed him on two trips from houses where he collected the night soil from the latrine bucket to the edge of the town where he poured the contents of his bucket into the bush behind the public latrine. His operations, carried out in dead silence and very cautiously in order not to disturb anyone, resembled the work of a burglar. Neither want to be seen or heard.

For the night-soil collectors, the night was first of all a kind of exile. People in Kwahu-Tafo would not tolerate them doing this work in broad daylight. Human faeces need to remain invisible and insmellable, in fact, imperceptible to any human sense. Only the night, when people (are supposed to) sleep, meets that condition. But the night also provides them with protection against humiliation and prying eyes. As the Ghanaian anthropologist Kodjo Senah commented in a personal comment, 'the night gives them double-blind protective cover.'

Sleeping

Sleeping in Kwahu-Tafo is an activity in which I have 'participated' for many years. However, most of my sleeping was non-participatory, for it prevented me from observing how others slept.

There were also many occasions, however, on which I did witness other people's sleep. One such occasion, which I also described in an article on sleeping (Van der Geest 2006), presented itself in the night that I filmed the night-soil collector during his nocturnal labour. Before we went to see the collector, I visited with two Ghanaian friends in the room of one of them. A curtain divided the room into two. Behind the curtain was a double bed. I saw two pairs of feet, motionless, sticking out from behind the curtain. Two boys, brothers, about 14 and 16 years old, were lying flat on their stomach, fully dressed in their regular street clothes. They were not covered by any sheet or cloth. Their feet were quite dirty. Yet they seemed fast asleep and were not disturbed by our loud conversation. The environment of their sleep was hardly different from that of their activities during the day; their clothes, the noise, the room, and the light were all similar. There had been practically no transition from being awake to being asleep. Yet, the boys were sound asleep. The question posed itself: how did they manage to sleep?

Unlike the previous three 'cases' (*bayie*, sex and waste removal), sleeping does not have clear moral implications or associations. It is regarded as the normal thing to do

during the night. It is a neutral 'activity', one could say, but indispensable for a fruitful next day. It is one of the behind-the-scenes phenomena that makes possible that which takes place on the stage during daytime.

Sleeping is not a cultural no-man's land, however. It is first of all an art, a body technique, to use Mauss' felicitous term, which has to be learnt. An 'unsleepable' position or situation for one person may be perfectly 'sleepable' for another. One of the most striking things I found about sleeping in Kwahu-Tafo was the thin line between sleeping and being awake. Most people do not pass through elaborate rituals nor do they completely change their environment in order to acquire a sound sleep. Often, there is hardly a clear transition to sleeping: the sleeper remains fully dressed, music and noisy conversation continue and the light remains on. Children may just fall asleep in the midst of their activities and be brought to the bed. In that case they do not even move to another location to find sleep.

My participant observation in sleeping taught me how differently my body had been trained in the art of sleeping. One of my most remarkable experiences while sleeping was indeed the noise of radios and of people engaging in a loud conversation right under my window in the middle of the night. No one seemed disturbed by it. Noisy religious activities were particularly popular during the night. Around 4 a.m. on Sunday mornings I often heard a man loudly urging people to come to church. No one complained about his disturbance.

It is true, the night is the favourite time to sleep, but is does not have a monopoly on sleeping. People may sleep at any time during the day, in any kind of position. In that sense too, day and night seem to flow into each other. Sometimes, the nights in Kwahu-Tafo are as sleepless and busy as the nights in Amsterdam. The next section gives an impression of the busy-ness of Kwahu-Tafo nights.

School essays

In order to get a broader and less idiosyncratic picture of nocturnal culture, I asked students in two classes of the local senior secondary school to write a composition about activities in the night. I present the outcome of that exercise here to position my own experiences within those of a larger group of young inhabitants.

When I invited the students to write about their views of the night, I added that they should explain why those particular activities took place at night and not in the day. I admit, I was sceptical about this part of my research, as students in school rarely feel free to write down what they privately think or have experienced. The setting of the school makes frankness risky. Nevertheless, their observations and the type of activities they described were revealing. Below a list of nightly activities that were mentioned at least three times.

Visiting bar or disco / dancing	25
Watching TV or cinema	14
Food selling	8
Children roaming in the street	6

Stealing	6
Dating	5
Evening studies	5
Rituals in local shrine	5
Reading in library	4
Story-telling	3
Work of police/watchmen	3
Sleeping	3
Wake-keeping during funeral	3
Gambling	3
Socializing with friends	3

The thrill of visiting a bar and dancing is by far the most common association of the students with the night. Seven of these 25 essays referred to a recent dance competition organized by the chief, which was not related to a bar. The drinking bar, like the cinema, stands for relaxation and entertainment. One student wrote:

> During the night people attend disco, cinema and other video centres to entertain themselves. All work and no play make Jack a dull boy, so during the night, visits to these places remove the stress and also refresh their minds for the next day's activities [with slight grammatical corrections].

But the bar or disco is also the favourite place for romantic encounters and dating (or 'chasing girls' as some students termed it). However, only five out of 44 students explicitly mentioned dating and lovemaking. I suspect that writing their essay, while a teacher was watching them (in spite of my request to leave), was not conducive to dwelling on romantic subjects. Moreover, it meant bringing to the daylight what is supposed to stay in the night. One girl wrote:

> At night some guys use the chance to chase girls and others play all those things that are not done in the afternoon when there are many people in town and there is no darkness so that people can see everywhere you go. There is a saying that the night is lovely [grammar slightly corrected].[6]

Only one – male – student was brave enough to write about his own sexual activity during the night (or was he boasting?):

> First thing we did was to go for a disco. We saw so many beautiful girls in the disco. They went and made a proposal on my behalf to one of the girls. In fact, everything succeeded and they asked me to take the girl to one *ghetto* [dark place]. I did enjoy with the girl, like having sex with her. We then came back. On our way back we saw so many young boys who are not in the range of eighteen but get being in darkness with the girls in [of] their own age [not corrected].

Watching TV and cinema came second in the list above. 'Cinema' usually is a video film played on a TV screen in a closed-off house compound, for which spectators, mostly children and youngsters between twelve and eighteen, pay a small entrance fee. Most students commented that TV and films are watched in the night because people have no time during the day:

> People in town have to spend their time during the day at workplaces, for instance students have to go to school […] farmers have to go to their various farms […] teachers also have to go to school to teach […] Because of these work opportunities they come home late in the night,[7] and they have to relax their body in order to reserve extra energy for another day's work. So they take that opportunity to watch television, while some also watch films [with minor corrections].

These activities during the night naturally attract food sellers, as eight students remarked. Some students mentioned an additional reason for the nightly food selling: two types of food *must* be eaten during the night.

> White kenkey[8] and porridge [local name *koko*] are sold during the night because the traditional belief in Kwahu-Tafo purports that these two are supposed to be eaten in the night…. So sellers take the advantage to prepare these foods in the night [with minor corrections].[9]

The above quotes illustrate what many students believe: that certain activities take place during the night because there is no time for them during the day. At the same time, however, they depict the night as exciting and 'sweet'; it is tinged with the extra attraction that goes with 'forbidden fruits'. One of them sums up both the sweetness and danger very well. It may not be an accurate account of his own nocturnal experiences, but it probably does reflect the popular imagery of night life in a rural town like Kwahu-Tafo:

> *Anadwo yɛ dɛ* [the night is sweet], as people say, is true and for that matter during the night people take their wives, friends and relatives to entertainment centres and have fun to relieve them of boredom and also discuss challenges confronting them and also find solutions to them. To cut it short, Kwahu-Tafo township becomes very attractive, educative, entertaining and exciting during the night. Everything has its positive and negative aspects and I must say that during the night, deviant behaviour like stealing, smoking of herbs (wee), fornications, drinking and all sorts of unnecessary things do happen. This is because the streetlights are not functioning well and this leads to the place becoming darker and darker. This has lead to some people sleeping as early as 7 pm to avoid being attacked by armed robbers and also wild animals [not corrected].

Nocturnal fieldwork

Studying things of the night does not always imply that the research took place in the night. Contrary to their claims of participant observation, most of what anthropologists write about the night they know from hearsay or circumstantial evidence. Most

of my own research is a case in point. Sociologists (like some anthropologists) usually work from 9 to 5, Nijhof (2001) writes. They spend the evening at home and the night in their bed. He (Nijhof) was no exception, till he fell seriously ill and had to stay for a long time in the hospital, days and nights. It opened his eyes to the terror of the long and sleepless night and convinced him that good research should include both day and night.[10]

Nijhof's illness drove him into the night of the hospital, not as a researcher but as a patient who could not help but remain in his researcher role. For researchers who are not 'insiders,' the night may remain a hard-to-access domain. In most cases the night is a period of ultimate privacy, when outsiders are kept outside. But even in places where the night has a more public character, such as institutions like hospitals or in bars or on the streets, an outsider's presence and direct observation may be difficult, because it is considered objectionable, unethical or dangerous. Vogler (2006), who did research in a refugee camp in Thailand, wrote that the aid workers discouraged her from visiting the camp at night. The night separated 'refugees from diurnal actors such as humanitarian aid workers and clerical staff' (Vogler 2006: 3).

In my case, most of my nocturnal data was also derived from hearsay and indirect evidence, i.e. writing about fire by seeing the ashes. Sometimes it did not even occur to me that I should leave my bed and go out in the night. Other times, I thought that my presence would be too obtrusive and I remained in bed. I can only agree with Steger and Brunt (2002) who remarked that the practice of social science research still has a strong die-centric bias. Anthropologists suffer night blindness.

Interesting exceptions confirm that conclusion. For Imtiaz Saikh, who carried out research into sexual practices in the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka, the night was a welcome cover. Apart from the fact that his topic was mainly observable during the night, he himself did not want to be seen by students or acquaintances visiting brothels and pornographic film shows (personal communication).

Another, rather impressive, example of a nocturnal fieldworker is Eric de Rosny (1974, 1981, 1986) who studied 'les maitres de nuit', healers in Douala, Cameroon, who treat patients suffering from the work of witches. Illnesses of the night can only be treated effectively in the night. De Rosny decided he had no other choice but to stay awake and join the healers during their nocturnal work.

Concluding

If it is darkness that makes the night, truly night, we must conclude that the eye is the sense that determines what should take place at night. To be seen or not to be seen, that is the question for the night. Moral and emotional experiences pass through seeing and being seen. What is not seen, falls outside the realm of moral judgment. But is there anything that is not seen by anybody? Most of daily life in Kwahu Tafo occurs in the open. Neighbours see and hear what happens next door. 'Everything that is done has its witness [is seen by somebody]' (*adedi mu wɔ adanse*), a proverb explains. The night offers an escape from that permanent visibility. Even if it does not produce complete invisibility, it provides space for the pretension of invisibility.

During the night the rule is that we do not seen what we see.

When I first came to Kwahu-Tafo in 1969, the night was much darker than it is today. There was no electricity. One bar and the Catholic mission had a generator. Every night young people and a few older ones assembled in front of the bar with generator that played loud Highlife music for the enjoyment of the crowd. Some danced, everybody conversed and women and children sold snacks, tea and other items. The bar itself remained empty except for the weekend and, especially, during funerals. At ten the music stopped, the lights went off and the crowd dispersed into the dark.

That thick cover of darkness is no more there; electricity has arrived. The diminution of darkness has not diminished nightlife, however. On the contrary, the music lasts longer and more people linger at more places that are enveloped in music.[11]

As I remarked before, the darkness of the night should not be taken in a literal sense. Its cover has first of all a symbolic and moral character. The division between day and night is a 'division of labour'; different things may or should be done in daytime and at night. Doing the things of the night in broad daylight is not only risky, it is also disrespectful.

The work of the night-soil collector is the clearest example. Carrying human faeces through the town in daytime would be outrageous, an extreme case of 'matter out of place'. The collector needs to be eclipsed into the night, together with his cargo. Those who meet him in the night have no reason to complain; the night is the collector's territory. The next day, when he goes around collecting his money from the houses he visited in the night, he is another person, a man of the day. Nothing reminds the daytime people of his nightly connections. His clothes and equipment and the smell have all been left behind, hidden in the night.

The love-makers appear into the day as if nothing has happened, dissimulating the pleasures of the night. Secret lovers sneak home before the day breaks and rise an hour later for the second time. They take their bath and wash away the sweat and excitement of the night before they start the new day.

And the witches, like the secret lovers, resume their regular position in bed before the others wake up and would notice their absence.

Nightlife stands apart from, even opposes day-life, but the two are also intricately linked to one another (cf. Schnepel 2006, Schnepel & Ben Ari 2005). Corbin (2000: 13) remarked that the history of daytime Paris would be unintelligible if we did not know Paris by night. Vogler (2006: 19) is clear and specific in her conclusions about nocturnal research in the refugee camp where she worked:

> I am convinced that more explorations of refugees' nocturnal livelihood and coping strategies might reveal important information in at least three regards. First, research on refugees' social lives after dark would enhance our understanding of the social and cultural life of their communities, thus correcting simplistic imagery of refugees using the night merely for sleep and sexual intercourse. Second, an exploration of the nighttime in camps and settlements would decidedly improve assessments of security problems and help identify and improve existing coping strategies employed by refugees. Finally, this research suggests that a focus on nocturnal stress factors would deepen our comprehension of refugees' livelihood provision.

The night is what the coulisses are for the theatre. They are indispensable for the actors to perform the play. What takes place off stage – to borrow Goffman's term – makes the on-stage performance possible, either as preparation or as a reversal, a temporary release from the day's tyrannical moral hygiene.

Returning to my question about why there was so much night in my fieldwork over the past forty years, I can only conclude that my interest in what takes place behind the scenes (cf. Bleek 1978) could not but lead me into the night; the night as the coulisses of the day.

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Notes

* I want to thank Anthony Obeng Boamah, Patrick Atuobi, Kodjo Senah, Daniel Arhinful, the editors of Etnofoor and Sera Young for their help and inspiring comments.

1 Scnepel (2006: 125-126)) provides a long list of negative/positive associations with night/day, but also emphasises the existence of positive meanings of the night.

2 Wolf Bleek is a pseudonym I used for my first publications on witchcraft and sexual relationships to protect the identity of my informants (see Van der Geest 2003).

3 It was mainly functionalist descriptions of African kinship that painted the harmonious picture. Even though conflicts and witchcraft accusations received much attention in these studies, they were treated as harmony in disguise. Eventually, the authors argued, these conflicts and accusations contributed to the functioning of the family system. I was, however, rather struck by the destruction that witchcraft caused in the lives of lineage members.

4 The night-soil collector and the bucket latrine are the main subjects of a separate article (Van der Geest 2002) where more details can be found.

5 Derived from Van der Geest (2002).

6 I do not think the student intended 'love-ly' in its double meaning.

7 The student first wrote 'late in the evening' but realizing that the composition was about the night she changed 'evening' into 'night.'

8 Kenkey is food prepared from fermented ground white corn or maize and wrapped in cornhusks or plantain leaves and cooked.

9 I have looked for more information about this 'taboo' without much success. Daniel Arhinful wrote to me: 'One reason why these meals are sold in the evening may be that people consider them as light meals if there is a need for meals at night. Secondly, they are easy to package and taken away if need be and very convenient to eat when one feels hungry'.

10 To illustrate the importance of night time research: One quarter more babies that are born in Dutch hospitals die during the night (when most doctors and nurses are asleep) than during the day (Visser & Steegers 2008).

11 The increased activity at night made possible by electric light is analogous to developments that took place after the 'invention' of fire, as described by Goudsblom (1992: 55-58, 241-243). Fire, he wrote, created 'enclaves of warmth and light' and extended people's time.

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Akan shit

Getting rid of dirt in Ghana

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To Mike Warren, who died on 28 December 1997 at the age of 53. He started his anthropological career with research among the Bono people of Ghana. He would have enjoyed this rumination.

There is a peculiar paradox in the Akan culture of Ghana. It has to do with people's manner of dealing with human faeces. On the one hand, they are extremely concerned with cleanliness and removing dirt from their bodies. On the other hand, the way they actually get rid of human waste is so inefficient that they are continuously confronted with what they most detest: filth, in particular, faeces.

If the Akan proverb that the stranger is like a child (*òhòhoò te sè abofra*) is true, it certainly applies to my interest in Akan shit. As a child in its anal phase, I have been fascinated by toilets and faeces ever since I set foot on Ghanaian soil in 1969.

At that time, I had found a room in the house of a teacher in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of about five thousand people in the southeastern part of the country. I explained to my host that I wanted to take part in everything and asked him to introduce me to his way of life, which he did meticulously. The morning after my first night in his house he took me to the public latrine. People prefer to go to the toilet early in the morning so it was rush hour. About ten people were waiting outside. When it was my turn I entered the place. A penetrating stench hit me in the face. The floor was littered with used paper. Squatting people stared at me. I felt terribly uncomfortable, walked past them and left the place. I told my host that I did not have the urge, which was very true. I never returned to the place. I asked an American missionary with a real water closet if I could use his facility.

Altogether I have stayed more than three years in Kwahu-Tafo. I have tried to practise participant observation to the letter, as an anthropologist should, but visiting the toilet has remained my major weakness. In 1994, when I revisited the town to conduct research among elderly people, I settled in the house of someone who had his own latrine. I asked him if I could use it and he generously gave me a key saying that I should not give it to anybody. The use of this toilet was a privilege. Only some grown-ups and his own children had access to it.

There were good reasons to restrict the number of people using his toilet. The bucket, which was emptied once a week, would soon be full and the place would become a mess. I discovered the place *was* a mess, at least in my eyes. Several times I found the bucket overflowing. Flies loved the place as did chickens who entered through holes in the door and the walls. The ever-present pieces of used paper, either tissue or newspapers in all languages, added to my repulsion. Separating the faeces and the paper is a general feature in Akan toilet culture. The paper is deposited in a separate bucket, basket or tin, but the wind, animals and careless people cause much of the paper to end up somewhere else, both in the toilet and in its immediate surroundings. A few times I saw my landlord or someone else from his compound burning the paper.

At that time, in 1994, I brought a Ghanaian sociology student with me to the field as a research assistant. He stayed in the room next to mine and I felt I had to show solidarity with him concerning toilet use. I thought I could not ask the priests at the Catholic mission if I might bring another customer to their toilet. That situation gave a new impulse to my determination to overcome my toilet phobia and become a more complete participant.

It did not last very long. I soon started to cheat on my assistant and secretly use the priests' toilet. I cleverly combined occasional visits to the Catholic mission with visits to their toilet. My bowels cooperated, which again shows to what extent natural urges can be tamed to obey social and cultural conditions. As soon as I approached the priests' place, I felt the urge coming.

I never revealed my unfaithfulness to my research assistant. I felt too uneasy about it. It was indeed a serious breach of confidence which, I feared, would damage our relationship and the work. He, too, did not like the landlord's toilet and started to visit the toilet of the Technical School, a walk of about ten minutes. So again toilet use disappeared from my participant observation but it made the phenomenon the more intriguing. After all, we are most attracted to the things which continue to elude us.

If there is anything dirty in Mary Douglas' sense of the term, it is human faeces. In my own culture, their place is in a 'no man's land', a territory unseen and untouched by human beings. Human faeces are hygienically handled by technical devices which make them disappear almost immediately, first under water, then underground. They leave no trace, not even their smell.

Only the faeces of small children are an exception. They are allowed to stay a bit longer above the ground and even pass through human hands, mostly those of their mothers, although cleverly designed diapers make it more and more possible to avoid contact with children's faeces as well. In general, one could say, however, that the faeces of children are less 'dirty' than those of older people.

The faeces of sick and elderly people who have become incontinent or cannot visit the toilet are more problematic. They require professional treatment. The fact that we need a special category of workers, nurses, to deal with that type of faeces confirms that they are really dirty. By assigning a profession to remove them, we make sure that they remain far from everyday life. They are restricted as much as possible to certain places and handled by 'specialists'. The system seems to work.

It does not work in Kwahu-Tafo and I assume in most other places in Ghana. In itself, this is not surprising. There are more things in Ghana which do not work very well: schools, hospitals, trains and electricity. Some roads are bad and some factories do not function

Note on transliteration
The Twi character Ɛ has been printed here as *è*, and as *ò*.

Warren, D.M. 1974. *Disease, medicine and religion among the Techiman-Bono of Ghana: A study in cultural change*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International.

well. These problems, some say, are mainly due to poverty and 'under-development'. Poor sewage and a defective toilet system in particular, one could argue, are caused by the same problems. Nevertheless there is also reason for surprise. That they have not developed a more efficient system of getting rid of faeces is puzzling if one takes into account their concern about dirt.

Dirt is a key concept in the Akan perception of the human being. Dirt is something unwanted, something one should get rid of. Ideas about dirt and cleanliness pervade the entire culture. There are several terms which refer to dirt. *Efi* is dirt which, according to some, comes from outside and attaches to the body, to clothes, to objects, or to a house. It has a temporary character. A man coming from his farm is dirty (*ne ho ayè fi* or *ne ho wò fi*) because of the work he has been doing. It is not his habit to be dirty. A child playing in the mud is dirty, as is a yard which has not been swept.

Atantaneè (lit. nasty or hateful things) is dirt which is more detestable. Most people use the term for dirt coming from inside the body: vomit, phlegm, menstruation blood, urine or faeces. When a latrine is dirty with human faeces, people say: *Èhò yè tan* (lit. there is nasty). *Pòtoo* (dirty) can refer to both types of dirt, from inside and from outside the body. A very deprecatory term is *oburu ne ho* (he is dirty; lit. his body is fermenting) or *oburu ne fie* (lit. she lets her house ferment). Such a person is called *obufoò*, a habitually dirty person.

As in most languages, terms of 'dirt' assume much wider meanings. They are metaphorically applied to social, moral and esthetic phenomena. Dirty = ugly = unattractive = nasty = bad = uncivilized = shameful = not respected. Examples from Christaller's Twi dictionary illustrate this: *Efi aka no* (lit. dirt has stuck to him) means that someone has defiled himself morally, for example by committing evil or breaking a taboo. *Ne yere de fi abèka no* (lit. his wife has brought dirt to stick to him) means that his wife has disgraced him. *Efi*, someone said, spoils things; it makes one vomit. So *efi* produces *efi*.

Atantaneè is made from the root *tan* which means ugly. Someone commented that it pains the eye when one looks at it. *Tan* is also the term for 'to hate'. Hateful, nasty, shameful, they are one and the same thing. If someone has the habit of being dirty, people say *Ommu ne ho* (lit. he does not respect himself). Telling someone that he is dirty is a serious offence. Warren (1974:80) cites fourteen such abuses in his study about the Bono Akan. The last one is the most interesting: 'You stink like the armpit of a white man' (*Wo ho bòn sè oburoni motomu*).

The strong emphasis on the different use of the right and the left hand shows the same concern about dirt. The left hand is reserved for 'dirty' activities, such as cleaning oneself after using the toilet, holding the penis while urinating, cleaning dirty things (e.g. a chamber pot), blowing one's nose, etc. Even in love-making, someone revealed to me, he switched from the right to the left hand when he touched 'unclean' parts of the body of his partner. It was an 'automatic' reaction.

Conversely, cleanliness (*ahoteè*) is the pre-eminent metaphor to express positive appreciation. Clean = beautiful = attractive = good = civilised = respectable. The most common term referring to being clean is *te*, which means 'to be open' or 'to be clear'. *Èhò te* (lit. there is open) must be understood to mean that the place is clear, free from unwanted things, dirt. *Ne ho te* (lit. his/her body is clear) is a compliment saying that the person is beautiful, attractive. In Ghanaian English, the expression 'she is neat' is almost synonymous with 'she is pretty', with the connotation that she is also beautiful in a moral sense, 'pure'. The connection with respect is always present. Cleanliness engenders respect and expresses it. *Odi ne ho ni* means 'he respects himself' as well as 'he keeps himself clean'. Another term for being clean is *pò*, which literally means 'to rub', 'to scrape'. *Wapò*, he has scraped (himself), refers to someone who is neat, polished, in the sense of civilized.

In summary, bodily cleanliness stands for physical and moral attractiveness, whereas dirt symbolises physical and moral decay. Dirt, or rather the abhorrence of it, plays a central role in the local 'anthropology'. To say that someone is dirty, is almost a rejection of the whole person. Cleanliness of the body (the skin, the orifices, the teeth, the nails) and cleanliness with regard to housekeeping, clothing, or one's children, constitutes a basic condition for a person's attractiveness. Physical beauty and sexual attraction are commonly explained in terms of cleanliness.

Constipation

Dirt also takes a central place in the explanation of sickness. Almost half of all disease causations collected by Warren (1974:317-18) among another Akan group are related to dirt. People are very concerned with avoiding dirt in order to stay healthy. One should cover food to protect it against flies and other dirt from outside. One should wash one's utensils, sweep away dirt which will attract insects, clean the containers in which water is stored, wash one's clothes regularly, and so on. A pure body, neatly dressed, in a clean house, stands for a healthy person. Warren (1974:320): 'Daily bathing is very important... and at least two baths a day are taken, one prior to beginning the day's business and one prior to retiring at night. Babies are bathed more frequently. Clothing is kept very clean and washed and ironed frequently.'

The presence of dirt *in* the body is seen as the most important cause of sickness. If one does not go to the toilet every day and one allows faeces to remain in the body for too long, it is thought that the dirt starts to ferment and heat as in a dunghill. It may affect the blood and spread throughout the body and then try to break out of the body in other ways. Boils for example are seen as the result of dirt, and so are piles, ulcers, excessive phlegm, headaches and skin rashes.

Constipation, therefore, is a very general health problem and a typical 'culture-bound syndrome'. People start using laxatives as soon as they have 'missed' a day of going to the toilet. Enemas, too, are busily used and have become part of popular self-medication. Mothers preparing and applying herbal enemas to their babies were a common sight in some of the compounds where I stayed. When I discuss this with friends and tell them that I never think of constipation, and that, never in my whole life have I had an enema, not even taken a laxative, they are greatly surprised. I hear *them* constantly complain of constipation.

All this brings me back to the initial question: If Akan people are so concerned about dirt, and faeces in particular, why don't they have a more efficient and cleaner system for removing dirt? Voilà, the dirt paradox, the hygienic puzzle.

Sanitation in Kwahu-Tafo

There are four public toilets, each with twelve squatting holes (six for each sex), in Kwahu-Tafo. Two of them have been closed, one for about three years and one four months ago, both due to maintenance problems. It

means just 24 public facilities for the entire town. (While I am writing these lines, I hear that one of the remaining toilets has been closed as well, because it is full. Twelve toilets for 5,000 people...). It also means that some people have to walk about 15 minutes to reach a public toilet (to and fro thirty minutes).

In addition there are semi-public toilets in two schools, which can be used by both teachers and pupils. The number of private latrines (almost all bucket latrines) is unknown. The sanitary inspector estimates their number at sixty. Finally, there are about ten private pit latrines and ten water closets, one in the chief's house, the others in the Catholic mission and the teachers' bungalows of the Technical School.

It is impossible to say how many people are in fact using the public toilets. Estimates vary from one third to 80 per cent of the population, which in absolute figures would be 1,500 to more than 4,000. Unknown is also the number of people who don't use toilets at all but are easing themselves in the 'bush' at the edge of town or on the way to their farm. Some people defecate into a plastic bag and dump their faeces with the bag somewhere out of sight. If we take a conservative estimate of 40 per cent, it means that every day about 2,000 people use 24 holes, almost ninety per hole per day. Taking into account that both toilets are closed from about 9 p.m. to 5 a.m., one can conclude that the holes are occupied every five minutes. On the average both public latrines would receive about one thousand visitors per day. When I discussed this with the caretaker of one of the latrines he estimated a number of only about two to three hundred. He based his calculation on his income per day. Whatever the exact number, it is not surprising that there are queues early in the morning as most people prefer to ease themselves before they start the day.

I asked several people why they preferred to go to the toilet early in the morning in spite of the inconvenience of having to wait in rather unpleasant circumstances. According to some, the preference for the early morning hour has to do with their dislike of dirt. They want to start the day with a 'clean slate' so that they don't have to worry about it any more during the rest of the day. After using the toilet they take their bath and are clean. Another consideration is that the food one takes in the evening is digested during the night. As one lady said, 'Before you put in new food it is better to take the old one out'.

For elderly people the way to the public toilet seems particularly painful. It may be far and the conditions do not befit their status of respected elder. Most elders therefore use a private latrine, either in their own house or in that of a kind neighbour. They are also likely to avoid the morning rush hour if they have to go to the public toilet.

People ignore each other on the way to the toilet. Greetings are withheld; a remarkable phenomenon in a culture where one could – and some do – fill the day with greeting people. Ignoring each other seems an effective proxemic device to reduce the unpleasant presence of others, not very different from the way people in my society ignore each other in crowded places like the tram and metro. People themselves have another explanation for not greeting one another on the way to the toilet: 'If you greet someone, the person may ask you a question and another question and delay you "too much". You may get in trouble and disgrace yourself.'

A more plausible interpretation of the silence on the way to the toilet was provided by an anonymous reader of this essay. A 'very distinguished Akan scholar' had once told him that, when he was a resident in an Oxford college, 'he found it almost impossible to force himself to respond to friendly greetings from fellow students as he crossed the quad to the loo in the morning. He had to prepare himself for what for him was a cultural ordeal. An Akan can tell from the way a walker holds his cloth if he is socially visible, i.e. shat and bathed, or invisible, i.e. belly full and unwashed.'

Visiting a public toilet is not 'free'. The caretaker of the toilet takes twenty cedis (about one U.S. cent) from each visitor. In that way the old coins which have lost nearly all their value are still useful (the same amount is charged for a bucket of water from the public tap). Today I visited the only toilet which was functioning. The caretaker was a man who had taken the place of his sister who usually did the job, but who had gone to farm. He was sitting in a small kiosk and had a pile of cut newspapers in front of him. He handed each customer one sheet and received twenty cedis. If they brought their own paper, he said, they would pay only ten cedis. Each day he had to pay 3,000 cedis to the sanitary inspector. He could keep what he earned above that amount. Funerals and other busy days were golden times for him. The closure of the other latrine also should have been a great advantage, but I did not notice that the traffic was very busy, perhaps because it was approaching ten in the morning.

The sanitary situation was much better than I remembered from my 1969 experience. The place was relatively clean. The caretaker inspected the place several times a day and cleaned it when necessary. When we went around we saw one hole that was really filthy. He apologised and said he would clean it immediately. The paper was burned right at the entrance.

The sanitary and cultural conditions surrounding the private bucket toilet also deserve our attention. I suspect that the earlier description of my landlord's private latrine also applies to many other ones in the town, although neither I nor anyone else ever conducted a systematic survey of them. For 800 cedis a month (about half one US dollar) the buckets are emptied every week. That sometimes buckets overflow may be due to the fact that the owner failed to pay his monthly dues or that the work force cannot cope with their task. The buckets are emptied in the night by a man from the North. Formerly these workers came from Sierra Leone and Liberia. That is why they are still called *Krufoò* (Kru people). *Krufoò* earn 50,000 cedis, about US$30 per month, according to the sanitary inspector. I suspect that they get some extra rewards from the different houses they serve, but my informant declined to talk about this.

No Akan native of the town would ever think of performing this kind of dirty and poorly paid work Neither would they be willing to do this work if it were well paid. ('Even if they paid me ten times as much.') The work is extremely unpleasant. The *Kruni* carries a container on his head in which he empties the bucket. He has a broom to clean the bucket and a lantern to find his way. The bucket is behind a small door on the outside of the house. He has to carry the container for a long distance to a dumping place on the outskirts of the town.

The *Krufoò* are literally 'people of the night'. They are the personification of the Akan horror of shit and have to make themselves and their load invisible. Just opposite the window of the room where I am now staying is the bucket of the neighbour. Once a week I wake up when the *Kruni* comes to empty the bucket,

not because of the noise he makes – he moves as silently as a mouse – but because of the stench drifting into my room.

It is unlikely that there will be any *Krufoò* in the near future. Those who are doing the work are getting old and no one wants the job any more. Their children attend school and have other ambitions. I heard the story of a *Kruni* in a nearby town whose son was in university. He asked his father to stop the work, but the old man replied: 'My son, this is the work I have always been doing. With the money of it I sent you to school. I have only a few years to go, so let me continue the work.' In Kwahu-Tafo there is only one *Kruni* who can hardly cope with the work. He is getting old and there is no successor.

The backstage of a hospital

In 1991 I was admitted to a hospital in the capital, Accra. I had severe diarrhoea and was becoming dehydrated. They put me on a drip, but I was still going to the toilet almost every hour. That's how I got to know a less known area of the hospital, something which Goffman has termed 'backstage', an area which is not supposed to be seen.

The ward was the front stage, fit for visitors (and doctors). A door led to the backstage, a corridor with several 'bathrooms'. The toilets were in terrible condition. The floor was flooded with a mixture of water and urine. The toilets did not flush. Used toilet paper had to be deposited in a rusty bucket without a lid. The flies were many and concentrated their attention on the paper in the bucket. I knew my disease was extremely contagious and figured that more patients would soon suffer from the same problem as me.

Meanwhile a female doctor in Kente cloth, decorated with a golden necklace and bracelets, was making her rounds on the front stage. It was a Sunday. She looked very clean, neat and beautiful. I realised the absurdity of her cleanliness in this place where the filth of the sanitary conditions probably made many people sicker than when they first arrived. I wondered how someone trained in the science of hygiene could tolerate such conditions. I could think of only one explanation: she and all her colleagues refused to think about it. She never entered the backstage with its dirt and also forbade her thoughts to visit the place. Her beautifully groomed presence indicated that she had succeeded in creating an area where dirt could have no place.

The language of shit

'Shit' is a common exclamation in English as are its equivalents in French, German, Russian, Polish, Spanish and several other languages. In my own language Dutch, the English 'shit' is commonly used by the younger generation to express feelings of disappointment, irritation, but also of surprise. It is not a serious term of abuse: after all, human faeces are not detested as much as in Ghana. We have dealt with them in a very efficient way, they are made to disappear smoothly out of our midst, so we don't mind so much if they make a reappearance in our language. We are not worried, they don't threaten our lives.

In Kwahu-Tafo, it is different. It is very dirty and abusive to use the Akan equivalents. If someone says '*Ebin*' (shit), it expresses an extreme measure of disapproval. The word is as taboo as the thing itself. Abuses containing 'shit' are so bad that I find it almost impossible to write them here. *Mene wo so* (I shit on you), *Meta wo so* (I fart on you) or worst of all: *Mene w'anom* (I shit into your mouth). Yet you hear them often, because there is a lot of shouting and noisy fighting in the town and people look for the most offensive terms to use against one another. I heard my neighbour 'shitting into someone's mouth' yesterday when a violent quarrel erupted in the house. Even mothers, who love their children very much, at times scold them in the most offensive terms, using the above abuses.

Euphemisms for going to the toilet (which in itself is metonymic for going to shit) are used in all languages. We have the 'bathroom', the 'geography of the house' and many other indirect references in English. We have them also in my own language, Dutch. At the same time I should stress that it is not over rough or impolite to mention the activity directly. '*Ik ga poepen*' is fairly common and can be used in the family context. '*Ik ga schijten*' (I am going to shit) is a bit rough but acceptable among relatives, friends or close colleagues.

It is different in Twi, the language of the Akan. *Merekò ne* (I am going to shit) does not sound nice at all. Very close friends may say it in a joking way. I have never heard it being used in a normal context. Only euphemistic expressions, are employed such as *Merekò baabi so* (I am going to a place), *Merekò dua so* (I am going up the tree; referring to the old toilet of tree stems over a deep hole), *Merekò gya m'anan* (I am going to leave my leg), and *Merekò tiafi* (I am going to the small house) which are the most common ones. Less common are *Merefa kwan* (I am going to take the road), *Merekò yi mmirekuo mma* (I am going to remove/catch the *mmirekuo*, birds in the bush), *Merekò to abaa* (I am going to throw a stick), *Merekò efi kèseè* (I am going to the big house). The person who gave me all these idioms did not include the term he used himself when, after so much talking on the subject, his bowels wanted to join the conversation and he had to rush to the toilet in the Technical School, about ten minutes away. He said: *Merekò block* (I am going to the block). Two days later he said: *Merekò school aba* (I am going to school and will soon be back). Some expressions are mostly used by the younger generation: *Merekò ntòmò* (meaning obscure), *Merekò hu mu* (I am going to blow inside) and *Merekòtwa me to* (I am going to cut my bottom).

I remember at least one proverb which uses 'to shit' (*ne*) shamelessly: *Wo nkoa didi a, wo nkoa ne* (If you eat alone, you shit alone). Someone explained to me that formerly it was not a pleasure to go out in the night to visit the toilet way out in the bush. There could be wild animals or witches. It was better to have some company. The fact that *ne* is used in a proverb does not necessarily mean that the term was less offensive in the past than it is now. The proverb itself is an abuse. The one that uses it is annoyed with the one to whom he directs the saying. He criticizes him, saying that the problem is the consequence of his own 'stupid' mistake.

The proverb refers to a past when getting rid of faeces did not cause great problems. Towns and villages were small, the bush, the other, uninhabitable world, was always nearby. People dug a hole and spread beams over it. It was a convenient, efficient and relatively clean method. They used a corncob (*brodua*) to clean themselves. When the hole was filled up, they closed it and dug a new one.

Why?

I asked Obeng Boamah, one of my research colleagues and my main informant, why people in Kwahu-Tafo, who are so fond of the newest technical devices, use such primitive and defective methods to get rid of their

faeces. Why are there hardly any pit latrines in the town? Why, I asked further, did they give such a low priority to toilet facilities while they were so extremely concerned about dirt and abhorred faeces?

It was poverty in the first place, he answered. People can't afford to build good toilets. 'Bullshit', I replied in English. Even if you are poor you can build a simple and efficient pit latrine next to your house. There were also technical problems, he added. In some places, when you dig a hole, water will enter. In other places rocks prevent you from digging a hole. It still did not answer my question, of course. Why did so many people give the highest priority to getting rid of bodily waste, and the lowest priority to doing it efficiently and cleanly? The 'hygienic puzzle' remained.

I remembered the neat doctor in gold and Kente when I was suffering from diarrhoea. Maybe, I suggested, you are so afraid of shit that you do not only want to remove it from your bowels but also from your heads. You don't want to think about it and you don't even tolerate it near your house. The fact that you have to pass through dirty places and faeces is a consequence which you simply put out of your mind. You don't greet anybody on your way to the place, you pretend nobody sees you and you see nobody. You go silently, as a thief in the night, and forget about it: a mental solution for a very physical problem. After all, the shit paradox is indeed only a paradox, it *appears* to be a contradiction. On closer look, it is perfectly logical. But Boamah was not convinced.

When we finished our conversation he had to rush to 'the block', as I just mentioned. When he returned, he explained that his rush was due to Alafiaa Bitters, a light laxative he had taken. The day before, he had attended a meeting in a nearby town and had not had the opportunity to visit a toilet. Since he often suffered from 'constipation' he had taken the laxative. It reminded me of another inconvenience involving the public toilet. Sitting there with constipation while the crowd waited outside must indeed be uncomfortable, apart from the fact that it is a not pleasant place to dwell. He had never read a book in the public toilet but he does sometimes read a newspaper – or the piece of paper to be used in a moment – because one gets used to everything. □

How chimpanzees have domesticated humans

Towards an anthropology of human–animal communication

DOMINIQUE LESTEL

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Cognitive anthropology examines the linkage between the evolutionary history or phylogenesis of cognition and the history of intelligence. As such it addresses the initial question of the relationships between evolution, cognitions and cultures. If it can be tempted by the simple step of applying cognitive sciences to natural sciences, it can also take on the role of founder discipline in the renewal of the cognitive sciences. From the example of talking apes, I shall try to show how an anthropological approach can refresh a question which beforehand had been considered to be purely psychological; and to throw light on some of the fundamental mechanisms at the interface of cognitive processes and cultural forms of behaviour.

Two ways of conceiving cognitive anthropology

There are two ways of envisaging cognitive anthropology. The first is for the anthropologist to rely on a ready-made field which is available in cognitive psychology. This step supposes that cultural phenomena present a diversity which can be reduced to simple rules, that they derive from cognitive properties intrinsic to human beings, and that bringing these rules and properties to the fore is fully satisfactory as a way of accounting for culture. The search for universals thus becomes central, and ethnoscience represents an ideal to aspire to. Culture is hence considered as a 'value added' to a cognition that one can find by means of a comparativist approach in which the exhaustive elaboration of a lexicon is central. A recent tendency which diverges from this cognitivist approach relativizes the importance of language, and considers that models such as connectionism developed in artificial intelligence are powerful alternatives to explore. Bloch (1991) is a good example of this. This approach is unpersuasive when it claims to do without a notion like that of 'signification', which is traditionally deemed essential in discussions of culture.

A second tendency opts for an independent role for anthropology in the constellation of the cognitive sciences, and refuses to be a sidekick. Inverting the customary perspectives, it plays down the importance of the neurosciences and formal models of cognition, considering that the necessary conditions are rarely sufficient ones. It is not because our cognitive behaviours require a nervous system that its functioning constitutes the ultimate explanation of our activities. The results of the cognitive sciences anchored in the neurosciences concern essentially the cognitive processes at a lower level, for instance, in perception, in the ontogenesis of movement, or in the acquisition of speech (which it is wrong to equate with the acquisition of language). The extension of this approach to more complex cognitive processes is currently practised with variable success, with satisfactory results obtained only from neuropsychology. But the reason for the difficulties encountered is intrinsic and not trivial: the cognitive sciences are incapable of addressing what arises from the generation of meanings. Theoreticians such as Bruner (1990) or Harré (1994) see here a major handicap inhibiting the cognitive sciences, and call for a 'second cognitive revolution' which would restore a central place to narration in the apprehension of the cognitive phenomenon; that is to say, would attribute real importance to the accounts which subjects give of what is happening and with which they construct their own identity. In this

Healthy Bowel Movements in Kwahu-Tafo
A Brief Note

Sjaak van der Geest

Excerpt from an old diary:

Kwahu-Tafo, April 1969. "I wake up from a bleating goat. Dawn, half-light. I hear people outside. A bucket is put on the floor, the handle falls down with a sharp click. Muted voices, a woman calls. Footsteps in front of my door. Cracking wood. People make fire. There is one sound that I can't identify, a monotonous and regular 'zzzz, zzzz, zzzz'. I get up and open the door. In the dusk I see a young girl sweeping the courtyard. She bends herself, left hand on the back. In her right hand a broom without a handle that brushes the earthen yard in large, regular movements. Yesterday's waste is shifted to the centre: banana peels, a rag, balls of paper, a piece of plastic, a broken sandal, spit out pieces of sugar cane, chicken waste, a tin of sardines, an old ballpoint, and a spoon that should not be there. For one moment the rhythm is interrupted, when she picks up the spoon and throws it in the direction of the kitchen. She continues her work, 'zzzz, zzzz, zzzz'. She draws parallel, slightly bent stripes on the soil.

Outside the courtyard silent figures pass, dressed in clothes that are firmly drawn around the neck because of the morning chill. They are on their way to the public toilet, fifty meters further down the road. It's rush hour, but silent. Nobody speaks. On the way to the toilet, people don't greet each other, as I will learn soon. A young boy enters the yard with a bucket on his head and pours some of the water into a pot on the fire. Water for bathing. My first night in Emmanuel Asirifi's house has passed. The day has begun."

The first sounds on my first day in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town in Ghana, are sounds of cleansing. The courtyard is swept, water is collected and put on the fire for a bath and people visit the toilet.

Dirt and Danger

Cleansing is the keyword if we want to write about 'healthy bowel movements in Kwahu-Tafo'. Kwahu-Tafo is the place where I settled for my first anthropological fieldwork many years ago. It is halfway between Accra and Kumasi, on the Kwahu Plateau. The inhabitants, Kwahu people, belong to the about eight million Akan in the country. Cleansing is 'the point'. Dirt is the great enemy. He who wants to stay healthy should remove dirt, from his yard, his house, his kitchen, his body; from the outside but most of all from the inside of his body.

Dirt is a central concept in the Akan culture of Ghana, in its physiology, its pathology, its aesthetics and in its 'sociology'. Dirt is something unwanted, something one should get rid of. There are several terms which refer to dirt. *Efi* is dirt which, according to some, comes from outside and attaches to the body, to clothes,
to objects, or to a house. It has a temporary character. *Efi* is not a serious type of dirt, if one removes it in time. It is not dangerous. *Atantaneè* (lit. nasty or hateful things) is dirt which is more detestable. Most people use this term for dirt coming from inside the body: vomit, phlegm, menstruation blood, urine, or faeces. Human excrement lying somewhere is far more revolting than banana peels or a piece of plastic in the courtyard. *Eho yè tan*, it is disgusting, dangerous (Van der Geest 1998).

As in most languages, terms of 'dirt' assume much wider meanings. They are metaphorically applied to social, moral and aesthetic phenomena. Dirty = ugly = unattractive = nasty = bad = uncivilised = shameful = not respected. Cleanliness (*ahoteè*), on the other hand, is the pre-eminent metaphor to express positive appreciation. Clean = beautiful = attractive = good = civilised = respectable.

Dirt also takes a central place in the explanation of sickness. Almost half of all disease causations collected by Warren (1974: 317-18) among another Akan group are related to dirt.

People are very concerned about avoiding dirt in order to stay healthy. One should cover food to protect it against flies and other dirt from outside. One should wash one's utensils, sweep away dirt which will attract insects, clean the containers in which water is stored, wash one's clothes regularly, and so on. A pure body, neatly dressed, in a clean house, stands for a healthy person. Warren (1974:320): "Daily bathing is very important ... and at least two baths a day are taken, one prior to beginning the day's business and one prior to retiring at night. Babies are bathed more frequently. Clothing is kept very clean and washed and ironed frequently." "*Adware yè oduro*, (Taking a bath is in itself a medicine)", writes the Ghanaian sociologist Yaw Osei (1978: 42).

The presence of dirt *in* the body is seen as the most important cause of sickness. If one does not go to the toilet everyday and one allows faeces to remain in the body for too long, one may get all kinds of diseases. For good health, therefore, a regular visit to the toilet is a *sine qua non*. A daily bowel movement is ultimate hygiene.

There is an analogy between the daily washing of the body, the daily visit to the toilet and the daily sweeping of the yard. That analogy increases in strength if we realise that all three 'rituals of cleansing' take place early in the morning. They mark the beginning of a good day. If one starts the day without any of these activities, it is a bad start and one runs the risk of encountering problems.

Defecation as Prevention

There has been a long tradition of 'testing stools': since time immemorial, the quality of human faeces has been regarded as a reliable indication of someone's state of health. Hippocrates writes:

"It is best when the stools are soft and formed, and passed at the hour customary to the patient when in health; their bulk should be proportionate to the amount of food taken. Such stools indicate a health condition of the lower bowel. But if the stools be fluid, it is best that they should not be accompanied by a noise, nor passed in small quantities at frequent intervals ... It is a bad sign if the stools are very watery, or white, or particularly yellowish or frothy ... Signs more indicative of death are when they are dark, or livid, or oily, or rust-coloured and foul-smelling" (Lloyd 1983: 175).

The mothers of Kwahu-Tafo inspecting their babies' faeces seem to follow Hippocrates' instructions. They too study the colour, smell, form and substance and are particularly attentive to the presence of worms. People of all generations have studied their faeces or had experts do so. Thousands of little containers with stools are delivered everyday to hospitals and labs for all kinds of tests. If one knows the tree by its fruits, one knows man by his turd, not only his physical condition, also his mental. "As long as your turd is okay, *you* are okay", according to one of my uncles who reached the age of 103.

A regular movement of the bowels is not only a *sign* of good health, it also is a *condition* for it. That is how the people of Kwahu-Tafo look at it, anyway. They believe that dirt which stays a long time in the bowels starts to ferment and heat as happens in a dunghill. It may affect the blood and spread throughout the body and then try to break out of the body in other ways (cf. Osei 1978). Boils, for example, are seen as the result of dirt, and so are piles, ulcers, excessive phlegm, headaches and skin rashes. A daily visit to the toilet is therefore the first rule of thumb for a healthy life. Someone who has not been to the toilet for one day is 'constipated'. People start using laxatives as soon as they have 'missed' a day. Enemas too are busily used and have become part of popular self-medication. Mothers preparing and applying herbal enemas to their babies were a common sight in the households where I stayed. Osei (1978: 43) refers to an "abdominal theory of health and illness":

"The ability of the body to resist a disease agent allegedly depends on the proper functioning of the abdominal organs, especially the stomach; for *òyareè biara firi yafunu mu*, (every illness originates from inside the abdomen) ..."

And he continues:

"... the Akan desire and care for regular free bowels is virtually a ritual. That is why the

enema syringe could be found in every Akan household and rectal suppositories are the commonest medicines known and prescribed even by laymen." (Osei 1978: 44)

"Free the bowels first" is the motto of one of his informants, because with free bowels one does not become sick and does not need any medicine.

Regular bowel movement also provides a healthy appetite as one has made room for new food. An elderly man cited the following proverb to express his view on the matter: *Wo poma na wo to a, na egye*, (If you load a gun well, it gives a loud bang). I could not quite figure out the point of this saying, but one of my friends explained that one can load the gun after having shot (the big bang) and load it again. The proverb showed in both a graphic and acoustic way the healthy alternation between eating and defecating.

It is not only important to move one's bowels *everyday*, it is also advisable to do so *early in the morning*. When I asked a woman why it should be done in the morning, she replied: "Before you put in new food, it is better to take the old one out." I was again reminded of the proverb of the gun. One man remarked that one should count oneself among the sick if one had not been to the toilet in the morning (*Sè wonkò tiafi anopa a, woka ayarefoò ho*). "Shit fears the sun" (*Ebin suro owia*), another one lectured, "When you are in bed and the sun rises, you want only one thing: going to the toilet."

We have seen that defecation promotes health in the long term as it prevents the piling up of dirt and – as a consequence – the outbreak of

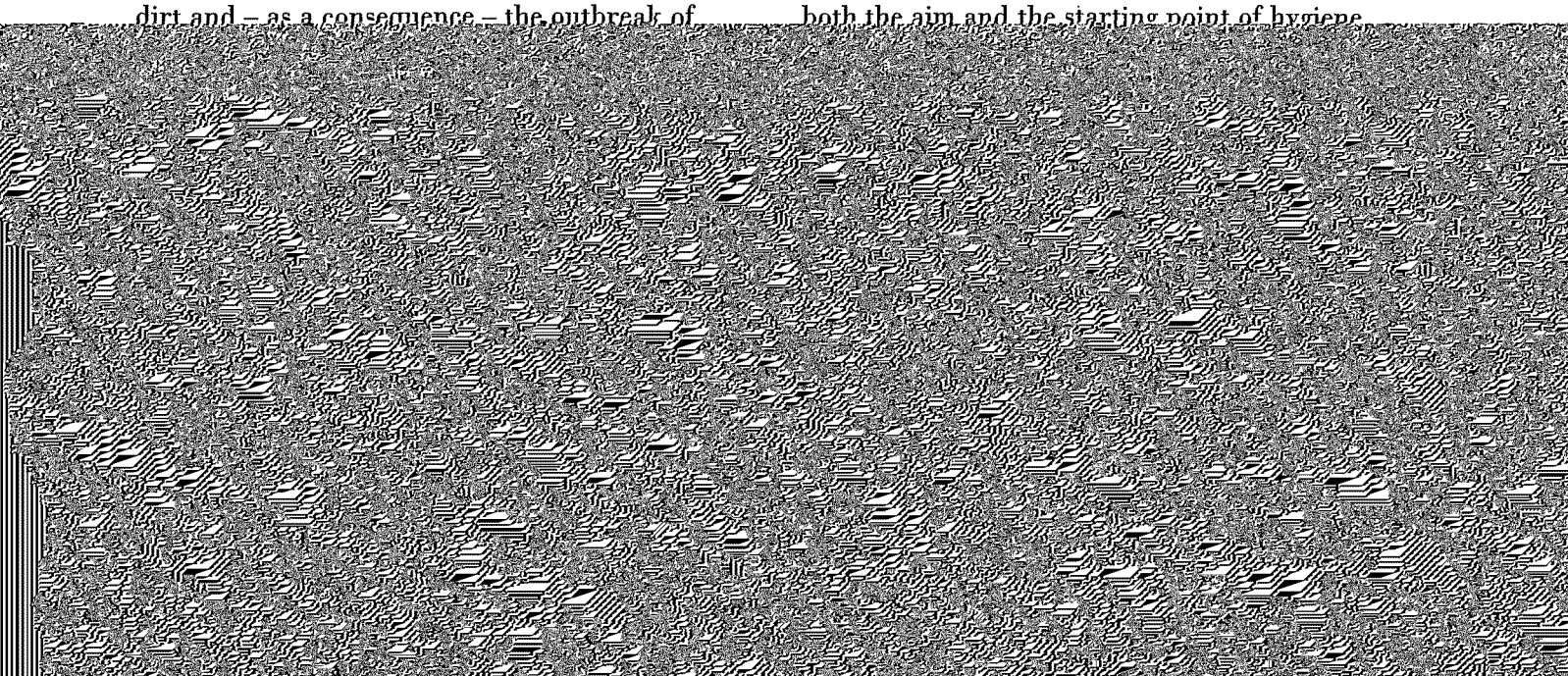
librium of self-control and release, two key values in most cultures. Lea (1999:12) thus summarises Crawford's 'vision':

"On the one hand, self-control which meant self-denial and control over what one eats, drinks and smokes, was seen as leading to a healthy body, and on the other hand being able to relax and be free from worry, to be able to let go, was also valued as necessary for health."

Bringing this down to the level of bowel control and bowel release she continues:

"In terms of excretion, too, there is a contrast between the pleasurable experience of being able to excrete, when the need arises, which I term having embodied self-control, and the uncomfortable experience of conflict between the mind and the body in which we either try to exert self-control over a rebelling body in order not to excrete at a culturally inappropriate situation or suffer from a body that just won't let go. Both being able to let go, and being able to hold are valued and welcomed; just as not being able to let go when necessary and not being able to hold on are sources of embarrassment and discomfort." (Lea 1999:12)

A regular and orderly bowel movement represents rule and order in general, the basic principle of a life that is under control. If dirt, in Mary Douglas' fortunate term, is 'disorder', then irregular and uncontrolled bowel movement is disorder in a double sense. It ducks out of the rules that people themselves have set. Conversely, regulating the movement of bowels defeats the chaos of dirt. The danger rising from dirt is brought under control. Order is both the aim and the starting point of hygiene



Culture as Prevention

If culture can be seen as the way in which people, together, attempt to make life as comfortable as possible for themselves, one also could define culture as one enormously complex system of prevention. Culture is getting rid of dirt, creating and restoring order. Not only religion, as Geertz (1973) argues in his famous essay, is a movement against chaos and disorder. In all areas of culture one finds people sweeping their rooms and yards, washing their dishes and bodies, and putting their houses in order against bugs, dirt, unrest, danger, misfortune, and sickness. Prevention is culture, culture is prevention.

Within that total system of preventive thought and action, daily bowel movement takes a central position. The concentration devoted to this daily activity in Kwahu-Tafo is part of a complex system of cleansing rituals which begin before daybreak, when the innocent anthropologist is still fast asleep.

Note

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Children and dirt in Kwahu, Ghana: A social-anthropological perspective[1]

Sjaak van der Geest

Anthropological theorizing about hygiene and dirt has forever been marked by Mary Douglas' concept of "matter out of place"[2]. One claim she made was that dirt is a relative concept. Absolute dirt does not exist; it all depends on where the "matter" is found. What is clean in one place may be dirty somewhere else. A second point she made was that our aversion of dirt cannot be explained as an instinctive avoidance of substances or practices that are dangerous to our health, a view that she called "medical materialism" after William James (1977). People's avoidance of dirt is much better understood when it is interpreted as symbolic behaviour:

> "If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place…. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism …" (Douglas 1970: 48)

The symbolism is that objects or actions are used to make a statement about life in a wider sense. In other words, identifying and removing "dirt" are acts of observing and restoring order. This may have consequences for hygiene and health, but concern about order is the central intuition. From there ideas about health are derived. It is not surprising, therefore, that problems of health are referred to by the term "disorder".

The social character of dirt

What makes an object abject? Douglas suggested: its being out-of-place. But how should we understand "place"? There is the danger of taking "place" too literally, in its physical sense: food on the floor, shoes on the table, a hair

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[1] This essay draws on earlier publications on meanings and experiences of dirt (Van der Geest 1998, 2002, 2003). I thank Zoe Goldstein for editing the text.

[2] Strictly speaking the concept "matter out of place" was not Douglas' invention. She took it from an old quotation book, as she wrote to me in 2003. She was however the one who revealed to us the anthropological depth of this simple folk wisdom.

in the soup. More important, however, is to take into account the manner in which the presence of "dirt" is communicated and the identity of the actor who is directly associated with the matter or activity that is considered "dirty". I will focus on this last aspect: who is responsible? Whose is it? Who did it? In other words, what is the social life of the dirty matter? The answer to the question "whose?" determines the experience of disgust much more than the question "where?". By adding a sociological dimension to "place" Douglas's theory of "matter out of place" becomes more true to life and more effective as an interpretative tool (cf. Van der Geest 2007).

This essay discusses the experience of dirt in the lives of children in a rural community in Kwahu, Ghana. Following the clue of dirt as a social phenomenon, I will take dirt as a vantage point to look at children and adults and how they relate to each other. Dirt is a metonym that informs us about the status and social situation of its producer.

Dirt in Kwahu

The two statements by Douglas that I referred to in the opening paragraphs (dirt is relative; dirt is not primarily a medical concern) are clearly borne out by Kwahu people's views and practices.

Kwahu is an area in the Eastern Region of Ghana, about 150 kilometres north of the capital Accra. It is also the name of its people. Kwahu people belong to the Akan who comprise about half of Ghana's twenty million inhabitants. Their language is Twi. My research took place at Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of about 6000. I have been visiting the town over a period of almost forty years, since 1969. Over the past 15 years my research focused on the meanings of growing old and care-giving to the elderly. Other interests included hygiene and sleeping as cultural activities.

Kwahu-Tafo is a town like many others in the area, though slightly more impoverished. Its inhabitants, as in all Kwahu towns, are mobile. They love trading, that is buying things in one place and retailing them in another. Kwahu traders can be found over the whole country. For people of the older generation, men as well as women, the "normal" lifecycle consisted of growing up in Kwahu-Tafo, then travelling and trading in one of the commercial centres of the country and finally returning to their hometown to settle as a farmer (cf. Bartle 1977). That lifecycle is less common now as most people of the younger generation aspire to other careers than trading and farming, but the mobility still prevails.

A brief description of the sanitary conditions in Kwahu-Tafo is needed as a backdrop to the topic of this essay. The town has pipe borne water, but most (public) taps have been closed; some permanently, others have a caretaker

to whom one has to pay a small amount to get the water. I estimate that there are about ten wells in the town (Fig. 1), which still provide most of the water. There is no centrally organised waste collection. In the morning people—mostly women and children—sweep in and around their houses and carry the dirt to the nearest garbage heap. Around 7 o'clock in the morning there is a busy traffic of people with baskets and boxes to and from the dunghills.



Fig. 1: At the well

During my observations in 1996, Kwahu-Tafo had four public latrines, each with twelve squatting holes. Two of them had been closed down for various reasons. Public latrines were—and still are—the most commonly used place for defecation. In addition there were some semi-public toilets in various schools, which were used by both pupils and staff members. People living in the vicinity of the school also made use of the facility. An unknown number of people did not use a toilet, but relieved themselves on their way to the farm or on the farm. In the latter case, their faeces contribute to the fertility of the land, but I am not sure if this is a conscious policy (as it is in some Asian countries). A more recent and pernicious technique of defecating without visiting a toilet was the use of plastic bags, which are later on thrown away in the bush or on the garbage heap outside town (which explains the term 'flying toilet'). Children often defecated directly on the dunghill (Fig. 2) near



Fig. 2: Defecating on the dunghill

the public latrine; it saved them the little money they otherwise had to pay.

Finally, a limited number of inhabitants had their own toilet. Some of these were water closets. They could be found in the clinic, in the staff quarters of the Technical School, in some houses of well-to-do inhabitants, and in the house of the chief. An increasing number of houses now have a pit latrine. All other private toilets were so-called bucket latrines. In 1996 the sanitary inspector estimated their number at sixty. Most "buckets" are square wooden containers that are emptied about once a week. A bucket latrine can be inside the house but in such a way that the bucket can be removed from the outside, through a little door at the back of the house. A bucket latrine can also be built in a separate wooden shed, a few metres from the house (see further Van der Geest 2002).

Dirt is a key concept in the Kwahu perception of the human being. It is something unwanted. Ideas about dirt and cleanliness pervade the entire culture. There are several terms which refer to dirt. *Efi* is dirt that comes from outside and attaches to the body, to clothes, to objects, or to a house. It has a temporary character. A man coming from his farm is dirty (*ne ho ayè fi* or *ne ho wò fi*) because of the work he has been doing. It is not inherent for him to be dirty. A child playing in the mud is dirty, as is a yard which has not been swept.

Atantaneè (lit. nasty or hateful things) is dirt which is more detestable. Most people use this term for dirt coming from inside the body: vomit, phlegm, menstrual blood, urine, or faeces. When a latrine is dirty with human faeces, people say, *Èhò yè tan* (lit. There is nasty).

As in most languages, terms of "dirt" assume wider meanings. They are metaphorically applied to social, moral, and aesthetic phenomena. Dirty = ugly = unattractive = nasty = bad = uncivilised = shameful = not respected. Examples from Christaller's Twi dictionary illustrate this: *Efi aka no* (lit. Dirt has stuck to him) means that someone has defiled himself morally, for example by committing evil or breaking a taboo. *Ne yere de fi abèka no* (lit.

His wife has brought dirt to stick to him) means that his wife has disgraced him (Christaller 1933). *Efi*, someone said, spoils things, it makes one vomit. *Efi* produces *efi*.

Atantaneè is derived from the root *tan* which means ugly. Someone commented that it pains the eye when one looks at it. *Tan* is also the term for "to hate". Hateful, nasty, shameful; they are one and the same thing. If someone has the habit of being dirty, people say *Ommu ne ho* (lit. He does not respect himself). Telling someone that he is dirty is a serious offence.

The strong emphasis on the different use of the right and the left hand shows the same concern about dirt. The left hand is reserved for "dirty" activities, such as cleaning oneself after using the toilet, holding the penis while urinating, cleaning dirty things (e.g. a chamber pot), blowing one's nose, etc.

Conversely, cleanliness (*ahoteè*) is the pre-eminent metaphor to express positive appreciation. Clean = beautiful = attractive = good = civilised = respectable. The most common term referring to being clean is *te*, which means "to be open" or "to be clear". *Èhò te* (lit. There is open) must be understood to mean that the place is clear, free from unwanted things, free from dirt. *Ne ho te* (lit. His/her body is clear) is a compliment saying that the person is beautiful, attractive. In Ghanaian English, the expression "she is neat" is almost synonymous with "she is pretty", with the connotation that she is also beautiful in a moral sense, "pure". The connection with respect is always present. Cleanliness engenders respect and expresses it. *Odi ne ho ni* means 'He respects himself' as well as 'He keeps himself clean'.

In summary, bodily cleanliness stands for physical and moral attractiveness, whereas dirt symbolises physical and moral decay. Dirt, or rather the abhorrence of it, plays a central role in the local "anthropology". To say that someone is dirty is almost a rejection of the whole person. Cleanliness of the body (the skin, the orifices, the teeth, the nails) and cleanliness with regard to housekeeping, clothing, or one's children, constitutes a basic condition for a person's attractiveness. Physical beauty and sexual attraction are commonly explained in terms of cleanliness.

The concern about cleanliness accounts for the reluctance of people to build a toilet in their house. A toilet, by definition, is a dirty place so it should be kept outside the house, preferably outside the community. Thus it became the custom to construct the toilet at the edge of the town.

Dirt and health

Dirt and cleanliness, as we have just seen, have a wide cultural significance, including respect and moral implications. Avoidance of dirt cannot be reduced to rational medical action, as Douglas warned us. This does not

mean, however, that dirt is unrelated to health and sickness. Dirt takes a central place in the explanation of sickness. Almost half of all disease causations collected by Warren (1974: 317–18) among another Akan group are related to dirt. People are indeed concerned with avoiding dirt in order to stay healthy. One should cover food to protect it against flies and other dirt from outside. One should wash one's utensils, sweep away dirt which will attract insects, clean the containers in which water is stored, wash one's clothes regularly, and so on. A pure body, neatly dressed, in a clean house, stands for a healthy person. Warren (1974:320): "Daily bathing is very important … and at least two baths a day are taken, one prior to beginning the day's business and one prior to retiring at night. Babies are bathed more frequently. Clothing is kept very clean and washed and ironed frequently".

The presence of dirt *in* the body is seen as the most important cause of sickness. If one does not go to the toilet every day and one allows faeces to remain in the body for too long, it is thought that the dirt starts to ferment and heat as in a dunghill. It may affect the blood and spread throughout the body and then try to break out of the body in other ways (cf. Osei 1987). Boils, for example, are seen as the result of dirt, and so are piles, ulcers, excessive phlegm, headaches, and skin rashes.

Constipation, therefore, is a very general health problem and a typical "culture-bound syndrome". People start using laxatives as soon as they have 'missed' one day of going to the toilet. Enemas, too, are busily used and have become part of popular self-medication. Mothers preparing and applying herbal enemas (Fig. 3) to their babies were a common sight in some of the compounds where I stayed.

Children and dirt

The relation between children and dirt is paradoxical. On the one hand, mothers seem very concerned about their child's cleanliness, as they are always busy cleaning their young children. On the other hand, they seem unconcerned and react lightly to a baby soiling itself or its mother. The distinction between *efi* and *atantanè*, discussed above, does not help us here. *Atantaneè*, dirt coming from inside the body that is abhorred most, does not seem detestable when it comes from a small baby.

One of my friends with whom I discussed this quoted a proverb: "If your child defecates on you, you don't cut the place away but you clean it". He explained: "Parents do not find the toilet [faeces] of a child as disgusting as that of an adult." Indeed, a mother will experience little or no aversion when she deals with the faeces of her baby. The baby is still felt as part of herself and cleaning the baby is almost the same as cleaning herself. She seems

relaxed. Yet, mothers show great concern cleaning their babies. The friend who quoted the proverb above continued:

> "But in a true sense, parents or mothers are very concerned with the cleaning of a child's toilet. The first thing a mother does in the morning is to wash the bedding of a child…"

In a study that was published almost half a century ago numerous examples are quoted that confirm the "cleanliness" of a baby's dirt in Akan society:

> "In some areas it is thought that to show disgust at an infant's excreta may alarm the child's soul and lead to its death. For this reason, disgust should not be shown by anyone carrying a baby if it soils her clothes; instead this is regarded as a good omen, indicating that the soiled person will have a child herself … In Apa [Asante] if the baby's faeces should happen to drop into the soup or fufu while it is sitting on its mother's lap during a meal, everyone, including the mother, should continue eating. Otherwise the baby might die."
>
> (Kaye 1962: 89)

These quotes may give the impression that tolerance of a baby's dirt is a forced attitude sanctioned by deadly consequences. I think it is not; it rather seems a spontaneous and rather "natural" reaction that



Fig. 3: Applying an enema



Fig. 4: Brushing teeth



Fig. 5: Potty training



Fig. 6: Morning sweeping

looks to some extent similar to reactions in my own society in The Netherlands. I remember that during my fieldwork I was once conversing with a mother who was preparing food while she had her child on her lap. At a certain moment the child urinated in the food. She laughed and made a small joke and continued the cooking. My presence did not seem to worry her. Later on, someone told me that such an event might bring fortune to the consumer of the food.

Mothers in Cameroon told Ndonko (1993: 111) that the *cacas* of their babies did not smell and were not at all repulsive to them. The observation made by many ethnographers from all parts of the world that small children are allowed to defecate near the house points to the same interpretation (Aufenanger 1959; Curtis 1998; Gil et al. 2004; Gunawan 2005).

There is still another aspect to children which influences the easy tolerance of their defecation practices. We may call it "innocence": they are not yet full-grown human beings with an outspoken identity and a biography. Because their hands are not yet dirty, in a metaphoric sense, their faeces are also not yet dirty.

The concern of mothers to keep their children clean should first of all be understood as concern about their own cleanliness. Bathing her

baby is a message that she herself is a neat person with all the virtues that—as we have seen—are associated with neatness, *ahoteè*. Husbands, other members of the house, and neighbours judge the mother's character by the cleanliness of her clothes, cooking utensils, and compound, but most of all of her child (Fig. 4, 5).

A man will divorce his wife if he finds her dirty, one man said to me. Another one remarked: "Any mother who is careless with the disposal of her child's toilet is not given due respect by her neighbours". In the midst of this hygienic, moral, and aesthetic turmoil around "dirt" the little child is, however, immanently "clean" in its blessed ignorance and innocence. But that changes…



Fig. 7: To the dunghill



Fig. 8: At the dunghill

When the child grows and becomes more of a "person", it will slowly move away from the intimate connection with its mother; it will learn to go to the toilet by itself and its faeces will become gradually dirtier to its parents and to others. That process of "falling out of grace" of hygienic innocence coincides with becoming increasingly responsible for actively removing the dirt of others from the house. The transition from careless "clean" dirt to the burden of cleaning work reflects the loss of the privileged position of a child and the entrance into premature and liminal adulthood. By "liminal" I mean that the child is given several adult-like responsibilities but remains deprived of the privileges that adulthood brings. Cleaning activities are the most prominent tasks of children between the age of about three and fifteen.



Fig. 9 Cleaning pans

The mornings in Kwahu are marked by the busy traffic of children who carry huge buckets and bowls with water from the wells, sweep in and around the houses, and carry the garbage to the dunghill. Most of these activities are performed in relative silence, as if the actors are still asleep. I estimate that children are between a half and full hour busy with wsanitary work that does not concern their personal hygiene. In the house where I have been staying these past years a girl of about eight was the daily sweeper who produced the characteristic morning sound of the broom sliding over the cement floor of the yard (Fig. 6)

She zigzagged from one end of the compound to the other, assembling all the dirt of the previous day. Her brothers, in the mean time, went down to the well and returned with the water needed for the many baths to be taken. The girl then collected the garbage and set off for the dunghill that looked like an anthill with little creatures coming from all directions, dumping their boxes and baskets, and returning to all directions (Fig. 7, 8).

During the day other dirt removing tasks may be given to children, in particular to girls, for example washing clothes or cleaning pans and other cooking utensils (Fig. 9). It is no exaggeration to say that children bear the brunt of keeping the house tidy and its inhabitants clean.

The social significance of dirt

Perceptions of dirt and hygiene are important markers of social relation and position. Aversion or tolerance of other people's bodily substances reveals the relation between the observer and those others. The very generous tolerance that adults, and mothers in particular, have toward the dirt that small babies produce shows the privileged and intimate relation that small children enjoy in Kwahu families.

Removing dirt shows another social reality: the lowest in social rank are occupied with cleaning work. The fact that children at a young age are given dirt-removing and other sanitary tasks suggests that they very early lose their privileged position of childhood.

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Sjaak van der Geest[1]

De drol van Columbus

Over hergebruik van menselijke uitwerpselen in Afrika

'Waarom bouw je hier geen latrine?', vraag ik Stephen Ansah. We staan in het moestuintje naast zijn huis in Kwahu-Tafo, een dorp in Ghana waar ik onderzoek doe naar de betekenis van ouderdom. Kwahu-Tafo heeft ongeveer vijfduizend inwoners. In zo'n zestig huizen is er een privé-toilet, dat wil zeggen, een emmer-toilet dat eens in de week wordt geleegd. Lang niet iedereen in huis mag van dat toilet gebruikmaken, anders zou de emmer al na twee dagen vol zijn. De deur zit op slot en de sleutel is alleen voor enkele geprivilegieerden beschikbaar. De andere huisbewoners zijn, net als de overige driekwart van de bevolking van het dorp, aangewezen op de publieke latrine.

Er zijn vier openbare toiletten in het hele dorp, maar slechts twee zijn er in gebruik. De twee andere zijn gesloten wegens onderhoudsproblemen. Op dit moment is er zelfs maar één open. De tweede is vol en men wacht op de tankwagen uit de districtshoofdstad om hem te legen.

Twee openbare toiletten, samen 24 gaten in een cementen vloer, voor zo'n 4.500 mensen, bijna tweehonderd klanten per gat per dag. Aangezien het openbare toilet tussen 9 uur 's avonds en 5 uur 's morgens dicht gaat (!), blijven er zestien uur over voor gebruik. Gemiddeld zou dus iedere vijf minuten iemand gebruik moeten maken van elk toiletgat.

'Dat klopt niet', zegt de toezichthouder bij een van de twee publieke latrines. Hij kan het aantal gebruikers narekenen want elke klant betaalt twintig cedis (twee cent). Hij denkt dat hij per dag zo'n twee tot driehonderd klanten heeft, een tiende van het aantal dat men zou verwachten.

Waar gaat de rest heen? Veel mensen zoeken naar alternatieven. Sommige scholen hebben toiletten waarvan leerkrachten, en soms ook leerlingen, gebruikmaken. Ze trainen hun darmen zich aan te passen aan de mogelijkheden en stellen hun stoelgang uit tot ze op school zijn. Ook mensen in de buurt van de school maken gebruik van het schooltoilet, soms 'stiekem', soms met toestemming. Moeders laten hun kleine kinderen op de grond poepen en ruimen dat op. Gewoonlijk gooien ze de uitwerpselen op een stukje grond vlakbij het huis waar allerlei afval gestort wordt. Kippen scharrelen er in rond. Veel mensen, tenslotte, doen hun behoefte op weg naar het land, in de 'bush'.

De schaarste aan toiletfaciliteiten maakt dat sommige mensen vijftien minuten, of nog langer, moeten lopen voor zij hun behoefte kunnen doen. Vooral voor oudere mensen is dat een probleem. Bijna alle ouderen hadden dan ook iets geregeld. Als ze zelf geen toilet hadden, mochten ze gebruikmaken van het toilet van een van de buren. Een goede buur is ook om deze reden beter dan een verre vriend.

Het leek mij allemaal vreselijk onhandig en onaangenaam, die lange afstanden, de viezigheid, het gebrek aan privacy. Toiletgang is altijd de zwakke schakel geweest in de participerende observatie van mijn onderzoek. Toen ik op de eerste dag van mijn verblijf door mijn gastheer meegenomen werd naar het publieke toilet, keerde mijn maag bijna om van de stank die er hing. Het was vroeg in de morgen, spitsuur, en ik werd door een rij van hurkende figuren aangestaard. De non-privaatheid van dit privaat joeg mij angst aan en ik maakte dat ik wegkwam. Sindsdien heb ik mijn stoelgang ook altijd trachten te regelen met een 'goede buur' die over een comfortabele wc beschikte. Dat heeft me echter nooit lekker gezeten.

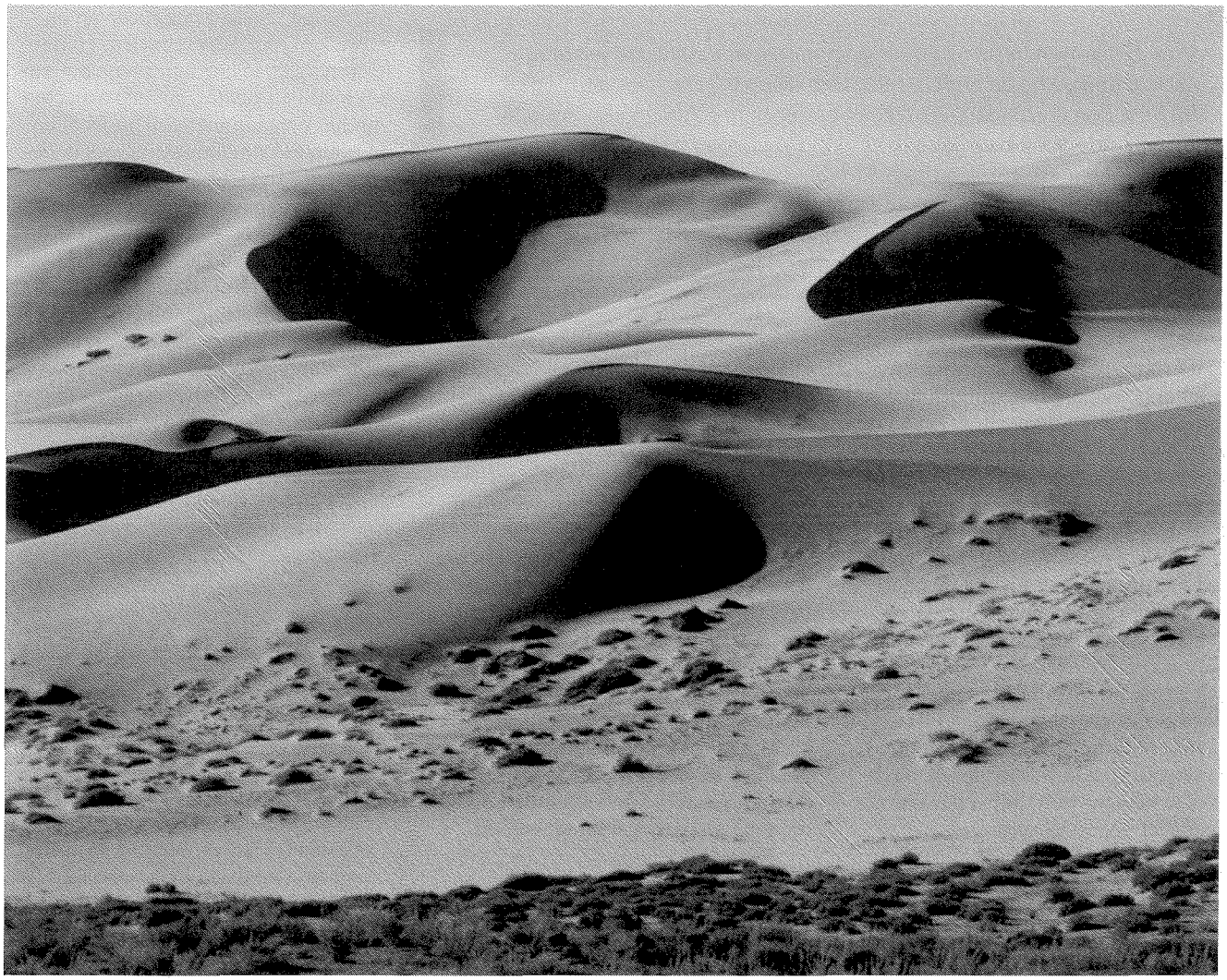
Stephen Ansah was 's morgens ruim een half uur kwijt aan zijn toiletgang, tien minuten heen, tien minuten terug, plus wacht- en zit-tijd. Vandaar dat ik hem die vraag stelde toen we zijn moestuin inspecteerden: waarom geen toilet in de tuin? 'Als je een put graaft en eens in de zoveel tijd schep je de stront eruit, laat die een half jaar liggen en je strooit dan alles over je tuin, dan sla je twee vliegen in een klap: je hebt een privé-toilet, fijn dicht bij huis en je tuintje floreert.' Hij keek me haast geschrokken aan en begon toen hard te lachen. Mensenpoep als tuinmest? Zo'n smerige gedachte kon alleen maar opkomen in het hoofd van een gekke Europeaan. Hij hoefde er geen moment over na te denken. Bah, weerzinwekkend.

Afrikaanse problemen

Afrikaanse landen - en zij niet alleen - hebben twee grote problemen. Het eerste is: wat te doen met menselijke uitwerpselen. Toen de Verenigde Naties 1980-1989 uitriepen tot het decennium van water en 'sanitatie', begon men meer aandacht aan deze problematiek te wijden. In 1990 schatte men dat zo'n 1,7 miljard mensen in de wereld niet over een 'adequaat' afvoersysteem beschikten, niet alleen in de dorpen maar ook in de dichtbevolkte steden.

Dat geldt ook voor Kumasi, met zo'n achthonderdduizend inwoners de tweede stad van Ghana. Uit een onderzoek[2] in 1989 bleek dat de bevolking van Kumasi zo'n 25.000 kubieke meter stront per maand produceerde en dat slechts 10 procent daarvan uit de stad verwijderd werd. De rest kwam terecht in open straatriolen, stroompjes, stukjes braakliggend terrein, enzovoort. Er bestaat geen ondergrondseriolenstelsel in Kumasi. De stad is niet in staat het probleem van menselijk afval op te lossen en tracht de situatie nu te verbeteren via privatisering.[3]

Kumasi lijkt in dit opzicht op zeer veel andere grote en middelgrote steden in



Afrika. De gebrekkige afvoer van menselijk afval veroorzaakt veel ongemak (waar mensen zich soms op ingenieuze wijze aan aanpassen), milieuvervuiling en gezondheidsproblemen.
Het tweede grote probleem waarmee Afrikaanse landen worstelen, is de uitputting van landbouwgronden en de dalende opbrengsten van de landbouw die daar het gevolg van zijn. Kleine boeren beschikken niet over middelen en kapitaal om hun land te voorzien van de benodigde nutriënten en het oude systeem van *'shifting cultivation'* is door de landschaarste niet meer mogelijk.
De twee problemen lijken elkaars oplossing te zijn. Als menselijke uitwerpselen gezien worden als bruikbare bemesting veranderen zij van een 'last' in een gewild product. Het ei van Columbus.
Van de nutriënten in de granen komt 60 procent van de stikstof en de fosfaat en 15 procent van de kalium in het eetbare gedeelte van de plant. Het grootste deel van die nutriënten wordt uitgescheiden en verdwijnt via de menselijke excretie uit het landbouwsysteem, tenminste, als de uitwerpselen niet worden hergebruikt.
Menselijke uitwerpselen bevatten meer nutriënten dan die van dieren. In vergelijking met koeien ligt het gehalte aan nutriënten in menselijk excretie bijvoorbeeld een factor 10 hoger.
Agboola en Kintomo[4] hebben enkele jaren geleden berekend dat bij een inwonersaantal van 640 miljoen in Sub-Sahara Afrika per jaar evenveel nutriënten in menselijke mest terechtkomen als de gehele hoeveelheid kunstmest die in 1983-1984 in het continent werd gebruikt. Een familie van vijf personen produceert per jaar genoeg mest om 1.600 tot 2.000 m^2 rijst te kunnen verbouwen.
Zo eenvoudig ligt het echter niet. Het 'lot' van de nutriënten in menselijke ontlasting hangt immers af van het afvoersysteem. De meeste menselijke uitwerpselen gaan 'verloren'. Alleen mensen die het 'in de *bush*' doen, doen het, ironisch genoeg, goed, ook al is dit niet de efficiëntste manier. Volgens de - schaarse - literatuur komt hergebruik van menselijke uitwerpselen in Afrika praktisch niet voor. Er lijken alom grote culturele bezwaren tegen te bestaan.

Vuil

Concepten van vuil verschillen van cultuur tot cultuur, maar menselijke uitwerpselen maken er altijd deel van uit. Wat vuil is, kan ziekte of ongeluk veroorzaken, betekent gevaar. Alle culturen ontwikkelen methoden en regels om omgang met vuil tot een minimum te beperken en zo ongevaarlijk mogelijk te maken. Het is dan ook geen wonder dat het idee van gebruik van menselijke uitwerpselen in voedselproductie mensen met weerzin vervult.
Toen de Chinezen die in de jaren zes-

Voor studenten in de culturele antropologie, agrarische sociologie, sociale geografie en andere relevante disciplines bestaat de mogelijkheid hun leeronderzoek / stage onder te brengen in een intercultureel onderzoek naar ideeën en praktijken rond het gebruik van menselijke mest in Sub-Sahara Afrika.
Geïnteresseerden kunnen contact opnemen met Sjaak van der Geest, tel. 020-5252621, e-mail: vandergeest@pscw.uva.nl

tig de spoorlijn tussen Tanzania en Zambia bouwden, hun tuintjes met eigen uitwerpselen bemestten, keken de omwonenden met ongeloof en afschuw toe. De goede opbrengsten van de Chinese tuinen konden hen niet tot andere gedachten brengen.
Mensen die met stront omgaan, worden er door besmet. Zij zijn de allerlaagsten in de sociale hiërarchie. In het Ghanese dorp waar ik mijn onderzoek verrichtte, werden de emmers van zestig privé-toiletten 's nachts geleegd door een 'gastarbeider' uit het Noorden. Geen enkele autochtoon van het dorp zou bereid zijn dit werk over te nemen, werd mij verzekerd. Zelfs niet voor veel geld.
Ik vertelde Stephen Ansah dat op Java, in Indonesië, sommige mensen een toilet bouwen boven hun visvijver en hun buren uitnodigen daar hun behoefte te doen omdat de vissen hun uitwerpselen eten. Hij wilde aanvankelijk niet geloven dat die vissen werkelijk door mensen gegeten werden. Toen ik hem verzekerde dat dat wel degelijk het geval was, schudde hij zijn hoofd en slaakte een luide kreet. Toch zijn er heel wat culturen waar men zich over die weerzin heeft heengezet. In de zeventiende eeuw was er in Nederland een bloeiende handel in menselijke mest die over grote afstanden werd vervoerd. Vandaag de dag worden met name in Oost-Aziatische landen zoals China, Korea en Vietnam menselijke fecaliën als mest op grote schaal gebruikt. Waarom zou die mogelijkheid ook niet Afrika benut kunnen worden, zeker in gebieden waar weinig of geen vee is?

Gezondheid

Medisch gezien zijn er risico's verbonden aan het gebruik van menselijke mest. Feces bevatten een grote hoeveelheid bacteriën, virussen, protozoa en andere parasieten waaronder ook pathogene. Aan feces gerelateerde ziekten maken 10 tot 25 procent uit van de klachten die de gezondheidszorg bereiken.[5] Gevaar voor infectie treedt op bij het vervoer van fecaliën, bij het bemesten en werken op het land en bij het eten van producten die door fecaliën zijn besmet. Deze risico's kunnen echter drastisch gereduceerd worden en er zijn ook technologieën die daar op inspelen, de 'dubbelpitlatrine' bijvoorbeeld. Tijd en temperatuur zijn daarbij de belangrijkste factoren. Afhankelijk van de temperatuur en het compostproces heeft de mest zes tot twaalf maanden nodig om vrij van pathogenen te worden.

Onderzoek

Een werkgroep, bestaande uit onderzoekers van het Koninklijke Instituut voor de Tropen, de Universiteit van Amsterdam, het International Water and Sanitation Centre en Waste, is bezig het project 'Menselijke excreta als meststof in Sub-Sahara Afrika' voor te bereiden. Een literatuurstudie is uitgevoerd om inzicht te krijgen in de factoren die het gebruik van mest in de landbouw beïnvloeden. Over de precieze motieven van boeren in Afrika om wel of niet gebruik van menselijk mest te maken, is weinig bekend. In publicaties wordt gewoonlijk gezegd dat het gebruik van menselijke mest in de landbouw tegen culturele barrières botst. Maar uit het informele circuit komen wel voorbeelden van gebruik van uitwerpselen.
De werkgroep vraagt collega-onderzoekers om hun persoonlijke ervaringen met gebruik van uitwerpselen in de Afrikaanse landbouw (zie kader op volgende pagina). Tevens houdt de werkgroep zich aanbevolen voor adressen van organisaties die ervaring hebben met dit onderwerp. In het project zullen lokale percepties van en gebruiken rond uitwerpselen, culturele en religieuze betekenissen van reinheid, vuil en gevaar, sociale aspecten van het omgaan met vuil en fecaliën en uiteraard landbouwmethoden, belangrijke aandachtsvelden vormen.
De werkgroep hoopt via deze publicatie geïnteresseerde collega's en studenten te bereiken en te kunnen profiteren van hun kennis en onderzoek. De Engelstalige oproep kan gekopieerd en doorgestuurd worden aan buitenlandse collega's van wie men vermoedt dat zij in het onderwerp geïnteresseerd zijn. De werkgroep is dankbaar voor alle suggesties die haar bij het onderzoek kunnen helpen.
Poep kan in dubbele zin een ontlasting betekenen.

Noten

1. Deze notitie is mede gebaseerd op een literatuuronderzoek door Lies Timmer en Cinty Visker van de werkgroep 'Human manure in Sub-Saharan Africa' van het Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen.
2. Dale Whittington et al., 'Household sanitation in Kumasi, Ghana. A description of current practices, attitudes and perceptions.' In: *World Development* 21, 1993, pp. 733-48.
3. A. Heijman & R.M. Langendijk, *Private sector participation in solid waste management in Kumasi*, Institute of Planning and Demography, University of Amsterdam, 1997.
4. A.A. Agboola & A.A. Kintomo, 'Nutrient cycling in pastures, rangeland, fallow and cut-and-carry systems in sub-Saharan Africa.' In: J.M. Powell et al. (eds), *Livestock and sustainable nutrient cycling in mixed farming systems in sub-Saharan Africa*. ILCA Conference, Vol. 2, Technical Papers, 1995, pp. 247-61.
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De eenzaamheid van zien en niet gezien worden

Voyeurisme bij Louis Paul Boon

Sjaak van der Geest

Nooit zou mij iets lukken, nooit zou ik datgene kunnen grijpen
wat anderen zomaar in de schoot werd geworpen.
Ik was blijkbaar alleen op de wereld gekomen
om dit alles met mijn ogen op te vangen.
(Eros en de eenzame man – Louis Paul Boon)

Kijken is een vorm van aanraken; aanraken op afstand en daarom een 'veilig' aanraken. In een TV-portret van hem (*Oude ogen*), vijftien jaar geleden, zei de dichter Adriaan Morriën: 'Als je kijkt, hoef je van geen enkele vrouw af te blijven.' *Augenlust* in de ware zin van het woord. Voyeurisme is dan ook het onbeperkt en (meestal) ongestraft aanraken van wat niet of nauwelijks fysiek aangeraakt kan en mag worden.
De paradox van het zien is dat het enerzijds het begin van de liefde is maar anderzijds de liefdevolle toenadering in de weg kan staan als het zien alleen al het verlangen naar de ander – althans gedeeltelijk – verzadigt.
Dat het oog verlangen en liefde opwekt is door velen opgemerkt. Jacob Cats dichtte:

Aansien doet vrijen,
Het oogh is leytsman van de min
En brengt voor eerst de lusten in.
Wat ooge niet en siet,
Dat begeert het herte niet.

De antropoloog Bronislaw Malinowski die bijna een eeuw geleden liefde en seks bij een volk in Melanesië beschreef, noteerde dat de ogen de zetel van verlangen en lust zijn en dat volgens zijn informanten een man nooit een erectie zal krijgen als hij zijn ogen gesloten houdt.

In Alberto Moravia's roman *De Voyeur* begint de liefde tussen de ik-figuur Dodo en Silvia met een voyeuristische scène. Op een middag kijkt hij uit zijn raam als hij de luiken wil sluiten voor zijn siësta en ziet door een open raam tegenover hem het interieur van een kamer.

> *Ik had net een gevoel me voor een toneeldecor te bevinden. Het doek was opgehaald, maar de acteurs, of liever de actrice (want er viel niet aan te twijfelen dat het een vrouw was die in deze kamer logeerde), was nog niet opgekomen.*

Hij blijft kijken en na een half uur betreedt een jonge vrouw het 'toneel'. Ze ziet hem kijken, begint wat heen en weer te lopen, dingetjes te verzetten en kleedt zich dan uit. Ze pakt een gitaar en speelt wat. Na een tijdje staat ze op en sluit de luiken. De volgende dag gaat hij op zoek naar haar en laat zich aan haar voorstellen. 'Zo ontstond er uit de ontmoeting van een toevallig exhibitionisme en een spontaan voyeurisme een heel normale liefdesverhouding.'
Maar, zoals gezegd, de ogen kunnen zo'n sterke compensatie voor de persoonlijke ontmoeting bieden, dat het bij het zien blijft. Het kijken kan een vlucht zijn van wat men niet daadwerkelijk durft uit te voeren: de bewonderde of begeerde persoon benaderen, aanspreken, omhelzen, liefhebben. Voyeurisme wordt om die reden in de psychiatrie als een afwijking gezien, gedrag dat een 'gezonde' seksuele omgang belemmert. De angst voor de ander als partner blijkt uit het stiekeme karakter van het kijken; de kijker (gluurder) houdt zichzelf onzichtbaar en voorkomt zo een directe confrontatie met de ander. De veiligheid van het ongezien blijven gaat echter gepaard met het gevaar betrapt te worden. Voyeurisme is een combinatie van lafheid en moed.
Het kijken mag dan 'aanraking' zijn, het is een gebrekkig, onvolledig aanraken. In de onvoltooidheid schuilt de frustratie die het verlangen naar een werkelijke aanraking doet groeien, maar nooit tot stand brengt. De onbereikbaarheid van het 'eindpunt' leidt tot steeds frequenter proberen, tot obsessie, tot verslaving. 'Oh schoonheid van het onvoltooide,' dichtte Leopold. Maar ook: 'Oh kwelling van het onvoltooide.'

Geobsedeerd door seks

Deze paradoxen, angsten en kwellingen van het kijken zijn door niemand zo indringend opgeschreven als door Louis Paul Boon in zijn laatste roman *Eros en de eenzame man*, die hij twee maanden voor zijn plotselinge dood in 1979 voltooide. De roman bevat de bekentenissen van een ongelukkige man die terugkijkt op zijn leven van onvoltooide verlangens. In het voorwoord, waarin

hij zich rechtstreeks tot de lezer richt, noemt Boon het een schandelijke maar tevens smartelijke biecht:

> *Ik weet waarlijk niet of ik dit boek aan het openbaar mag prijsgeven. De vraag kwelt me, of deze schandelijk onzedige maar tevens smartelijke biecht van een eenzame door zijn driften vervolgde en opgejaagde man, niet best in de vergeethoek zou opgeborgen worden. Ik zou zeggen: lees dit boek dan niet. Als u bij deze woorden komt en u zich verwittigd voelt, sla het dan dicht en berg het ergens op waar niemand het vinden kan. En lees het pas als u oud bent geworden en in het leven uw klappen hebt meegekregen. Dan pas, misschien, gaat u voldoende mededogen kunnen opbrengen voor deze, man in wiens biecht de meest schunnige woorden voorkomen en de nog schunniger daden beschreven zijn – maar die toch, ondanks alles, een der ongelukkigsten onder ons moet geweest zijn. .... En daarom zou ik willen vragen – áls u dit boek niet in afschuw van u gaat weggooien – om bij het ontmoeten van een dergelijke man, hem te benaderen met de tedere liefde die hij nimmer gekend heeft. Wij zijn goed voor de dieren, laat ons ook goed zijn voor hen die leven als beesten.*

De man blijkt een voyeur en exhibitionist te zijn die zich vooral voelt aangetrokken tot jonge meisjes en niet in staat is 'normale' relaties aan te gaan. Hij wordt geobsedeerd door seks maar blijft ervan verstoken.
Zijn herinneringen beginnen in zijn vroegste jeugd. Zijn vader heeft hij nooit gekend: met de noorderzon vertrokken, enkele maanden na zijn geboorte. Hij heeft een tirannieke moeder die zich geroepen voelt 'vuilheid en ontucht uit deze wereld te vagen.' Hij groeit op als een schuw jongetje dat hevig verlangt naar alles wat zijn moeder verboden heeft maar daar tegelijkertijd bang voor is. Op zijn tiende ziet hij vanuit het struikgewas hoe zijn vriendje en een buurmeisje elkaar bekijken en betasten.

> *En toen ik dit van tussen het onkruid gadesloeg, vroeg ik me af waarom toch ik nooit de moed had opgebracht, het met hem daarover te hebben. Ik had gedacht een uitzondering van een viezerikje te zijn, alleen maar omdat ik er niet aan weerstaan kon toe te kijken. En nu drong het tot me door dat ik dat ik slechts een onhandige toeschouwer was geweest, waar de anderen het waagden deze verboden spelen te bedrijven.*

Enkele jaren later raapt hij al zijn moed bij elkaar als hij met open gulp naar een jonge vrouw aan de overkant van de straat loopt.

> *Wat hoopte en verlangde ik werkelijk? Dat zij dit opmerken zou, vaststellen dat ik niet meer een kind was zoals toen, en dat zij misschien met de glimlach – als ik dicht genoeg bij haar stond – de knots zou uithalen, betasten en be-*

wonderen.... Was dit maar gebeurd: hoe heel anders zou dan misschien mijn verdere leven verlopen zijn, zonder al deze bange twijfels, deze laffe onzekerheid, dat besef van al te onervaren zijn. Maar nimmer was het geluk eens met mij, ze keek slechts heel even mijn richting uit, en misschien dacht ze alleen maar: dat jongetje van de buurvrouw staat daar te plassen.

Het verhaal is één lange opsomming van plastisch beschreven gebeurtenissen die stuk voor stuk eindigen in mislukking en frustratie. Hij wordt een rommelopkoper en combineert zijn voyeuristische verlangens met het rondneuzen in meubelstukken, boeken en prenten die hij aantreft in de huizen die hij mag leeghalen. Op een dag vraagt hij een meisje dat alleen in huis is hem aan te wijzen welke boeken wel en niet weg mogen. Hij knoopt zijn overall los en hoopt dat ze zijn seksuele opwinding opmerkt en beantwoordt.

Ik deed alsof ik nog druk aan het werk was, mijn rug naar haar toe. Daarna keerde ik me tot haar om het rekje met boeken aan te wijzen dat op de plankenvloer stond. Ik hield me erbij gebogen, zodat de overall nu haast helemaal open moest hangen. Ik stelde vast dat ze even een blik in deze opening wierp, doch ze hield zich alsof ze het niet had opgemerkt.... Het werd een wederzijds gevaarlijk spelletje. Ik werkte gewoon door, alsof ik niet wist dat mijn overall nu reeds helemaal openhing en zij bleef even gewoon toekijken, als naar een man die bij hen aan huis aan het werk was. Ze verpinkte niet, ze maakte geen enkele ongekontroleerd gebaar, alleen streek ze af en toe een neervallende vlok haren van het voorhoofd weg.

Na de zoveelste mislukking:

... Of ik nog iets nodig had? Ik kón nog iets gevraagd hebben maar ik wist me er het vijfde wiel aan de wagen, betaalde keek naar haar opgeduwde tieten in de blouse en ging weg. Kontakt, kontakt met andere mensen ... ik was in het leven der anderen slechts een spelbreker.

Gemiste kansen

Het kijken naar anderen wordt driester. Hij probeert met geveinsde toevalligheid in de nabijheid van meisjes en vrouwen te komen. De voyeur wordt een exhibitionist maar hij wordt niet 'opgemerkt', wel achtervolgd als viezerik.
Zien en gezien worden wil hij, maar oogcontact is er zelden. Een ontmoeting van de ogen zou de ander misschien werkelijk dichterbij brengen. Ook dat is

niet voor hem weggelegd. Er is slechts het vluchtige en angstige oogcontact. Eenmaal lijkt er meer te gebeuren:

> *Het pad was zo smal dat ze me bijna aanraken moest. En toen gebeurde wat, dat ik nu nog met wat stil verdriet beschrijven moet... ze wendde de blik van mijn stijve en keek me diep, diep, in de ogen. En wat ik in háár ogen zag valt niet te zeggen. Het was begeerte, verlangen, misschien zelfs liefde, maar ook afschuw en vooral angst. Het was dat alles samen, en nog iets méér. En misschien zag ze in mijn eigen ogen dezelfde begeerte naar haar, dezelfde liefde voor haar, en dezelfde afschuw and angst voor mezelf. Er ging een schok door me heen....*

Hij probeert haar terug te vinden, vergeefs uiteraard.
Hij wordt ouder en triester. Meisjes vernederen hem en lachen hem uit. Hij is een sukkel, een buitengeslotene. Dan ontdekt hij een ander jachtterrein: de volle bus waarin hij de lichamen van meisjes en vrouwen quasi toevallig kan voelen.

> *Ik werd verder opgedrongen, tot tegen de achterruit van de bus aan. En mijn hart gaf een sprong toen ik ontdekte een dertienjarige dicht bij me te hebben. Opnieuw lag mijn hand tegen een dij aan.... Ik trachtte, achter haar staande, het gezichtje te zien. Maar ze keek net als ik daarstraks de wegsnellende straten na.... Aan de halte maakte ik me met natte broek los, en liep door. Het lag aan mij, dacht ik, het lag aan mij dat ik nooit met een vrouw wat te doen had, ik was er te bang voor geweest.*

In de herinneringen van de man is het misverstand, de gemiste kans de eigenlijke tragiek van zijn leven. Tegelijkertijd verschaffen die gemiste kansen hem de grootste vreugde omdat het niet vervullen van de droom de droom intact gelaten heeft. Dat is de meest raadselachtige ambiguïteit: dat het verdriet én de vreugde om het onvoltooide elkaar bestaansvoorwaarden zijn.
De sociale betekenis van het oog kan nauwelijks treffender worden uitgedrukt dan in de figuur van de voyeur en exhibitionist, degene die wil *zien* en *gezien worden*. Het zien vervangt het zijn. In het levensverhaal van de man (die geen naam krijgt in Boons roman) wordt het absurde geloofwaardig. Hij doet wat hij niet wil en verzuimt datgene te doen wat hij zou willen doen. Het oog is de grote verwarringstichter, niet alleen in dit verhaal.

Gegrepen worden

Boons roman is een allegorie van een algemeen maatschappelijk verschijnsel: uit schaamte, of eigenlijk uit angst voor schaamte, doen mensen

wat zij niet willen. De onzekerheid over de reactie van de ander als ik mij bloot geef, weerhoudt mij ervan mij bloot te geven en ook de ander houdt zich om die reden gedekt. Op die wijze blijft men elkaar onthouden wat men het liefst zou delen. Zelfs als de ander toenadering zoekt, reageer ik misschien – tegen mijn wil – afhoudend of afwijzend omdat ik in onzekerheid verkeer over zijn bedoelingen. Ieder zich-bloot-geven houdt enkele vluchtwegen open: de mogelijkheid te ontkennen dat er van toenadering sprake was.
Zo wordt alles ambigu; iedere toenadering kan tegelijkertijd een ontkenning daarvan zijn. De oogopslag, de aanspreking, de aanraking, elk gebaar kan verhuld worden in een schijn van on-bewustheid, van toevalligheid en de ander in grote twijfel brengen over de juiste betekenis ervan. De aanraking in het gedrang van de bus is een sprekend voorbeeld.
De eenzaamheid van de man komt uiteindelijk voort uit het niet gezien worden (of menen niet gezien te worden) door de ander naar wie zijn verlangen uitgaat. Zijn lijden is het feit dat hij niet gegrepen wordt door degene door wie hij gegrepen wil worden. Hij wordt zelfs niet gegrepen door de politie, hoewel hij dat steeds verwacht (en in zekere zin ook verlangt). Zijn niet-gezien en niet-gegrepen worden heeft als diepste betekenis dat hij niet *be*grepen wordt. Niemand is geïnteresseerd in hem. Hij is niemand.
Het zien en gezien-worden geeft het 'zijn' echter tegelijkertijd een glans die het van zichzelf niet heeft. Het wordt vervuld van een diepe betekenis omdat er de belofte van *meer* is: de aanraking. De gelukzaligheid van de aanraking is 'reëel' zolang hij niet heeft plaatsgehad. De belofte die in het zien besloten ligt is rijker en inniger dan de 'werkelijkheid'. Geen wonder dat het zien zo verslavend is. De uiteindelijke vervulling van de belofte kan een ontgoocheling zijn. Het einde van de roman maakt dit verpletterend duidelijk. Een vrouw ontfermt zich uiteindelijk over hem en neemt hem in huis.

> *Voor de eerste maal in mijn leven bereed ik nu een vrouw. Ik had er niet het minste genot of de minste vreugde aan. Je hoeft naar niets te kijken, zei ze.... Ik deed het alsof het een plicht was, en schoot mijn zaad binnen in haar. Zo was het dus met alle anderen, die ik benijd en vervloekt had. Een plicht die je volbrengt zonder vreugde, zonder dat tikkeltje gevaar, zonder de opwinding hiervoor in de gevangenis te kunnen terecht komen.*

De eenzame man, die zijn grootste vreugden met zijn ogen beleefd heeft, volbrengt wat hij altijd verlangd heeft met gesloten ogen.

Enkele gedachten en passages in dit essay zijn afkomstig uit een eerdere tekst in het Hollands Maandblad

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Pollution and Purity

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"Pollution" and "purity" form a classic conceptual pair in cultural anthropology, mostly applied to ritual status. The solemn and somewhat archaic tone of the two terms betrays their religious pedigree, but pollution and purity are basically about very mundane matters: being dirty and being clean. These everyday experiences lend themselves eminently as metaphors to express positive or negative valuation of nearly everything in human lives. Their efficacy as metaphors lies in the intense visceral emotions of aversion and attraction concerning what is physically dirty or clean. "Dirt" and "cleanliness" may therefore be better terms for an anthropological discourse on everyday experience and the emotions of disgust and desire.

CULTURE DOMAINS

Nearly everywhere in the anthropological literature it is argued that "dirty" and "clean" are used to draw boundaries and make pertinent distinctions between what is good and bad in some sense or other. That drawing of judgmental boundaries can be done in almost any field of human experience: social, religious, and moral; and with regard to sex and intimacy, gender, health, and "civilization."

In his early work on Andaman society, Radcliffe-Brown (1952) demonstrated how taboos and rules to avoid pollution helped to produce and maintain social order between different categories of people: men and women; older and younger persons; parents and children; leaders and subjects. Today, systems of political and social inequality are still being bolstered by popular ideas that specific "others" are dirty, smell dirty, have dirty habits, and eat dirty food. Racism and the Indian caste system are obvious examples of dirt-related justifications of social exclusion. Similar mechanisms are employed in mutual perceptions of ethnic groups and in relations between migrants and autochthones everywhere in the world. People who are different because of sexual practice, bodily appearance, disability, occupation, or criminal offense suffer the same tarnishing. In all these cases "dirty" is a convenient derogatory and sometimes even stigmatizing synonym for "other." Excluding others in this manner implicitly confirms and reinforces the homogeneity and superiority (purity) of one's own group, as Radcliffe-Brown suggested many years ago.

Where religion constitutes the ultimate legitimization of societal norms and hierarchy, purity and pollution provide a connection between social and religious order and disorder. But also within religion, pure versus polluted prove effective didactics of religious approval versus disapproval, of sanctity versus sinfulness. Sin brings about a state of pollution that needs to be cleansed by prayer, confession, or ritual purification. From religious impurity it is a small step to morality. "Dirty," again, is one of the most common qualifications to express moral condemnation. Disapproving language gathers strength and imagination when dirt-related terms are included. "Shit" and equivalent terms have become popular expletives for negative

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assertions (but – by an interesting twist of language – also for positive avowals).

Gender distinction and gender hostility are cast in terms of dirt and pollution worldwide. Menstruation, pregnancy, and delivery in particular are often seen by men as polluting and therefore dangerous states, which force women into subordination and withdrawal from social life (cf. Meigs 1984). Sex and intimacy are particularly prone to metaphors of cleanliness and dirt. When sex transgresses boundaries of personal integrity and violates rules of intimacy, dirt and contamination are the first associations that cause intense feelings of disgust and call for cleaning in symbolic as well as in the literal sense of the term.

In health and health care, dirt and cleanliness have established themselves more firmly than in any other domain of life. Hygiene has become the basic principle of healthy living. Here cleanliness has assumed a medical status and dropped its metaphorical identity. Infection, contagion, the touch of dirt – hygiene's antipode – is the origin of many diseases. Unclean water and lack of good sanitation are known to be major killers of people in poor societies (Curtis 1998). It should be noted, however, that improved hygiene is not necessarily a motive for building better sanitary facilities. A case study of rural Benin shows that toilets are primarily seen as status symbols (Jenkins and Curtis 2005) and in Cameroon inhabitants of two communities resist the building of latrines because they interfere with their perception of cleanliness and a good life (Ndonko 1993). Yet, one can say that medical hygiene is becoming an increasingly important element in cultures that are caught in the process of medicalization. At the same time, hygienic behavior retains a strong social purpose: it demonstrates civilized manners. People are known to behave much less hygienically when they are not observed by others (Cahil et al. 1985).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Dirt and cleanliness have been the subject of theorizing in several anthropological and sociological perspectives since the beginning of social sciences. Early evolutionist thinkers in the tradition of Darwin looked upon the fear and avoidance of dirt as defense mechanisms against sickness and other danger. They believed there was a hidden rationality in the seemingly spontaneous disgust of dirty things and animals. Religious rules about purity and pollution and taboos on eating certain food or touching unclean objects or persons were medical prescriptions in disguise. Mosaic laws in the biblical texts of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, for example, were perceived as rules for healthy living, even though some of these rules do not make any medical sense today. Curtis and Biran (2001), who carried out research in five different locations, present five elicitors of disgust: body excretions and body parts, certain animals, spoiled food, certain categories of "other people," and breaches of morality. Disgust, they write, "is one of the mechanisms crafted by natural selection to keep our distance from contagion" (2001, 22). Feces, for example, are mentioned as transmitters of more than 20 diseases. Other people's breath, lice and rats, and sexual organs, all of which score high for human disgust, are also common sources of infection.

Marvin Harris (1985) added ecological wisdom to the evolutionary perspective on food taboos and food recommendations. The prohibition of pork, for example, prevented the raising of pigs if that would be detrimental for the environment. In the same vein, he hypothesized that cannibalism – an abomination in most cultures – became an accepted form of consumption among

the Aztecs who faced a depletion of their natural fauna.

It was against these evolutionist and materialist interpretations of dirt avoidance that Mary Douglas (1970) took a stand. "In chasing dirt," she wrote, "we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea" (1970, 12). With her famous dictum "Dirt is matter out of place" she rejected the concept of dirt as a fixed quality of particular objects, substances, animals, or human beings and turned dirt into a radically contextual phenomenon. Absolute dirt, therefore, does not exist; it is the context that determines what/who is clean and what/who is dirty. Saliva in my mouth or caught in a handkerchief is hygienic, but when it falls on the table it is extremely dirty. Conversely, something that is generally regarded as pure, a glass of wine, becomes dirt when it is spilled on a dress.

Douglas's thesis is that the concepts of dirt and cleanliness are strong tools to establish order. They point out what is the appropriate place for anything in life. That definition makes clear why "dirty" and "clean" are such convenient tools for drawing boundaries in any cultural domain. The presence of dirt as a condition of disorder carries with it a strong appeal to restore order in social, religious, moral, sexual, etc. matters. The metaphor of dirt helps to formulate the norms and values of culture. Hygiene, in other words, is a basic cultural act, not just a medical practice.

The psychologist Paul Rozin and colleagues published extensively on disgust as a meaningful human emotion and a reaction to destructions of life. What is most revolting, according to Rozin, is a rotting corpse. Rozin regards abhorrence of dirt ultimately as fear of death (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2000).

The German sociologist Norbert Elias (1982), who developed the perspective of "civilization process," gave dirt a central place as a problem that cultures continuously redefine in a process of refinement and internalization of civilized manners. One of the characteristics of this refinement is a moving away from animalistic features of humans. Bodily functions and substances are increasingly seen as dirty and are covered and dissimulated. Revealing them is regarded as uncivilized. Activities such as sleeping, sex, and defecation should only take place in the private sphere. Better sanitary facilities are seen as signs of progress in civilization (cf. Goudsblom 1986).

Inspired by Douglas's vision of purity and pollution, Van der Geest (2007) has added a relational dimension to the concept of "matter out of place." The strongest feelings of disgust arise in the unwelcome close presence of others. Shoes on a table may be dirty, as Douglas writes, but their presence on the table becomes really uncomfortable if they belong to another person and are placed right in front of us. Thus they become a disgusting invasion of our personal territory; they penetrate our "social skin." The experience of sexual harassment, the unwanted breach of personal and bodily integrity, causes the same revulsion but more intensely.

In conclusion, what is most deeply felt to be out of place is what invades our most private domain. Apparently, the dominant guarantor of social order, at least in Western society, is the boundary between people as individuals. Transgressing those boundaries results in undesired intimacy, which is ultimate dirt. It is no surprise that sexual harassment is viewed as a most disgusting experience and sexual abuse as a hideous crime.

SEE ALSO: Disability; Race and Gender: Intersectionality Theory; Sex; Stigma

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MEDICINE AND SOCIETY

Hygiene and sanitation: medical, social and psychological concerns

In 2007, over 11 000 readers of the *British Medical Journal* chose the sanitary revolution or, defined more broadly, the introduction of clean piped water and sewerage disposal as the most important medical breakthrough since 1840.[1] Earlier on, the World Health Organization had called for a decade of water and sanitation to draw attention to the crucial role of hygiene (human behaviour) and sanitation (infrastructural services) in public health, and in 2010 *PLOS Medicine* published an introductory article titled *Hygiene, Sanitation, and Water: Forgotten Foundations of Health* as part of a four-part series on water and sanitation.[2] One of its opening statements read:

> A massive disease burden is associated with deficient hygiene, sanitation, and water supply and is largely preventable with proven, cost-effective interventions.[2]



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For the past 15 years, the safe disposal of human waste has indeed acquired a status of high priority in public health policies, and the technology of the hygienic toilet is now spreading through poorer parts of the world.

It is indeed remarkable that the medical profession recognizes the crucial importance of a simple and unheroic intervention such as sanitation for the maintenance of health and considers it a bigger step forward than highly advanced medical technologies. Still, the recognition of hygiene and sanitation should not lead to their medical annexation at the expense of other aspects, in particular, their social and psychological implications.

In the history of Western countries, sanitary improvement was not primarily welcomed as medical advance leading to better health; its popularity came first from its appeal to social values such as cleanliness, comfort, esthetics, civilization, good manners, moral purity, godliness, status and prestige.[3,4] The same applies to the acceptance of hygienic toilets in countries where modern sanitation used to be the privilege of a few well-to-do citizens.[5] "Stench (the fight against it) and sanitation go hand in hand," writes the historian, Dolly Jørgensen, in her study of sanitary conditions in medieval London.[6]

Hygiene is embedded in a wide and complex set of social values and sentiments. What we call hygiene is linked with concerns about privacy and intimacy, neatness, social prestige, convenience, respect and being civilized. Unhygienic, in contrast, refers to poverty, shame, disgust and invaded intimacy. During my fieldwork in Ghana, I came to realize that cleanliness is the pre-eminent metaphor to express positive appreciation. Clean = beautiful = attractive = good = civilized = respectable. In Ghanaian English, the expression "she is neat" is almost synonymous with "she is pretty," with the connotation that she is also beautiful in a moral sense: pure. In short, body cleanliness stands for physical and moral attractiveness, whereas dirt symbolizes physical and moral decay. Dirt, or rather the abhorrence of it, plays a central role in human relations. To say that someone is dirty is almost a rejection of the whole person. Cleanliness of the body (the skin, the orifices, the teeth, the nails) and cleanliness with regard to housekeeping, clothing, or one's children, constitutes a basic condition for a person's attractiveness. Physical beauty and attraction are commonly explained in terms of cleanliness.[7]

Hygienic behaviour, therefore, has more to do with impression management and showing respect to others than with prevention of disease. If we give our house a special cleaning when we expect visitors, we do not do so because we are worried about their health but because we want to make a good impression on them. Washing your hands after defecation — a spear point in present-day sanitation campaigns —

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is mainly a sign of being civilized and respectful. Several studies have shown that people are much less motivated to carry out this act of hygiene when nobody is around to observe their good manners.[8] Mothers in Ghana show their civilized stature by the cleanliness of their own and their children's appearance, of cooking utensils, and of the house and its immediate surroundings.

A study in rural Benin, West Africa, about people's motives for building a latrine concluded that "health considerations played only a minor role, and had little if anything to do with preventing fecal–oral disease transmission."[5] The main drives were prestige, well-being, and reasons such as cleanliness, privacy and convenience. Having a private latrine also attracted people to rent a room in the house, which is a common extra income for house owners. In Ghana, having a decent private latrine proved an important condition for organizing a successful funeral. Funerals are social events where families play host to a large crowd of people who come to pay their respects to the deceased. Some visitors come from far away. For the family, the event is a test of their social standing. If conditions in the house are poor, the funeral guests will gossip and look down on them. However, if the house and the reception are good, they will praise the family. A clean and modern toilet plays a substantial role in that appreciation. The study emphasized that policy-makers should take these aspects into consideration during their social marketing of sanitation.[5]

We will not understand hygiene if we do not also discuss disgust. Dirt can be disgusting; removing it is, therefore, not only a social act but also a psychological and emotional one. But what is dirt and why does it cause disgust? In a classic essay, the anthropologist, Mary Douglas, defined dirt as "matter out of place."[9] Her central thesis was that "absolute" dirt does not exist. The same thing or act can be clean as well as dirty. It all depends on the context. Red wine in a glass is fine, but on a dress it becomes dirt. Shoes on the floor (Douglas' own example) are in order, but not on the table. Shaking hands or kissing can be civilized in one situation and outrageous and disgusting in another. Dirt, in other words, is disorder that causes psychological discomfort. Cleaning restores order.

The qualification "out of place" should not be merely understood as a physical or geographical indication (on the floor or on the table). Of more importance is its relational aspect. The wine can still be in the glass and yet be dirty because someone else has drunk from it. The identity of that other person is crucial for the emotional reaction. One person may cause disgust, whereas another person will cause much less or no disgust at all. For some lovers, drinking from one glass even increases the pleasure. The same applies to dealing with matters that we are inclined to consider as absolute dirt (e.g., feces). Cleaning one's little baby is not a disgusting experience for most people; however, a confrontation with the feces of another person may be extremely disgusting. The decisive difference between people who do and do not cause disgust is *intimacy*. The most forceful cause of disgust is not the matter or act itself, but the degree of undesired intimacy that it brings about.

Disgust, according to some scientists, is a natural instinct — a product of our evolution — that protects us against disease. But that is too simple. Disgust is an impulse to restore order. It is an emotion that sets our boundaries and protects our intimate privacy. This may have favourable health effects, but the opposite may also happen. One may acquire HIV from one's lover. A study in Uganda showed that people considered injection needles dirty if they had been used by outsiders and clean if they had been used within the family.[10] A hygienic toilet can be dirty because it is also being used by someone with whom one does not or should not share intimacy. If medical sanitation efforts clash with social values or emotional concerns, they are unlikely to be accepted. Or, to put it more positively, sanitation and hygiene are physical, social and psychological phenomena that may also lead to health improvement.

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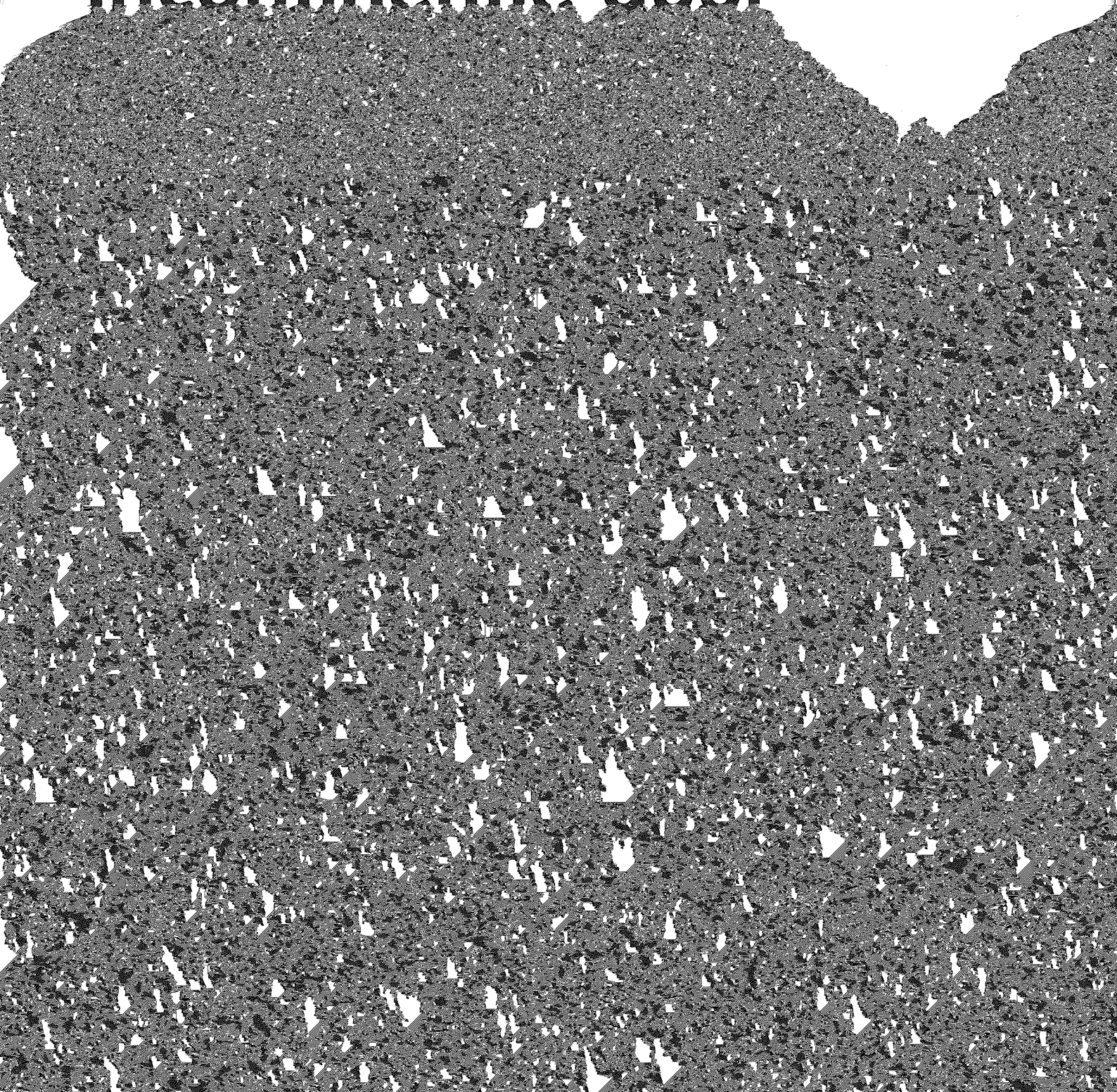
"Wherever the art of medicine is loved, there is also a love of Humanities." — Hippocrates

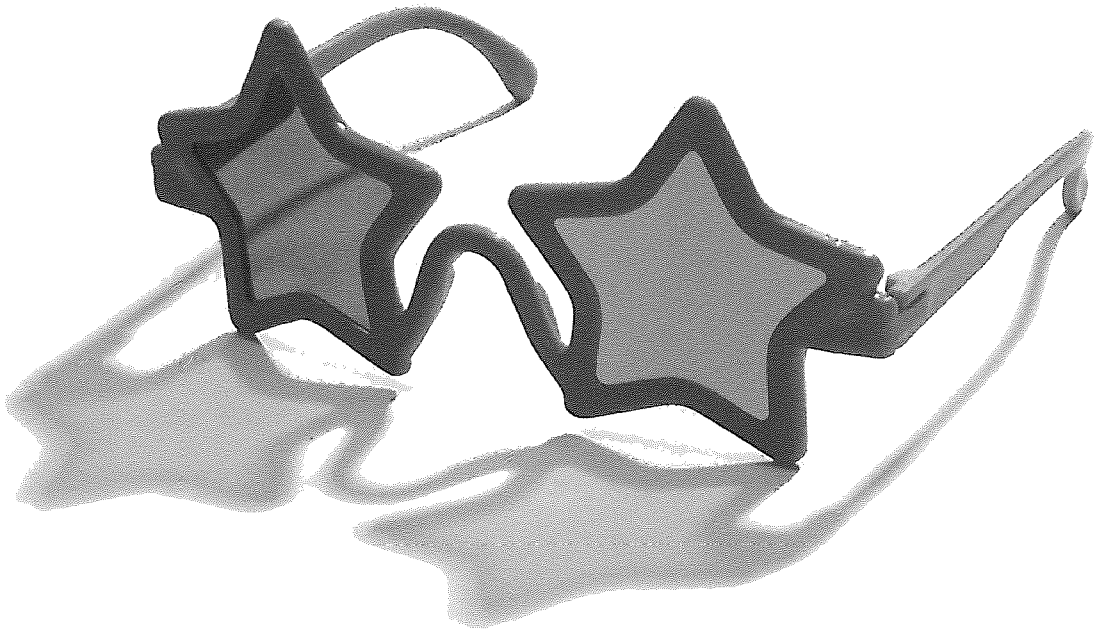
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Binnengekomen stukken

Sociaal vuil en schoon:
Antropologische opmerkingen bij incontinentie

Incontinentie door





Binnengekomen stukken

Zo zou ik door kunnen gaan. Waarom is de drol van mijn hond minder vies dan die van mijn buurmans hond? Waarom is de ontlasting van de baby van iemand anders vies en die van mijn eigen kind 'schoon'? Waarom hebben kinderen vaak grote moeite met de ontlasting van hun bejaarde ouders? Waarom hebben sommige verpleegkundigen wel en andere geen probleem met de ontlasting van de patiënt die ze verzorgen? Waarom is de ontlasting van een onbekende minder vies dan die van een mij bekend persoon?

Het lijkt dat de sleutel tot de antwoorden op deze vragen ligt in de ervaring van gewenste en ongewenste intimiteit. Ontlasting wordt viezer als het sociaal gezien meer 'misplaatst' is. Wat wel of niet 'in orde' is, ligt niet vast maar hangt af van de personen die er mee te maken hebben en van hun relatie tot elkaar. De ontlasting van de buurman vormt misschien helemaal geen probleem voor diens partner.

Incontinentie

Terug naar het begin. Voor incontinentie gelden bovenstaande overwegingen uiteraard ook, maar er komt nog iets bij. Er is niet alleen sprake van mogelijke afkeer bij degene die geconfronteerd wordt met de ontlasting van de incontinente persoon. We moeten ook de ervaring van de incontinente zelf in beschouwing nemen. Mensen anticiperen op hoe anderen zullen reageren hun ontlasting. De ervaring van een openbaar toilet is iedereen bekend. De gedachte dat iemand anders onmiddellijk na mij gebruik zal maken van het toilet waar de lucht van mijn ontlasting nog hangt, maakt mij zenuwachtig. Ik bedenk een manier om de confrontatie van die ander met mijn intimiteit te voorkomen, bijvoorbeeld door een tijdje te wachten tot iedereen weg is of minstens tot de lucht een beetje is opgetrokken. Dat voorbeeld is waarschijnlijk te vergelijken met de vele malen meer directe en ongemakkelijke ervaring van een incontinente persoon die moet toestaan dat een ander zijn ontlasting opruimt. Vooral in het beging is die ervaring misschien nog moeilijker voor de incontinente dan voor degene die hem verzorgt.

Alles went, beweert men. Na een zekere periode wordt de situatie waarin deze persoon mij verzorgd en schoonmaakt gewoner en verdraaglijker. Er groeit een soort vertrouwensrelatie. Het délen van deze intimiteit wordt meer 'gewenst', maar de angst en schaamte keren terug als een ander deze taken overneemt.

Tot besluit

Ik begon deze beschouwing met de opmerking dat alle kwalen en klachten gepaard gaan met sociaal lijden en dat dat in hevige mate geldt voor incontinentie. Vervolgens heb ik getracht onder woorden te brengen waarom dat zo is. Mijn betoog kwam erop neer dat ervaringen van vuil en afkeer die dit lijden verergeren sociaal geconstrueerd worden. Maar als dat zo is, zou het ook mogelijk moeiten zijn reinheid op sociale wijze te construeren en afkeer te vervangen door affectieve zorg. Vuil ligt immers niet vast, het hangt af, zoals gezegd, van menselijke relaties.

Toen ik met een groepje Aziatische en Afrikaanse studenten over ontlasting en vuil sprak, ontspon zich - zoals altijd - een levendige discussie. Er was echter een vrouw, uit de Filippijnen die niets zei, terwijl haar ogen zich met tranen vulden. Iemand vroeg haar waarom ze huilde. Ze vertelde dat haar man drie maanden geleden was overleden na een lange ziekte. Een jaar lang had ze dag en nacht voor hem gezorgd. Hij was incontinent, maar ze had dat nooit afstotend gevonden; integendeel, het schoonmaken van haar zieke hulpeloze geliefde had ze altijd het 'mooiste' gevonden wat ze voor hem kon doen. Er viel een stilte in het klaslokaal en ik zag dat verschillende anderen ook natte ogen kregen.

Ontlasting kan mooi en rein zijn.

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INTRODUCTION

M. A. Odei & Sjaak van der Geest

Waste management is a crucial is sue in preventive health. In 1980 the WHO launched a decade, which was to lead to proper toilet facilities for everybody in the world by the year 1990. The health implications were clear, but there was insufficient understanding of the social and cultural aspects of people's habits of defecation. This publication addresses both sanitary and social aspects of toilet behaviour through three case studies in southern Ghana. The objective is to draw attention to the urgency of a new policy of sanitation and waste management based on good understanding of people's ideas and practices concerning defecation. Indeed the public health is the public wealth. This may be achieved through effective public health and environmental education accompanied by the provision of the appropriate and affordable sanitary facilities.

Health implications

Human excreta usually carry all sorts of organisms, which may cause disease on infection through contamination. These organisms or agents include viruses and bacteria commonly termed germs and parasites, which include protozoa and helminths or worms. A number of these agents or infections depend for their persistence on passing from the excreta of one person to the mouth of another. Auto or self-infection occurs among a few like the seat-worm. There are also a few of them e.g. hookworm and schistosomes which gain entry into the body by directly penetrating through the exposed skin on contact.

There are many obvious and also unsuspecting conditions, behavioural and environmental, which enhance the transmission processes, and these are readily encountered in endemic populations particularly developing countries. In these places one observes the indiscriminate disposal of human excreta in the immediate surroundings and environment. Where some efforts have been made to dispose of them, these may not have been proper or adequately effective. Yet all these infections are likely to decrease in the population or community with the implementation of measures to properly collect the excreta and dispose of them or treat them. The proper management of liquid waste should therefore greatly enhance public health. In this regard it is necessary to appreciate certain factors which have bearing on excretal transmission and the agents involved.

The viruses and bacteria and some protozoan germs in human waste require no period of latency and are immediately infective. Moreover only a tiny dose of infection of the germ is enough to cause illness in the affected person since the germs multiply rap-

idly on entry into the human system. The requirements for the safe collection and disposal of such waste must therefore be very stringent, far more so than for the other agents, the worms.

Most of the helminths or worms require a period of latency to be infective and therefore would not be immediately infective on evacuation. Some may even require intermediate hosts. The requirement for the collection and disposal of excreta containing such disease agents are less stringent than those for the germs discussed above. Moreover they often require repeated doses of infection to elicit the disease conditions.

With the above in mind, the management of liquid or human waste to ensure safe and healthy environment requires careful and deliberate appreciation of the factors necessary to avoid and eliminate contact with the agents of disease. The merits and short comings of all the management practices in use should be carefully assessed and implemented with all the necessary hygienic conditions which may otherwise undermine the efforts of the management practices adopted; pit-latrines, bucket-latrines, KVIPs, septage systems, treatment of liquid waste on collection and the subsequent use of composts developed from them having ensured the destruction of all pathogens during the treatment process.

The aim of all these provisions and measures in liquid waste management must be to isolate the population from their excreta and disease infection agents and thus ensure sound public health in the communities.

Thus there is the absolute need to prevent indiscriminate defecation in the immediate surroundings of human habitation, settlements, labour camp sites and refugee centres. If the provision of pit-latrine is the affordable solution, this must be done. In that case the area must be hygienically maintained, preventing access by flies, which may spread faecal matter containing the germs i.e. viruses, bacteria and protozoan parasites. The surroundings must be dry to prevent infection by hookworms. The selected sites for pit-latrines must take cognisance of underground water systems and wells to avoid contamination through seepage. If it is bucket-type latrines that are appropriate or affordable, these must take into consideration the health implication of the removers and carriers. The final deposition sites must also consider the environmental implication of such dumping as in the case of pit-latrines, and also possible contact with surface water bodies.

The management systems that involve final treatment should take relevant aspects of the above into consideration in addition to the quality and safeness of the effluent to be discharged into natural drains or streams. In addition, the safeness of compost derived from the treatment and its use in food production must be borne in mind.

Social aspects

Practices concerning dirt are firmly embedded in social and cultural traditions. Perception and tolerance of dirt vary between and within cultures and so do concepts of privacy and shame.

A remarkable phenomenon in Ghana's management of liquid waste is the 'popularity' of public toilets. The majority of the population (exact figures are hard to come by[1]) have no private toilets and do not seem particularly worried about the lack of such a facility. Apparently, for many people building or renting a house, a toilet is not a priority. Some seem to prefer *not* to have the toilet on the premises. In Accra, as Obirih-Opareh mentions in his contribution, existing toilets may even be transformed into rooms or stores forcing the inhabitants to resort to public places of convenience.

Such preferences and practices run counter to recommendations by the WHO and other international agencies which stipulate that each household should have its own facility. Assuming that public facilities are kept less clean than private ones, one may expect that the former carry greater health risks for their occupants than the latter.

The impression exists that Ghana is quite unique in its wide-spread use of public toilets (cf., Van der Geest 1999). This publication investigates why this may be the case. It further explores the social, cultural and economic factors leading to hazardous dealing with human waste. Concepts of cleanliness and attitudes to towards bodily excretions usually are the most entrenched in human cultures. Attempts to influence people's management of waste should therefore start from a clear understanding of such cultural and social practices. Up to now, however, such understanding hardly exists in any documentary form.

Research and policy

Defecation is not a topic which is freely discussed in ministerial offices or university lecture rooms. It rather is surrounded and obscured by feelings of embarrassment and disgust and is hidden from public debate. 'Shit' is not a proper topic for academic discourses or policy statements. In spite of their keen theoretical interest in the concept of pollution, social researchers have overwhelmingly neglected defecation in the research efforts.[2]

Similarly, policy-makers have turned a blind eye on the problems of toilet and sanitation, apparently because of their utterly unpleasant character. Post, in his contribution, makes the ironic comment that policy-makers – as well as most researchers – can afford to neglect the dreadful state of many toilets in the community because they themselves do not have to rely on them. They have more comfortable places to relieve themselves.

The three papers in this publication are an attempt to reverse this tendency

[1] Figures for Accra, provided by Stephen et al. 1994 and Konadu-Agyemang 1998, are difficult to interpret. The former, for example, report that in 1990, 30% of the population resorted to public toilets, 20% had their own private toilet and 50% 'shared' a toilet with others in the house. It seems, therefore, that the majority use semi-public toilets, but exact descriptions of such 'semi-public' facilities are lacking.

[2] An exception is Ndonko's study of social and cultural aspects of defecation in two Cameroonian societies. Flavier T. Ndonko is an anthropologist from Cameroon (Ndonko 1993).

of avoidance and to draw attention to the importance and urgency of the matter. The paper on Accra, by Nelson Obirih-Opareh, is based on research on 'Decentralisation and waste management in the Accra Metropolitan Area", funded by the Netherlands-Israel Development Research Programme (NIRP). The Kumasi paper, by Johan Post, results from a co-operative project of the Kumasi Town and Country Planning Department, the Department of Planning of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, and the Institutes of Planning and Demography and Development Research of the University of Amsterdam. The paper on the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo, by Sjaak van der Geest, is derived from his anthropological study of old age and care, financed by the Sociology and Anthropology Department of the University of Amsterdam. All four authors of this publication take part in the NIRP research project on Decentralisation and waste management.

Notes

1. Some of the ideas discussed in this chapter were published in an earlier article (Van der Geest 1998).
2. We thank Johan Post and the participants of a 'round table' on liquid waste management at STEPRI/CSIR for their constructive comments. This chapter is a first exploration of an important but neglected domain of human thought and behaviour. We are aware that more anthropological fieldwork (participant observation) needs to be done to reach an understanding of the 'paradoxes discussed here.

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Ontmoeting in het toilet

Sjaak van der Geest

Ik ontmoette Johan Post – metonymisch gesproken – voor het eerst in een Ghanees toilet. Niet een gezellige plek voor een ontmoeting tenzij je – zoals wij beiden – een warme belangstelling hebt voor een van de gewoonste en tegelijkertijd meest verafschuwde menselijke gedragingen: je behoefte doen. Misschien een wat eufemistische benaming maar ook een zeer rake en terechte. Johan had in Kumasi, de tweede stad van Ghana, onderzoek gedaan naar de condities en het gebruik van openbare toiletten. Hij had daar ook over gepubliceerd, onder meer met Ankie Frantzen. Dat was eind jaren negentig van de vorige eeuw, dus vèr in het Pre-Posttijdperk van het Onderwijsinstituut, maar het is altijd leerzaam iets over directeuren te vernemen, vóór zij directeur werden.

Rond diezelfde tijd had ik een artikel geschreven over het gebruik van het toilet in een Ghanees dorp, ongeveer 80 kilometer van Kumasi. Een wat smerig verhaal (zoals je van een antropoloog mag verwachten) waarin ik mijn eerste traumatische ervaring in het plaatselijke openbare toilet verwerkte en elke vorm van eufemisering trachtte te vermijden (Van der Geest, 1998). Ik wilde met woorden de olfactorische en visuele verschrikkingen van het toilet zo zintuigelijk mogelijk voor de lezer oproepen. Kortom, we deelden een fascinatie voor een basaal en banaal menselijk verschijnsel dat massaal genegeerd werd door onze collega's in de sociale geografie en culturele antropologie.

Johan nam in 1998 deel aan een symposium over 'Poep, cultuur en welbevinden' georganiseerd door het tijdschrift Medische Antropologie en presenteerde een paper (co-auteur Ankie Frantzen) met de poëtische titel 'Wel en Wee van de Publieke Plee', dat later gepubliceerd werd in het themanummer van het tijdschrift over 'Poep' etcetera. Een kort citaat uit de conclusie; zoals men van een social geograaf mag verwachten, beleidsgericht:

> *Ook in de nabije toekomst zullen veel mensen, vooral in de lagere inkomenswijken, het zich niet kunnen veroorloven een eigen privé-toilet te installeren. De overheid veronderstelt dat veel bewoners een latrine in huis prefereren boven het gebruik van een openbaar toilet in verband met privacy-redenen. Voor die aanname is eigenlijk geen bewijs gevonden. De toiletgebouwen zijn doorgaans goed afgeschermd van de straat, waardoor voor vrijwel alle gebruikers het gevoel van voldoende privacy ontstaat. De preoccupatie met privacy is meer iets van de plannenmakers met hun verwesterste opvattingen dan van de gebruikers. Uit de lange lijst met klachten die de geïnterviewde gebruikers opsommen, blijkt dat zij veel waarde hechten aan schone en goed onderhouden toiletten.Met deze feiten moeten planners, besluitvormers en beheerders van openbare toiletten rekening houden. Gezocht moet worden naar openbare latrines die niet alleen goedkoop in onderhoud zijn maar ook makkelijk schoon te houden (Frantzen & Post 1999: 95).*

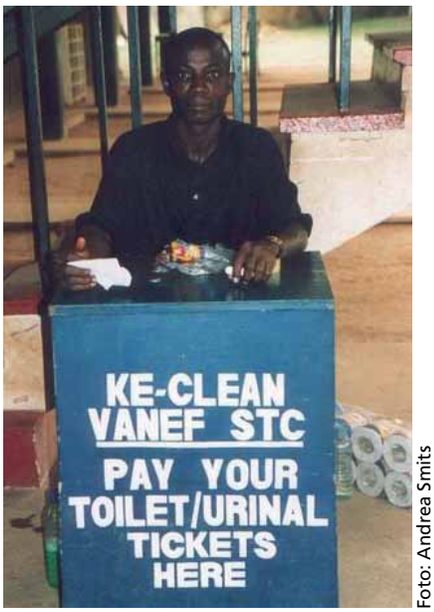


Foto: Andrea Smits

Een schoon openbaar toilet in Kumasi

Rond diezelfde periode diende zich een Ghanese PhD kandidaat aan, Nelson Obirih-Opareh die – na het zien van een TV uitzending over de meeste vervuilde wijk van de hoofdstad Accra, bijbels bijgenaamd 'Sodom and Gomorrah' – besloten had zijn onderzoek op de sanitaire problemen in de hoofdstad van zijn land te richten: *solid and liquid waste management* (weer zo'n keurig eufemisme). Het sprak vanzelf dat Johan en ik (samen met Ad de Bruijne) de superviors werden van deze kandidaat. Een kort citaat uit de Preface van zijn proefschrift schetst wat Nelson – eerst op TV en daarna 'live' – in Sodom and Gomorrah aantrof:

> *There is no waste collection in the area by any organization, agency or individual, resulting in waste dumps and litter everywhere. There are no toilet facilities in the whole area. Although the adults may use public toilets in other parts of the city, the children who stay behind at home simply have to defecate outside. Such free-for all defecation means human faeces are a common sight. There is no drainage system and the few natural drains are blocked by all manner of waste including plastics and polythene bags through indiscriminate dumping. The stagnant waste water, which is greenish black in color, offers a fertile breeding ground for mosquitoes and other disease carriers (Obirih-Opareh 2003: 1)* >

Ik weet niet of de toiletkennis van Johan nuttig is geweest tijdens zijn aanstelling in het Onderwijsinstituut (vuil ruimen, emoties van afkeer onderdrukken) maar zijn begeleiding van Nelson is dat zeker geweest. Ik heb daar zijn engelengeduld en onverwoestbaar goeie humeur leren kennen en bewonderd; die moeten hem in het administratieve doolhof van onze faculteit zeer van pas zijn gekomen. Ik wens hem veel succes in zijn nieuwe baan waar hij bovengenoemde kwaliteiten ook zeker nodig zal hebben. En ik wens zijn opvolger in het Onderwijsinstituut veel sterkte in het nu aangebroken Post-Posttijdperk.

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Foto: Hassi Baniaz/Facebook

Sodom and Gomorrah



Bron: *www.historiek.nl*

Napoleon 'voor de troepen uit!'

Voor de troepen uitlopen

Marieke Brand

Johan Post maakt onderdeel uit van een zeer select gezelschap van bestuurders die voordat het en vogue raakte het aandurfde om te kijken naar iets wat Abram de Swaan ooit tijdens een bijeenkomst beschreef als 'de apartheid van de UvA'.

Toen ik jaren geleden begon na te denken over de vraag waarom de UvA zo homogeen is in haar studentenpopulatie en haar medewerkersbestand – omdat dit eigenlijk best vreemd is in een stad die enkel bestaat uit minderheden – was dit thema vrijwel taboe op de UvA. De Pavlov reactie van UvA bestuurders op de aanwijzingen dat er processen van uitsluiting gaande waren, was om alles weg te wuiven. Als we al iets deden, was het op het niveau van de studenten. Men was zich er niet van bewust dat dit het beeld versterkte en dat zij dus het probleem waren. Johan had door dat het tijd was om de blik naar binnen te richten en naar de eigen instelling te kijken. Hij durfde vragen te stellen zoals: Hoe inclusief zijn we nou eigenlijk? Zijn er structurele processen gaande waarvan we ons niet bewust zijn, en die maken dat studenten en medewerkers die afwijken van de (impliciete) norm moeite hebben om hier te presteren? Wat heb je extra nodig om het speelveld voor iedereen gelijk te maken? Inmiddels gaan deze vragen op veel meer plekken leven, en gaan we hopelijk op weg naar een andere, meer open universiteit.

Toen we hieraan begonnen bij sociale wetenschappen had haast niemand de moed om een eigen koers te varen ten opzichte van het CvB, en het CvB keek de andere kant uit. Johan durfde dat wel, en is daarmee naast een trendsetter ook gewoon een held. <

SJAAK VAN DER GEEST

Kou en warmte in de stad

Over 'privacy in public' en geveinsde onverschilligheid

Op een zonnige middag in het voorjaar van 1990 zit Thaddeus Müller in het Vondelpark een boek te lezen. Zijn aandacht wordt afgeleid. Een paar meter van hem vandaan zit een 'aantrekkelijke moeder in een kleurig badpak' met haar kindje te spelen. Ze heeft een picknickmand bij zich, bladert wat in een tijdschrift en kijkt even naar de antropoloog. Er is oogcontact. Ze glimlacht. Ze lijkt gelukkig. De blik van Müller dwaalt verder. Rechts zitten twee meisjes te praten. Hij verstaat flarden. Een jongen komt langs fietsen en een van de meisjes roept iets naar hem. Links zit een verliefd stel. Ze strelen elkaar. Achter hem zit een man in de dertig de krant te lezen. Müller ziet dat de man naar het verliefde paartje kijkt en dat het meisje, over de schouder van haar vriend, de dertiger aankijkt. De man draait zich om en gaat op zijn buik liggen. Hij kijkt nu naar iemand anders en Müller volgt zijn blik weer... Zo ontwikkelt zich een netwerk van blikken en onuitgesproken gedachten en gevoelens, op het groene gras, in de vriendelijke zon. Het is het moment waarop bij Müller het idee

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* Deze beschouwing is het resultaat van een experiment in zelfdiscipline. Als docent in antropologische onderzoeksmethoden werd ik geconfronteerd met 46 verslagen van studenten die in diverse openbare ruimtes het gedrag van mensen hadden geobserveerd. De tegenzin in het lezen en 'beoordelen' van zoveel teksten kon ik overwinnen door ze te beschouwen als materiaal van 'eigen' onderzoek, bruikbaar voor een kritische bespreking van een onlangs verschenen boek over de warmte van de stad. Ik dank de studenten voor hun toestemming gebruik te maken van hun waardevolle waarnemingen. Als cultuur – vaak – een kwestie is van zich schikken in het onvermijdelijke, de symbolische of psychologische tering naar de maatschappelijke nering zetten, van de culturele nood een metaculturele deugd maken, dan heb ik dat met het schrijven van dit essay gedaan. Dank ook aan mijn collega's Hein Streefkerk, Pepijn van de Port en Leon Deben, aan de warme-stad-auteur Thaddeus Müller en aan Rimke en Geertje van der Geest voor hun scherpe observaties.

geboren wordt van 'De Warme Stad'. Twaalf jaar later verschijnt het boek met die titel en promoveert Müller in Amsterdam, de stad waar het allemaal begon.

Zijn studie, schrijft hij, is een kanttekening bij het stereotiepe beeld van de koude anonieme stad zoals dat door diverse antropologen en sociologen beschreven is. Een van de eersten was Wirth (1938) in zijn theoretisch manifest van de 'Chicago School'. Vanwege de bevolkingsomvang, -dichtheid en -heterogeniteit van de grote stad dienen mensen zich anders tegenover elkaar te gedragen: onpersoonlijk, oppervlakkig, vluchtig. Het vermijden van persoonlijke betrokkenheid in het publieke domein is de enige manier om in deze 'wildernis' te overleven. Stedelingen beperken zich in hun contacten met anderen tot het hoogst noodzakelijke, functioneel en zakelijk, eendimensionaal. De ander is buschauffeur, een agent, een verkoper, een lokettiste of gewoon – in de meeste gevallen – een voorbijganger. Een nadere kennismaking is onnodig en ongewenst. Door zich zakelijk op te stellen in publieke ruimtes waar honderden mensen per minuut de 'revue' passeren, bewaren mensen tijd, ruimte, energie en emotie voor degenen met wie ze wel persoonlijk contact willen hebben. Volgens de Amerikaanse theoloog Harvey Cox, in zijn in 1965 verschenen bestseller *The Secular City*, was de anonimiteit van de grote stad een 'zegen' omdat anders de bewoners te gronde zouden gaan aan de overrompelende hoeveelheid publieke contacten.

Zo blijkt de anonimiteit van de stad een 'blessing in disguise' en kenmerken de meeste sociologische en antropologische studies van de stedelijke samenleving zich door ambivalentie en paradox: de kou van de stad is onvermijdelijk, en misschien te betreuren maar tegelijkertijd is zij een voorwaarde voor de warmte die mensen nastreven in hun privé-domein. Met name in het werk van Goffman (1963), Milgram (1977) en Lofland (1985, 1998) wordt die dubbelheid van publiek gedrag scherp getekend. Als stedelingen zich in de publieke ruimte begeven, zo vat Müller Loflands visie samen,

> [M]oeten ze overgaan tot symbolische transformatie. Dit gedrag bestaat uit lichaamsbewegingen en -houdingen waarmee personen contact uit de weg gaan. Ze scheppen afstand door oogcontact te vermijden en zich niet opvallend te gedragen. Zo ontstaat een 'symbolisch schild van privacy', waardoor de sociale omgang in steden een onvriendelijk, kil en onverschillig karakter heeft (Müller 2002a: 20).

Maar, genietend in de lentezon van het Vondelpark, bedenkt Müller dat er meer aan de hand is en dat deze quasi-onverschilligheid een eenzijdig beeld van de stad geeft. De industriestad, citeert hij zijn promotor Brunt (1989: 9), heeft

plaatsgemaakt voor de pretstad. De binnenstad is het domein geworden waar jonge mensen met een redelijk inkomen en betrekkelijk veel vrije tijd verpozing zoeken al of niet vermengd met de aanwezigheid van toeristen die deze 'gezelligheid' met instemming en/of verbazing gadeslaan. Het aantal horecagelegenheden is exponentieel gestegen en hetzelfde geldt voor de vierkante meters terras. Mensen zoeken de stad op om zich te vermaken, ze gaan 'stappen', winkelen, op een terras zitten en storten zich op de dichtbevolkte dansvloer. Er is oog- en lichaamscontact in overvloed. Individuen wurmen zich met graagte door de menigte en leggen 'terloops' een warme hand op een schouder of de zachte ronding van een heup. In het voorbijgaan worden opmerkingen geplaatst die soms tot meer leiden. Er hangt een elektrische lading in de lucht, een erotische zelfs, niet alleen kou.

Hoe overtuigend is dit *andere* beeld van de stad? Müller schrijft dat observeren voor hem een vruchtbare onderzoeksmethode was: 'Ik heb dag in dag uit gekeken naar het gedrag van onbekenden, van vriend(inn)en en mezelf in het publieke domein als ik bijvoorbeeld uitging, door de stad fietste of boodschappen deed' (p. 25).Hij deed zijn observaties in cafés, discotheken, straten en parken en op markten. Uit die observaties kwam naar voren dat mensen zich in veel situaties hielden aan de regels die Lofland noemde ('zo min mogelijk opvallen, fysiek contact uit de weg gaan, contact vermijden en personen die er vreemd of anders uitzien op een afstand houden'). 'In veel situaties', maar hoe vaak? Hij geeft toe dat hij er niet in geslaagd is de stedelijke warmte 'op grote schaal' waar te nemen (p. 25), maar voegt daar in een voetnoot aan toe dat zijn observaties overeenkwamen met die van studenten die gelijksoortige observaties verricht hadden in het kader van het onderwijs dat hij gaf (1995-1997). Opvallend is echter dat we in zijn studie niets meer vernemen van die studentenobservaties en bijna niets van die van hemzelf. Observaties bleken grote beperkingen te hebben. Elders schrijft hij: 'Hoe kan iemand op basis van vluchtige observaties aflezen hoe mensen voelen of denken?' (Müller 2002b: 26).

Het toeval wil dat ik zes jaar later ook inzage kreeg in observaties van (in grote meerderheid vrouwelijke) antropologiestudenten, zoals ik in *mijn* voetnoot reeds vermeldde. Die 46 observaties bieden een mogelijkheid om met iets meer zelfvertrouwen een schatting te maken hoe 'gewoon' Müllers informatie over contactzoekende stedelingen nu is. Ik weet, kwantitatieve metingen maken geen deel uit van de huidige antropologische cultuur, maar een *indruk*, een *redelijk vermoeden*, over de al of niet alledaagsheid van antropologische observaties is toch gewenst. Uiteindelijk wil geen enkele antropoloog toch iets beschrijven dat onmiddellijk opgeslokt wordt in de spreekwoordelijke 'uitzon-

dering die de regel bevestigt'. Het lijkt daarom verstandig om de 46 observaties die mij in de schoot geworpen werden nader te beschouwen.

Alle studenten observeerden gedurende één uur het gedrag van mensen in een openbare ruimte. Hun was gevraagd speciaal te letten op de vraag of deze mensen contact zochten met anderen of – integendeel – zich van die anderen afschermden en een stukje privé-ruimte trachtten te behouden. De observaties vonden plaats in de trein en de tram, op het station en het vliegveld, in restaurants, winkels, bibliotheken, in een sportschool, in een computerzaal van de universiteit, in een centrum voor drugsverslaafden, in een stembureau, in een museum, op een boot en zelfs in de kortstondige glazen ruimte van een draaideur. Opvallend afwezig zijn de zonnige straten, parken en markten waar Müller rondhing, begrijpelijk want het was hartje winter toen de studenten op pad gingen.

Hun conclusies laten aan duidelijkheid niets te wensen over. In 44 van de 46 verslagen melden de studenten dat mensen in de publieke ruimte de 'regels' van Lofland secuur volgen: zij vermijden alle vormen van contact met onbekenden en gooien daarvoor een grote verscheidenheid van middelen in de strijd. Een kleine bloemlezing volgt.

Strategieën van afscherming

Geen middel tot vervoering
maar middel van vervoer
Ellen Warmond

Studente Kirsten van der Voort zit in een van de middelste coupés van de sneltrein Amsterdam-Den Haag. Het is zes uur in de avond. De meeste reizigers lijken zakenmensen en studenten. Ze observeert:

> Als mensen de trein instappen, lopen de meesten eerst de gehele coupé door alvorens een zitplaats uit te kiezen. Sommigen lopen de coupé weer uit, ook al is er nog genoeg zitplek. Anderen kiezen aan het eind van de coupé een zitplek uit. Weer anderen lopen aan het einde van de coupé een stuk terug voordat ze ergens plaatsnemen. De mensen kiezen allereerst voor een zitplek op een lege bank en dan het liefst bij het raam. Als men plaatsneemt tegenover iemand, kiest men ervoor om aan het gangpad te zitten, schuin tegenover de ander. Iedereen die een tas heeft en plaatsneemt op een lege bank, zet de tas op de lege plaats naast zich. Wanneer iemand vraagt de tas weg te halen om daar te kunnen zitten, doet iedereen dat. De meesten nemen de tas dan op schoot, als een

soort wiegenkindje. Bijna iedereen houdt de jas aan in de trein. Twee mensen zitten met gekruiste armen. De meeste reizigers zoeken een bezigheid zodra ze hebben plaatsgenomen; de een belt, de ander leest of eet en weer een ander luistert naar een walkman of schrijft in een notitieboekje [observeert zij zichzelf]. Aan de lichaamshouding kan men zien dat men elkaar liefst niet aanraakt of gadeslaat. Mensen aan de raamkant zitten met hun lichaam naar het raam gedraaid, die aan het gangpad de andere kant op. Oogcontact wordt vermeden door gezichten van elkaar af te wenden.

Er is waarschijnlijk geen situatie waarin het dilemma van 'privacy in public' zich zo acuut aandient als in een trein waar mensen opgescheept worden met de nabijheid van anderen, een onbedoeld neveneffect van hun wens zich te verplaatsen van A naar B. Men vindt dan ook nergens zoveel strategieën om het ongemak van de ongewenste aanwezigheid van vreemden te verminderen als in de trein. In de zojuist aangehaalde observatie komen er diverse aan bod. Het begint met het zoeken naar de meest lege zitplaats, de keuze voor een zitplaats aan het raam, het afwenden van het lichaam, het vermijden van oogcontact, het gebruik van tassen om de plaats naast zich onbezet te houden, het aanhouden van een jas als een buffer tegen het naderende lichaam van de medereiziger, de armen beschermend voor het lichaam kruisen, een boek of een krant die niet alleen de ruimte afschermen, maar ook een natuurlijk 'excuus' bieden om de – ongepaste – aandacht voor medereizigers af te leiden. Walkmans, diskmans en mobiele telefoons (om te sms'en en berichten te lezen) dienen hetzelfde doel. Het raam is een uitkomst. Niet alleen biedt het een fysieke bescherming voor het privé-domein van de reiziger, het zorgt ook voor de hoognodige afleiding.

De publieke ruimte van de treincoupé is zo ongemakkelijk omdat men lang met elkaar *stil* zit. Niemand beweegt. Het kijken naar elkaar gaat daarom onmiddellijk over in staren of zelfs gluren, een hoogst ongemakkelijke situatie, temeer daar iedereen tegelijkertijd subject en object van kijken is. Het natuurlijke kijken naar iemand die passeert – even maar, en dan is hij voorbij – is hier niet mogelijk. Ook de blik die op de ander gericht mag zijn tijdens een gesprek is hier geen optie, althans niet voor de reizigers die zwijgend naast en tegenover onbekenden zitten. Gelukkig beweegt de trein door een landschap of een stad, en het raam laat dat zien. De ogen kunnen zich op natuurlijke wijze op de voorbijschietende mensen en objecten richten, weg van de anderen die ook een veilige plek zoeken voor hun ogen, zoals een verlegen spreker die niet weet wat hij met zijn handen moet doen.

Zoals het raam het passerende landschap toont, laat het boek of de krant een andere beweging zien waar de ogen zich op mogen richten: een lopend verhaal, een bericht. En hetzelfde geldt voor de mobiel en voor de muziekproducerende objecten waarbij men de ogen kan sluiten, zogenaamd om intenser van de muziek te genieten. En ten slotte is er de meest natuurlijke afsluiting van de wereld, de al of niet voorgewende slaap.[1]

Al deze strategieën voor het behoud van een stukje privacy in de trein beginnen op het perron. Studente Matthea de Jong observeerde het gedrag van mensen op Perron 10 van het Centraal Station in Amsterdam. Ze schrijft:

> 17.15 uur: Mensen staan te wachten op de trein van 17.36. Ik zit op een bankje. De regel lijkt dat er hooguit drie mensen op een bankje mogen zitten, een vierde wordt met argusogen bekeken. Om te voorkomen dat er nog een vierde bij komt zitten, wordt een grote reistas op de bank gezet. De tas dient als een verlenging van het lichaam, als een schild ter verdediging van de ruimte. (...) Iets anders wat ik in het uur negen keer observeer, is dat men een krant of tijdschrift gaat lezen. De lezers houden de krant zodanig grotesk vast dat het lijkt alsof ze zoveel mogelijk ruimte voor zichzelf willen reserveren. (...) De krant verbergt de persoon erachter. Deze heeft een privé-ruimte gecreëerd die zonder brutaliteit niet verstoord kan worden.
> 17.25: Het wordt drukker op het perron. Mensen verspreiden zich gelijkmatig over het perron. Het zijn net atomen die zich naar het minst drukke plekje haasten. De wet van de diffusie. Niemand gaat dicht bij een ander staan.
> 17.30: De trein arriveert. De regels die tot dat moment golden, worden van alle kanten geschonden. De reizigers weten niet hoe snel ze naar de witte lijn moeten snellen om straks de beste plek te veroveren. (De trein stopt) Alle schaamte valt van de reizigers af. Men holt en struikelt om zo snel mogelijk bij de deuren te komen. (...) De passagiers die de trein uitstappen moeten zich door de menigte heen worstelen. Het gaat met moeite. Mensen staan tegen elkaar aan zonder dat ze er problemen mee hebben. Tassen worden wel stevig vastgehouden, maar het lijkt of het mensen niet meer kan schelen dat ze zo op elkaar staan.[2]

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1 De echte slaap heeft echter ook nadelen en veroorzaakt wederzijdse gêne. Onbedoeld en onbewust verraadt de slaper enkele intieme details van zichzelf aan onbekenden, die daar vervolgens weer onaangenaam door getroffen kunnen worden: openhangende mond, snurken, kwijlen, ongewenst lichaamscontact (cf. Van der Geest 2002).

2 Over de veldslagen die op Amsterdamse perrons geleverd worden schreef Brana-Shute, een Amerikaanse antropoloog, een korte moraliteit. Het feit dat 'The

De waarneming is herkenbaar en komisch; komisch omdat de goede plek die de voorsten weten te bemachtigen onmiddellijk zijn waarde verliest als de coupé volstroomt. Het gedrag is irrationeel in de zin dat degene die zich 'prinsheerlijk' als enige op de vierzitplaatsen nestelt, weet dat hij binnen enkele tellen zijn territorium zal moeten delen met anderen. De enige winst is misschien dat hij een raamzit bemachtigt. Het nadeel is echter dat de hardloper niet kan kiezen met wie hij het komende halfuur de ruimte zal moeten delen. Toch haast men zich voor de beste plaatsen... Het gedrag is vooral symbolisch en psychologisch, men *doet* in ieder geval iets, men geeft zichzelf het gevoel niet passief te blijven. Het feitelijke effect doet minder terzake, is even irrationeel (of rationeel?) als de automobilist die in de stapvoets rijdende file voortdurend van baan wisselt.

De regels van afstand houden gelden met name in eetgelegenheden. Studente Anna Stegeman schrijft:

> Een paar maanden geleden zat ik in de Mensa (studentenrestaurant) te eten terwijl het vrij rustig was. Ik zat alleen aan een tafel met acht stoelen maar na een tijdje kwam er een man bij me aan tafel zitten die op de stoel naast me ging zitten. Ik voelde meteen dat hij inbreuk maakte op wat ik op dat moment beschouwde als mijn persoonlijke ruimte. Hij had net zo goed ergens anders of in ieder geval op een andere stoel aan dezelfde tafel kunnen gaan zitten, er was immers plaats genoeg.

Na een uur observeren, enkele maanden later, in dezelfde Mensa, terwijl het niet druk is, concludeert ze:

> Alle mensen gingen zonder uitzondering aan een lege tafel zitten. De meesten gingen bovendien aan het uiteinde van een tafel zitten. (...) Een opvallend punt was verder dat mensen alleen meer in de periferie van de ruimte plaatsnamen terwijl groepjes eerder kozen voor het centrum van de ruimte. (...) Van de mensen die alleen waren ging meer dan de helft zitten lezen of bellen, alsof zij probeerden zichzelf een houding te geven in plaats van alleen maar te eten en voor zich uit te staren. De mensen in groepjes hadden dit niet nodig; die hadden elkaar.

Dutch don't queu' bracht hem in grote verwarring. Hem was met name het lichamelijk contact tijdens het gedrang op de roltrap een gruwel (Brana-Shute 1990).

Mensen die *samen* kwamen gedroegen zich dus heel anders. Zij gingen vaker in het midden zitten en 'eisten' als het ware de ruimte voor zich op, over groepen van mensen kom ik later te spreken.

Er zijn vele plaatsen waar mensen zich gedurende enige tijd noodgedwongen samen ophouden omdat ze op hun beurt wachten, bijvoorbeeld in een winkel, een wachtkamer of in een museum voor een beroemd schilderij. Gewoonlijk hebben de wachtenden geen enkele relatie met elkaar, afgezien van het gemeenschappelijk doel waarvoor zij zich daar bevinden. Zij keren zich dan gewoonlijk ook niet tot de anderen. Het verbreken van deze code wordt vaak als onaangenaam ervaren. Beschaafd gedrag in dergelijke situaties is zich niet met anderen bemoeien en niet de orde 'verstoren'. Een studente observeerde het wachten van studenten in een computerruimte tot een computer vrijkwam. Hoewel alle wachtenden studenten waren, vermeden ook zij alle contacten en wachtten beleefd op hun beurt. De strategieën die mensen in treinen volgen om zichzelf in zwijgzaamheid een houding te geven, werden ook hier beproefd: lezen, sms'en, naar mensen (en objecten) verder weg kijken (zolang die niet terugkeken).

> Zodra iemand bemerkte dat hij nog niet aan de beurt was ging die aan zijn kleding plukken, tegen de muur hangen, enzovoort. Nooit kwam er een gesprekje op gang tussen onbekende wachtenden, zelfs geen glimlach werd uitgewisseld. Als de blikken van twee mensen elkaar kruisten, leek dat per ongeluk te gebeuren en keken beiden zo snel mogelijk weer voor zich uit.

De bedreiging van de privacy door anderen is het grootst naarmate men minder 'beschermende' kleding draagt. Het publieke zwembad is zo'n plek waar men zich bijna ontkleed in de menigte begeeft. De regels ter vermijding van inbreuk op privacy worden er extra strikt nageleefd. Tegen elkaar aan dringen met de kleren aan, dat kan nog, zoals we gezien hebben op het perron, maar in badpak doe je dat niet. Geertje Laurijssen noteerde wat observaties bij haar bezoek aan het zwembad.

> De meeste mensen kiezen het trapje om in het water te gaan. Zorgvuldig kijken ze of er genoeg plaats is om zich in het water te begeven. Anders wachten ze tot de anderen uit de buurt zijn. Ook degenen die in de buurt van het trapje zwemmen, houden dat in de gaten. Als zij zien dat mensen het water in willen, zwemmen zij iets sneller door of wisselen van baan om plaats te maken... Sommigen springen gewoon in het water. De 'omzwemmenden' krijgen spetters in hun gezicht.(...) Rugzwemmers maken zich niet druk om de ruimte. Zij

verwachten dat de hun medezwemmers hen zien aankomen en plaats zullen maken. De meesten schijnen dit te accepteren en zwemmen in een bocht om de rugzwemmer heen. Toch doen zich enkele botsingen voor. De rugzwemmer verontschuldigt zich. De 'aangevallen' zwemmer lijkt geïrriteerd maar antwoordt toch: 'O, geeft niet.'

Nog delicater wordt het onder de douche, die nu eenmaal een sterk privégevoel oproept. Net als het toilet is de douche een plek waar men thuis gewoonlijk alleen is. In het zwembad is het echter een plaats die je met anderen moet delen. Dat geeft enig ongemak:

> De douches kozen mensen zorgvuldig uit. Als het rustig was, ging men zo ver mogelijk van de andere douchers af staan, liefst aan de andere muur. Zelden de douche direct naast een andere douchende persoon. (...) Sommigen douchten bescheiden en snel en namen weinig ruimte in beslag. Anderen gingen ongegeneerd uitgebreid douchen en een enkeling schroomde niet zijn geslachtsdelen te wassen wat tot verbaasde (soms afkeurende) gezichten leidde van mensen in hun directe omgeving.

Observerend onderzoek heeft zijn beperkingen, zoals ook Müller ontdekte; hoe moeten wij het gedrag van de geslachtsdelenwassende man interpreteren? Heeft hij gewoon lak aan de aanwezigheid van anderen en behoort hij tot de categorie van mensen (zie verderop) die de publieke ruimte als hun thuis beschouwen? Of lijdt hij aan een verhulde vorm van exhibitionisme? Het zijn geen vragen die men gemakkelijk kan stellen daar in de douche. De vragen zelf zouden de orde nog meer verstoren.

De privacy van de dingen

Het gevoel van privacy in de publieke ruimte breidt zich uit over de dingen die op een of andere wijze verbonden zijn met individuen. De tassen die mensen in de trein naast zich leggen zijn niet alleen buffers tegen invasies door anderen, het zijn tegelijkertijd metonymische verlengstukken van het lichaam van de eigenaar. Het is dan ook niet mogelijk een tas op de tas van een ander te leggen, dat zou bijna even verkeerd zijn als op zijn/haar schoot te gaan zitten. Een tas is een stukje persoon dat naast de bezittende persoon zit. Daarom werkt de buffer ook zo goed.

Voor kleding geldt hetzelfde. Petra ten Hoeve, in de spitstrein, schrijft:

> Wanneer iemand naast mij per ongeluk op mijn jas gaat zitten, zeg ik pardon. De persoon licht zijn zitvlak even op, zodat ik mijn jas kan terugtrekken. Waarom vind ik het onprettig als iemand op mijn jas zit? Ik heb het gevoel dat hij aan een deel van mij komt.

Metonymische uitbreidingen van het individu zijn er in vele soorten en maten. De rook van een sigaret, het geluid van een stem, de lichaamsgeur, de warme zitting die overblijft als de medereiziger opschuift of vertrekt, de spetters van de andere zwemmers in het zwembad, de plas water in het kleedhokje, de borden en het bestek van een vorige eter, de hond van de voorbijganger, het zijn allemaal onaangename tekenen van de aanwezigheid van anderen die ongevraagd het privé-domein van iemand binnendringen. Ongewenste intimiteiten dus. Die zorg om de privacy der dingen komt heel treffend naar voren in de wijze waarop de badgasten in het zwembad hun shampooflesjes ordenen op het muurtje van de doucheruimte: op veilige afstand van elkaar, alsof het de douchende mensen zelf zijn.

Ordeverstoorders

Niet alle gebruikers van de publieke ruimte houden zich even zorgvuldig aan de ongeschreven regels van privacy. Het is leerzaam om deze ordeverstoorders nader te beschouwen.

Eén categorie bestaat uit individuen die zich in een groep bevinden. Leden van een groep hebben geen probleem met de onderlinge privacy, ze zijn immers een groep en staan voor elkaar open. Daar komt nog bij dat ze 'samen sterk' zijn en er minder voor terugschrikken de privacy van anderen in het gedrang te brengen. Luidruchtigheid en hinderlijk gedrag zijn hoofdzakelijk afkomstig van groepen. Openbaar geweld, de uiterste vorm van ordeverstoring, wordt nagenoeg altijd door groepen gepleegd.

In de observaties van de studenten zijn talrijke voorbeelden van dergelijk groepsgedrag te vinden. Stelletjes en grotere groepen zijn luider en 'agressiever' in ruimtes zoals treinen, eetgelegenheden, bibliotheken en wachtkamers. Ze schrikken er niet voor terug om zich dichtbij individuen te vestigen omdat ze – nogmaals – samen sterk zijn en niets hoeven te vrezen van de eenling. 'Met drie mensen maak je soms, als je een beetje bravourige types hebt, sneller contact met andere mensen, dan in je eentje aan de bar,' vertelt een man in Müllers boek (2002: 125).

Een karakteristiek voorbeeld van een dergelijk groepsgedrag werd geregistreerd in het zwembad:

> Degenen die deze ochtend de meeste ergernis wekten vormden een groep van ongeveer zeven zwemmers met flippers en duikbrillen (...). Zij hielden zich niet aan de banen en zwommen onder anderen door. Mensen die boven hen zwommen keken beduusd naar beneden om te zien wat er zich onder hen afspeelde. Hoewel hun gedrag veel ergernis veroorzaakte, trad niemand tegen hen op.

Een bijzonder geval van 'groepsgedrag' is misschien het bellen in openbare ruimtes. De gesprekspartner is weliswaar niet fysiek aanwezig, maar misschien geeft zijn/haar telefonische aanwezigheid het bellende individu toch het lef om anderen op deze wijze te storen met lange privé-verhalen.

Een tweede categorie van 'ordeverstoorders' zijn degenen voor wie de betreffende publieke ruimte in zekere zin hun 'thuis' is. Zij vormen een bont gezelschap: conducteurs in trams en treinen, barkeepers en kantinejuffrouwen in eet- en drinkgelegenheden, bedelaars en politieagenten op straat, suppoosten in het museum, badmeesters in het zwembad, lokettisten in de stationshal, enzovoort. Een observatie: Twee studentes zitten in de trein notities (observaties!) te maken. Een conducteur verbreekt de stilte en knoopt een kort gesprek aan:

> 'Druk aan de studie?'
> 'Ja,' antwoorden wij lachend.
> 'Gaat het goed?'
> 'Ja, prima.'
> 'Dus we hoeven je niet bij te spijkeren?'
> 'Nee hoor,' lachen wij, 'als we het even niet meer weten, zoeken we u wel op. Goed?'

Op het perron passeert een conducteur die vrolijk het openingsdeuntje van de Dikke en de Dunne fluit. Niemand die zich verbaast, het is immers een conducteur. In het kerkje in de Kalverstraat is iedere bezoeker met zichzelf bezig, maar de vrouw die er de wacht houdt, groet iedere bezoeker die binnenkomt heel uitdrukkelijk. De kantinejuffrouw roept luid door het leeszaaltje van de bibliotheek: 'Tosti', en ook de instructeur in de sportschool geeft zijn aanwijzingen met luide stem. Deze ordeverstoorders verstoren geen orde. Ze zijn op hun eigen privé-terrein en alle andere aanwezigen zijn als het ware bij hen te

gast. Ze gedragen zich alsof ze thuis zijn en dat wordt geaccepteerd. Zij zijn ordeverstoorders én ordebewaarders.

Een derde categorie zijn kinderen. Cultuur is: weten hoe men zich dient te gedragen. Van kinderen mag men dat niet altijd verwachten. Zij moeten dat nog leren en hun 'ordeverstoringen' worden daarom gewoonlijk geaccepteerd – soms zelfs met een glimlach van vertedering als het om heel kleine kinderen gaat. Suzanne Reitsma bevindt zich in de aankomsthal van Schiphol waar de volwassenen zich keurig aan regels houden en achter het hekje blijven staan.

> De kinderen, daarentegen, gedroegen zich heel anders (...). Ze renden heen en weer, speelden op de hekken en kwamen zoveel dichter in de buurt van onbekenden dan de volwassenen (...). De kinderen waren ook de enigen die achter het hek kwamen, om te spelen of een reiziger te begroeten. Slechts eenmaal begaf een volwassene zich achter het hek, om een jongetje weg te halen.

Kinderen kunnen als buffers tussen volwassen mensen functioneren omdat ze minder op hun privacy gesteld zijn en zich gemakkelijker aan de grenzen van het privé-domein van volwassenen ophouden. Ze kunnen echter ook vanaf die plek verbindingen leggen en ervoor zorgen dat volwassenen met elkaar in gesprek raken. Ze kunnen, net als honden die zich nog minder om hun privacy bekommeren, het ijs breken. Ouders in de publieke ruimte komen via de 'ordeverstoringen' van hun kinderen met elkaar in contact. Het initiatief daartoe hebben ze zelf niet hoeven nemen; daar heeft een onverdacht, onschuldig kind voor gezorgd. Dat is veel veiliger dan zelf iemand aanspreken. De positie van het kind is echter ambigu, het heeft recht op clementie, maar het is tegelijkertijd een metonymische verlenging van de oudere in zijn omgeving. Subtiele elementen leiden ertoe dat het kind de ene keer geëxcuseerd wordt en de andere keer als hinderlijk afgewezen, waarbij – in het laatste geval – de verantwoordelijke volwassene eigenlijk de kritiek krijgt.

Een heel aparte soort van ordeverstoorders zijn de tegenhangers van kinderen, oudere mensen die blijkbaar vasthouden aan de cultuur van hun eigen tijd toen het nog beleefd was anderen in het openbaar te groeten en gesprekken aan te knopen. In de trein reizen ouderen op een andere manier dan de forenzen die op hun dagelijks gang naar werk en terug naar huis met rust gelaten willen worden. Voor ouderen zal de reis eerder een evenement zijn. Zij reizen meer om het reizen en staan veel meer open voor contacten tijdens de reis. Een van de studenten registreerde een gesprek tussen een oudere man en een andere reiziger. Het gesprek begon met een opmerking van eerstgenoemde over de

mooie tas van de ander. Het is onwaarschijnlijk dat een jonger persoon zo'n gesprek zou beginnen.

Dan zijn er nog de sociaal bekwamen die het zich kunnen permitteren de regels te overtreden zonder dat dit ergernis opwekt. Ze hebben charme en *Schwung* en zijn zeker van zichzelf. Zij zijn een beetje als de 'thuisspelers' van de tweede categorie want ze voelen zich op hun gemak in de publieke ruime, alsof ze er inderdaad 'thuis' zijn. Het zijn de personen die in grote getale het boek van Thaddeus Müller bevolken, maar waarvan de studenten tijdens hun observaties weinig sporen hebben gezien.

En tot slot zijn er de onaangepasten die zich niets aantrekken van de regels van het openbare verkeer en veelal irritatie opwekken door de wijze waarop zij het privé-territorium van onbekenden binnendringen. De vreemd uitgedoste man in de trein die een onaangename lucht verspreidt en zijn plastic tassen hinderlijk in het gangpad plaatst, is een voorbeeld. De zitplekken om hem heen blijven het langst onbezet. Als er uiteindelijk iemand per ongeluk of noodgedwongen bij hem plaatsneemt, begint hij luid een verhaal af te steken dat de ander zolang mogelijk tracht te negeren, totdat hij zich, in een mengeling van beleefdheid en verlegenheid, genoodzaakt ziet een paar nietszeggende woorden terug te zeggen. De omgeving luistert gegêneerd of geamuseerd toe, zonder dat te laten merken. Soms wordt de 'vreemdeling' heimelijk tot gek bestempeld en kan dan de rol van het kind krijgen dat mensen in de publieke ruimte even nader tot elkaar brengt. Medereizigers wisselen blikken van verstandhouding en kunnen zich zelfs in het gesprek gaan mengen.

Vreemdelingen, zoals toeristen, behoren tot dezelfde categorie. Hun 'fouten' worden getolereerd; ze zijn 'acceptably imcompetent' omdat ze, net als kinderen, de regels niet kennen en zich kunnen permitteren anderen aan te spreken met vragen of gewoon om een gesprek te voeren.

Sommige van de deviante gebruikers van de publieke ruimte verstoren de orde openlijk en luidruchtig, anderen doen dit in het geniep. Sommigen maken hardop opmerkingen en staren hinderlijk naar anderen. Anderen worden stiekem handtastelijk, bijvoorbeeld in overvolle metro's. Dat laatste is uiterst riskant maar het risico kan beheerst worden door voor te wenden dat de aanraking onvrijwillig is. Als de ander echter instemmend reageert (zonder dat overigens ondubbelzinnig te laten blijken, want het risico van gezichtsverlies geldt voor beiden) ontstaat er wederzijdse 'overtreding' van de privacyregels. Dit 'misbruik' van 'privacy in public' wordt beschreven door Louis Paul Boon in zijn laatste boek *Eros en de eenzame man*:

Maar ik werd verder opgedrongen, tot tegen de achterkant van de bus aan. (...) Opnieuw lag mijn hand tegen een dij aan, smaller en ranker nu. En weer gleed mijn hand stilaan naar het kontje toe... en toen er weer bij een halte duwen en stampen aan te pas kwam, lag mijn hand halfweg de dij, onder het rokje. Ik trachtte, achter haar staande, het gezichtje te zien. Maar ze keek net als ik daarstraks de wegsnellende straten na (Boon 1980: 181).

Conclusie

Met dit laatste citaat lijken we heel ver afgedwaald van de observaties van de studenten die juist afstand en verplichte onverschilligheid noteerden in de publieke ruimte. Toch zit er ook in die observaties meer aandacht voor anderen dan 'meets the eye'. De regels van het openbare verkeer zijn inderdaad Eliasiaans: bemoei je niet met anderen, wees ingetogen en beleefd, veroorzaak geen pijnlijke toestanden, beheers je. Zoals in alle cultuur, hebben we hier te maken met een flinke dosis theater, 'performance'. Gebruikers van de openbare ruimte dienen onverschilligheid (en tolerantie) ten aanzien van anderen voor te wenden, maar dat wil nog niet zeggen dat ze altijd onverschillig en tolerant *zijn*.

Het oogcontact-spel laat deze spanning 'tussen droom en daad' nog het treffendst zien. De krampachtigheid en haast waarmee oogcontact verbroken wordt als de ene persoon de ander 'betrapt' op kijken suggereert dat er geen sprake is van onverschilligheid maar dat men het zich niet kan permitteren interesse in de ander openlijk te laten blijken. Interesse tonen in een ander in een publieke ruimte is ongepast, een *taboe*, dat wil zeggen een verbod waarvan men weet dat het onterecht en toch dwingend is.

Tijdens het lezen in de trein kunnen de gedachten bij de persoon naast of tegenover de lezer zijn en is het boek vooral een middel om die 'ongepaste' nieuwsgierigheid te verbergen. Op dezelfde wijze kan de reiziger die ogenschijnlijk door het raam naar buiten kijkt, dat raam gebruiken als een spiegel om zijn/haar medereiziger te bespieden... tot het moment dat die medereiziger hetzelfde doet en het taboe in werking treedt.

Kortom, gedrag in de openbare ruimte is een ingewikkeld spel van veinzen en ontveinzen, een verwarrend mengsel van ongewenste en gewenste intimiteiten die beide echter op straffe van gezichtsverlies vermeden moeten worden.

Op deze wijze kunnen we misschien Thaddeus Müllers warme stad verenigen met de – op zijn minst geveinsde – koude stad die mijn studenten beschreven. Natuurlijk, er is veel meer. Er is, zoals gezegd het verschil der jaargetijden: het zonnige Vondelpark tegenover het tochtige perron in januari. Een groep

mensen voor een stoplicht is iets anders dan een clubje terraszitters. Er is ook het verschil in onderzoeker: de man Thaddeus tegenover de – hoofdzakelijk vrouwelijke – studenten. Hun insteek was verschillend, hun interesses eveneens. De studenten werden op pad gestuurd om te kijken hoe mensen 'strijd leverden om de ruimte'; Müller zocht naar warmte.

En dan is er nog het verschil in onderzoeksmethode. De studenten hebben slechts geobserveerd, zo neutraal en afzijdig als mogelijk was. In een latere reflectie op zijn onderzoek schrijft Müller (2002b: 26): 'De afstandelijkheid van het observeren creëert misschien wel voor een belangrijk deel het beeld van de koude stad.' Zelf, hebben we al opgemerkt, meldt hij nauwelijks eigen observaties in zijn boek maar vraagt zijn informanten om herinneringen aan 'warme' ervaringen. Eén zo'n ervaring overschaduwt uiteraard duizend niet-ontmoetingen en wordt levendig herinnerd. Bovendien zijn veel van de prettige ervaringen helemaal geen ontmoetingen maar gebeurtenissen op veilige afstand, zoals vanaf een terrasje kijken naar passanten of gezellig winkelen, dat wil zeggen kijken naar dingen die men meestal niet eens koopt.

Zelden heb ik het effect van de onderzoeker-als-zijn-eigen-instrument-en-eigen-data zo duidelijk gedemonstreerd gezien. Müller was zelf de warme stad en verbreidde die warmte onder zijn gesprekspartners. Hij geeft dat eerlijk toe.

> De warme stad gaat over een sociale wereld waarvan ik zelf deel uitmaak. Dit maakte mijn werk bij voorbaat discutabel voor anderen...' (Müller 2002b: 28).

en:

> Vaak zeiden informanten vooraf dat ze de stad niet warm vonden. Maar tijdens het interview vertelden ze over interacties waarin sprake was van positieve betrokkenheid. Geregeld belden ze me later op en vertelden dat ze nu met een andere blik naar de stad keken en gaven ze voorbeelden van de warme stad (2002b: 27).

In een bespreking van een eerdere versie van deze beschouwing vonden de studenten dat ik te ver ging in mijn interpretaties en te veel 'strategie' zag. Een bekend probleem bij antropologen (zie bijvoorbeeld Keesing 1987). Veel dingen doe je gewoon omdat ze voor de hand liggen, niet met een speciale bedoeling. Een tas naast je neerleggen in de trein bijvoorbeeld. Waar moet je de tas anders laten? En je jas aanhouden; moet je hem dan uittrekken als je over vijftien minuten al op je plaats van bestemming bent? Ze hebben half gelijk maar onderschatten de symboliek van het alledaagse handelen.

Het is duidelijk dat Wirth, Lofland, Goffman en al die andere aanhangers van de urbanistische visie gelijk hadden met hun beschrijving van de koude stad. Loflands 'symbolische transformatie' die afscherming en wederzijdse onverschilligheid teweegbrengt, heerst almachtig in de publieke ruime. Müller maakt echter aannemelijk dat we die onverschilligheid niet altijd letterlijk moeten nemen. Wederzijdse desinteresse kan het tegenovergestelde verbergen. Warmte, belangstelling, nieuwsgierigheid en aantrekking gedijen vaak in hun ontkenning.

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Cultuur en lichaamszuivering

Gezonde stoelgang bij een bevolkingsgroep in Ghana

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Onlangs heeft het Nederlandse tijdschrift *Medische Antropologie* een volledig nummer gewijd aan het thema *'Poep, cultuur en welbevinden'*.* De titel lijkt een beetje obsceen, maar de zaak waarover het gaat is veel minder triviaal dan men zou vermoeden. Ontlasting heeft te maken met reiniging en met zuiverheid. Met lichaamscultuur, mag men zeggen. Maar cultuur in het algemeen is vuil opruimen, gevaar bezweren, orde scheppen. Daarover handelt dit artikel. Het beschrijft aan de hand van een Afrikaans voorbeeld hoeveel belang mensen hechten aan de bestrijding van lichaamsvuil.

VUIL EN GEVAAR

Een aantekening uit een oud dagboek: Kwahu-Tafo, april 1969. "Word wakker van een mekkerende geit. Het is nog half donker, maar buiten hoor ik mensen. Een emmer wordt neergezet, het hengsel valt met een scherpe klik. Gedempte stemmen, een vrouw roept iets. Voetstappen voor de deur. Brekend hout, er wordt vuur gemaakt. Eén geluid kan ik niet thuisbrengen, een eentonig en regelmatig 'zzzz, zzzz, zzzz'. Ik sta op en open de deur. In het schemerlicht zie ik een meisje van ongeveer veertien dat het erf aan het vegen is. Ze staat voorovergebogen, haar linkerhand op de rug, in haar rechter een bezem zonder steel die met grote regelmaat over het aarden binnenerf strijkt en het afval van gisteren naar het midden schuift: bananenschillen, een vod, proppen papier, een stuk plastic, een kapotte sandaal, uitgespuugde resten van een suikerrietstengel, kippenstront, een sardienblikje, houtsplinters, een oude ballpoint en een lepel die er tussen uit gevist wordt. Even wordt het ritme onderbroken als ze de lepel oppakt en in de richting van de keuken gooit. Dan vervolgt ze haar werk, 'zzzz, zzzz, zzzz'...

Buiten het erf zie ik zwijgende gestalten voorbij komen, gehuld in een kleed dat hoog om de nek geslagen is tegen de ochtendkilte. Ze zijn op weg naar het openbare toilet dat vijftig meter verderop staat. Het is spitsuur maar stil. Er wordt niets gezegd. Op weg naar het toilet groet men niet, leer ik korte tijd later. Een jongen komt met een emmer op zijn hoofd het erf op en giet een gedeelte van het water in een pot die op het vuur staat. Badwater. Mijn eerste nacht in het huis van Emmanuel Asirifi is voorbij. De dag is begonnen."

De geluiden van de eerste dag in Kwahu-Tafo, een dorp in Ghana, zijn geluiden van reiniging. Vuil is de grote vijand. Wie gezond wil blijven, moet vuil verwijderen: van het erf, van het huis, van de keuken, van het lichaam, maar vooral *uit* het lichaam.

Vuil is een centraal begrip in de Akan-cultuur van Ghana, in hun fysiologie, in hun

pathologie en hun 'sociologie'. Vuil wordt gezien als een van de hoofdoorzaken van ziekte. Bijna de helft van de ziekteoorzaken die Warren verzamelde in een andere Akan-gemeenschap, was gerelateerd aan vuil. Men dient daarom altijd het voedsel af te dekken tegen vliegen en ander vuil. Men moet pannen en ander kook- en eetgerei zorgvuldig wassen, het erf goed vegen omdat afval op de grond insecten aantrekt die ziekten verspreiden. De drums, potten en jerrycans waarin water wordt bewaard, moeten steeds schoongemaakt worden, de kleren worden vaak en grondig gewassen en men neemt dagelijks minstens eenmaal, liefst tweemaal, een bad. *Adware yè oduro*: een bad nemen is *in* zichzelf al een medicijn, schrijft een Ghanese socioloog. Voor de verwijdering van het echte, kwaadaardige vuil, dat wat zich in het lichaam bevindt, is een geregelde stoelgang een vereiste. Dagelijkse ontlasting is ultieme hygiëne.

Er is een analogie tussen het dagelijks wassen van het lichaam, de dagelijkse toiletgang en het dagelijks schoonvegen van het erf. De analogie wordt nog overtuigender als we bedenken dat alle drie 'reinigingsrituelen' in de ochtend plaats vinden. Ze markeren het begin van een goede dag. Wie de dag begint met weglating van een van deze activiteiten, maakt een slechte start en loopt de kans problemen tegen te komen.

Vuil is ongewenst, maar er zijn diverse soorten vuil die verschillen in hun graad van 'ongewenstheid'. *Efi* is vuil dat van buiten komt en zich hecht aan het lichaam, aan kleding, aan voorwerpen zoals eetgerei, en aan een huis. Het heeft een tijdelijk karakter. Het is geen ernstige vorm van vuil. Als men er tijdig iets aan doet, is het niet bedreigend. *Atantaneè* (letterlijk: weerzinwekkende dingen) is vuil dat meer zorgen baart. Het is vuil dat uit het lichaam komt: speeksel, braaksel, menstruatiebloed, urine en ontlasting. Als er ergens menselijke uitwerpselen liggen, is dat ernstiger dan bananenschillen en stukken plastic op het erf. *Eho ye tan*, zegt men: het is smerig, weerzinwekkend – en gevaarlijk.

STOELGANG ALS PREVENTIE

Er is een lange traditie van 'stoel-onderzoek': de kwaliteit van ontlasting wordt sinds mensenheugenis beschouwd als een betrouwbare indicatie van de gezondheidstoestand. Hippocrates schreef reeds dat fecaliën zacht en lichtbruin moeten zijn, een mooie vorm moeten hebben en niet te veel moeten stinken. Als ze waterig en bleek zijn, of geelachtig en oneffen, is dat een slecht teken. En als ze zwart zijn of loodkleurig, betekent dat dat de dood nadert. De moeders van Kwahu-Tafo die de ontlasting van hun kleuters inspecteren, zijn het in grote lijnen met Hippocrates eens. Ook zij hebben grote belangstelling voor kleur, reuk, vorm en substantie. Zij letten bovendien scherp op de aanwezigheid van wormen.

Mensen hebben altijd hun ontlasting bestudeerd of laten bestuderen door deskundigen en sinds ongeveer een eeuw brengen ze doosjes en potjes met ontlasting naar ziekenhuizen en laboratoria voor diagnostisch onderzoek. Zoals men aan de vruchten de boom kent, zo kent men aan de drol de mens, zijn fysieke maar ook zijn geestelijke conditie. "Zolang je drol goed is, is er niets met je aan de hand", aldus een oude oom van me.

Een geregelde stoelgang is niet alleen een teken van een goede gezondheid, het is er ook een voorwaarde voor. Zo zien de bewoners van Kwahu-Tafo het in ieder geval. Ontlasting is vuil dat zich ophoopt in het lichaam en zo snel mogelijk verwijderd dient te worden. Vuil dat niet uitgescheiden

Er is een analogie tussen het dagelijks wassen van het lichaam, de dagelijkse toiletgang en het dagelijks schoonvegen van het erf. De analogie wordt nog overtuigender als we bedenken dat alle drie 'reinigingsrituelen' in de ochtend plaats vinden. Ze markeren het begin van een goede dag. Wie de dag begint met weglating van een van deze activiteiten, maakt een slechte start en loopt de kans problemen tegen te komen.

wordt, gaat gisten en broeien en veroorzaakt hitte in het lichaam, wat vervolgens tot allerlei ziektes kan leiden, zowel intern als extern. De hitte zoekt zich een weg naar buiten via zweren, aambeien en huiduitslag. Wie één dag niet naar het toilet is geweest, heeft 'constipatie'. Met laxeermiddelen, inclusief darmspoelingen, tracht men de constipatie te bestrijden. De Ghanese socioloog Osei spreekt van een *abdominal theory of health and illness*: "Iedere ziekte heeft haar oorsprong binnen in het abdomen. (...) De hang naar en de zorg voor regelmatig gedigde darmen is in de Akan-cultuur zogoed als een ritueel. Dat is de reden waarom de klisteerspuit in elk Akan-gezin kan gevonden worden en allerhande soorten zetpillen de meest gebruikelijke medicamenten zijn die iedereen kent en die zelfs door gewone leken worden voorgeschreven." – 'Maak eerst je darmen leeg', is het motto van een van zijn informanten, want als dat gebeurt, wordt men ook niet ziek en behoeft men geen medicijn.

Een geregelde stoelgang geeft ook een gezonde appetijt, men heeft immers plaats gemaakt voor nieuw voedsel. Een oudere informant citeert een spreekwoord om zijn visie hierop kracht bij te zetten: *Wo poma na wo to a, na egye*: als je een geweer goed laadt, geeft het een harde knal. Na geschoten te hebben, kun je het opnieuw laden (en weer een harde knal produceren). Het spreekwoord geeft op plastische wijze de continue gezonde afwisseling tussen eten en stoelgang weer.

Niet alleen is het belangrijk dagelijks ontlasting te produceren, het is ook sterk aan te raden dat vroeg in de ochtend te doen. Als ik een vrouw vraag waarom dat zo is, antwoordt ze: "Voor je nieuw voedsel inneemt, is het goed het oude uit te drijven." Een man merkt op dat iemand die 's morgens niet naar het toilet gaat zich onder de zieken moet rekenen. "Stront vreest de zon", zegt iemand anders, "als je in bed ligt en het wordt dag, wil je maar één ding: naar het toilet."

Ontlasting is niet alleen gezond op de langere termijn omdat het de ophoping van vuil en daarmee het ontstaan van ziekte voorkomt. Ze verhoogt ook het menselijk welbevinden met onmiddellijk effect. Men voelt zich van een last bevrijd, opgelucht, en spreekt wel van een verlossing, zelfs van een (zware) bevalling. Lea vergelijkt defecatie met andere vormen van 'ontlasting': zijn hart of gemoed luchten, 'schoon schip maken', iets opbiechten. Poepen is catharsis, reiniging. In de activiteit van de 'geregelde' ontlasting beleven mensen hun gezond zijn, het perfecte evenwicht tussen vasthouden en loslaten, controle en bevrijding, inspanning en ontspanning.

Een geregelde stoelgang staat voor regelmaat in het algemeen, het basisprincipe van een leven dat men onder controle heeft. Als in Mary Douglas' woorden vuil 'wanorde' is, dan is een onregelmatige en ongeregelde stoelgang in dubbele zin wanorde, iets wat zich letterlijk aan de regels onttrekt die mensen voor zichzelf hebben opgesteld. Omgekeerd maakt de 'regeling' van de stoelgang de wanorde die het vuil is onschadelijk. Het gevaar dat uit het vuil voortkomt, wordt getemd. Orde is het doel en uitgangspunt van hygiëne. Een geregelde stoelgang is het summum van orde en beschaving, terwijl onzindelijkheid het toppunt is van verlies van status en onwelbevinden. "Vuil is het bewijs van de onvolmaaktheden van het leven",

citeert Valerie Curtis McLaughlin. Wie zijn darmen niet onder controle heeft is gewoonlijk een kind, dat nog niet volwaardig 'mens' is. Wie dit als opgroeiend kind of volwassene overkomt, bevindt zich in een uiterst pijnlijke situatie. Zo iemand is pas echt 'ziek'. Ziekte, net als vuil, is immers wanorde.

CULTUUR ALS PREVENTIE

Als cultuur de wijze is waarop mensen, met elkaar, hun leven zo geriefelijk mogelijk inrichten, dan zou men cultuur één groot preventief systeem kunnen noemen. Cultuur is vuil opruimen, gevaar bezweren, orde scheppen. In alle instituten en levensterreinen die men in een klassiek handboek van culturele antropologie aantreft, is deze gedachte terug te vinden. Niet alleen religie is ordescheppend en dus welzijn-verhogend, zoals Geertz in zijn beroemde essay schreef. Op alle terreinen van de cultuur vegen mensen hun erf schoon en trachten ze orde op zaken te stellen om ziekte, ongemak, onheil en onrust te voorkomen, kortom, om 'gezond' te kunnen leven. Preventie is cultuur, cultuur is preventie.

Binnen dat stelsel van preventief denken en handelen neemt de dagelijkse, geordende stoelgang een centrale plaats in. Het vuil dat men iedere dag op die wijze verwijdert (liefst op een veilige afstand van het huis, ook al zorgt dat voor enig ongemak) maakt deel uit van een 'reinheidscomplex' dat vroeg in de ochtend begint. ■

* Wie er belang in stelt, kan dit nummer verkrijgen bij St. Van Wolputte, departement Culturele Antropologie, K.U. Leuven (Tiensestraat 102, 3000 Leuven).

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Lying Informants: A Fieldwork Experience from Ghana

Wolf Bleek

For its conclusion alone, I would not have written this fieldwork note. That conclusion is merely a truism: survey research cannot handle delicate issues. My reason for writing this note is a coincidental event, something almost anecdotal that occurred during my research in a rural Ghanaian community. That event showed how valid the truism is.

It is well known from countless anthropological field reports that not all informants are as enthusiastic about anthropological research as the fieldworkers themselves. Evans-Pritchard's (1940: 12–13) recording of his conversation with an uninterested and unwilling Nuer informant has become a celebrated example of that differential.[1] That an informant's unwillingness to cooperate increases as the topic becomes more intimate and embarrassing goes without saying, although anthropologists have thought it worth a considerable amount of words. Interviewers who ask personal questions about delicate topics, sometimes with more sense of duty than common sense, force polite informants into lying ones. Salamone (1977) has pointed out that such lying is a meaningful "form of communication and not its negation." Asking why people lie may lead to important new insights into personal, social, and cultural aspects of their lives. First, however, there must be an awareness that people *are* lying. Some researchers may never make that discovery.

In 1971 and 1973 I conducted fieldwork in a rural "town" in the Kwahu area of Southern Ghana.[2] The kinds of things in which I was interested were definitely delicate: family quarrels, suspicions of witchcraft, sexual relationships, and birth control practices, including induced abortion. Initially, I limited my research to the members of one lineage (*abusua*). I was then residing with the head of that lineage. My research approach consisted of "participant ob-

servation,'' a phrase that we all know to be somewhat presumptuous and misleading.

My doubts about the word ''participant'' arise from an impression that most fieldworkers who use this word to describe their research method hardly participate in the subject of their research, if at all. I am no exception. My participation in sexual relationships was slight, in birth control insignificant, and in witchcraft nonexistent. Ironically, anthropologists tend to be most interested in those transactions and affairs least accessible to them, those in which they cannot participate. This irony, I suspect, also applies to other research traditions. The inaccessible arouses curiosity; what is open to the public soon may lead to boredom.

By participant, therefore, I refer rather to my taking part in the general events of daily life in town. I attempted to live as much like other inhabitants as possible. I acquired a room, two by four meters, in an ordinary lineage compound. People who observed my way of life, the furniture I had, the quality of my food, my means of washing clothes and collecting water, noticed little difference between me and the other young unmarried male immigrants who rented rooms in town. Apart from the color of my skin and my European background (which implied hidden richness; see Bleek, 1979), the most conspicuous difference between other men and myself was vocational: I was not a farmer or a shopkeeper, not a teacher, a clerk, or a priest, but a researcher, an anthropologist, someone with an outlandish, unfamiliar profession. Many solved this definitional problem by regarding me as a student, and they were right. Some of the elders even called me a school boy. They too were right.

My ''free time'' was spent mostly in the company of others. I sat many hours in palm wine bars, joking, boasting, and gossiping with men, sometimes with women. I attended church services and funerals. Most frequently, however, I was in the compounds of lineage members, talking—often I recorded these conversations—and watching the work that people were doing: preparing a meal, feeding or bathing a child, repairing tools.

If the things in which anthropological researchers are interested are often inaccessible to them, they are probably also difficult things to observe. What then do these researchers mean when they speak of ''participant *observation*''? The latter word strikes me as being as inapt as the former.

Anthropological knowledge is predominantly based on what people *say* they do, not on what researchers *see* them doing. If one wants to investigate something in the past or something occurring elsewhere, one has to rely on secondhand information. Yet even things taking place here and now often remain hidden to a researcher, because by their very nature these activities cannot tolerate the eye of an observer.

Since it is the fate of fieldworkers to remain dependent on information from others, it is of crucial importance for them to develop techniques to assess and improve the reliability and validity of such information. The techniques of participant observation consist largely of getting to know informants and

the contexts of reported transactions and issues. The method is, therefore, hardly what it claims to be: direct engagement with and observation of the object of research. In an indirect way, however, participant observation certainly does contribute to a more adequate understanding of issues under study. Still, observation never replaces interviews; the two methods complement each other. Observation sustains the interview, while the interview extends observation over a longer period of time and to other places.

Thus, by getting to know the members of the lineage among whom I lived, by conversing with them—sometimes casually, sometimes through a formal interview—and by cross-checking their information with other lineage members—let us call it gossiping—I gradually gained considerable knowledge and understanding of even the more clandestine aspects of life in which I had taken an interest. Let me give two examples to illustrate my progress: both concern the practice of induced abortion, which, viewed as extremely disgraceful, was therefore carefully hidden from others (see Bleek, 1981).

I was able to learn about abortion by getting to know those involved in the practice and the social context in which they maneuvered. Although I never witnessed an abortion, I learned much about their causes and consequences. I *saw* these causes and consequences. This enabled me to ask concrete questions and to interpret the answers. Informants were often evasive at first, but gradually shifted to become more truthful and confiding. Once people saw that I *knew* quite a lot already about abortions, they felt they could trust me.

The two excerpts below have been taken from my field diary. The first is about a girl of 17 who lived in the same house as I did. The second describes the reactions of townspeople when a woman died from an induced abortion.

> After the long vacation Nina returned from Kumasi with a swollen leg. I asked what had happened and she answered that she would tell me everything later on. Some time after that I met her in front of the clinic, waiting her turn. Again a few hours later Nina's mother said she wanted to speak to me. She came with Nina to my room and showed me a deep wound in Nina's upper leg. She told me that, after an induced abortion, Nina had begun to feel heavy pains and had gone to her cousin for a (free) injection. (Note that the cousin, a farmer, is not qualified to give injections.) After some days the injection caused an abscess. Nina went to Kumasi and visited the hospital, where the abscess was lanced. She returned home, but the nurse of the local clinic refused to help her and told her to go to the Catholic hospital in Nkwawkaw (25 km. away). The mother asked me to mediate so that Nina could be treated in the clinic. I think she had two reasons for asking me this. She was afraid that the real cause of the infection would be revealed and that the police would hear about it. In the second place, she was thinking of the financial consequences of a stay in a hospital.
>
> I still advised them to go to the hospital, and they said they would do so tomorrow because it was now too late to go. In the evening Nina came to me with a bucket of hot water and asked me to clean the wound. I answered that I could do nothing without clean bandages. The next morning Nina and her

> mother left very early. Afterwards I discovered that they had not gone to the hospital but to a government clinic about 20 km. away, probably because medical help in government institutions is free. In the afternoon they returned. Nina told me that the nurse in the clinic had treated her and given her medicines. She had been requested to come back when the medicines were finished.
>
> Afua O. died today at the hospital. Someone told me that she became pregnant in Accra and tried to get rid of it through the help of some people at the Accra hospital. The drugs she took did not produce an abortion, but she began to feel pains after some days. She could not bear the pain so she rushed to her home town to receive better help. At that time her condition was already precarious. She was taken to the hospital at A., where she died after two weeks.
>
> People in town kept saying that the deceased died foolishly. She had two children already, so, if she did not want more, she should have been smart enough to see the family planning team.
>
> Someone else told me that officially nothing was said about the abortion, because this could prevent her from being buried customarily. Her death would be considered as suicide and she would no longer be recognized as a member of the family. There would be no mourning, no donations, etc.

Through participant observation I came to the conclusion that induced abortion was a very common practice among the 19 women of this lineage. At least ten of them were found to have had an induced abortion; five had had three or more. Inducing an abortion was most frequently attempted to solve the problem of an undesired pregnancy while a girl was still in school or when there was no partner willing to accept financial responsibility for the child to come. But was abortion equally frequent in other lineages or other Kwahu towns? And were motives for abortion the same everywhere?

Doing my fieldwork at a time when statistical data enjoyed higher esteem than at present, I was often chided by colleagues about the statistical weaknesses of my research. Because my sample consisted of only 42 adults, its representativeness was challenged. I was advised to include a survey of a larger sample of the town population, selected in an orthodox way. And so, a budding academician, I yielded to the statistical temptation.

One hundred men, approximately between 18 and 60 years of age, were accosted on the street, in their compounds, or during visits to the local clinic. They were asked to spare half an hour to answer some questions. Forty-seven of the interviews I conducted myself. Two assistants, young teachers, did the other 53.

For the female sample, I followed another plan: 179 women with at least one child were interviewed during visits to a child-welfare clinic. It had previously been ascertained that women visiting that clinic constituted a representative sample of all town mothers. Six nurses from a nearby hospital carried out these interviews after brief training. All young, around age 20, they wore their uniforms during the interview to give the proceedings a medical air. It

was assumed that questions about sex and birth control would meet with the least resistance if put in a medical context. To prevent personal bias in selection, the names of women to be interviewed were preselected in the office and assigned to the nurses. I kept out of sight as much as possible.

Examining the results of the interviews, I soon realized that their reliability was low, an impression reinforced during an evaluation meeting with the nurse-interviewers. They told me that some women had given nonchalant and inconsistent answers; others had been far from cooperative; yet others had reacted indignantly and aggressively to certain questions, especially those referring to abortion (which was then, and still is, a criminal act). Some women had asked the nurses whether they were working for the police.[3]

Although the nurses sensed that many women were simply lying in response to some of the questions, they had no means by which to check because they did not know the respondents. Even more problematic, in my eyes, was that the respondents did not know the interviewers. Many women, shocked to hear strangers asking them such intimate questions, felt they had no choice but to lie in response.

It is not easy to measure "how much" an informant is lying. One method is to compare suspect answers with those of a control group of persons who,

TABLE 1 Percentage of Ghanaian women giving socially less-desirable answers in two small-scale field studies conducted in the early 1970s using different research methods

	Research method	
Answer	Survey questionnaire response (N = 179)	"Participant observations" of women in lineage (N = 19)[a]
Does not belong to a church	18	42
Unmarried after divorce	11	16
Not legally married to present sexual partner	11	21
Divorced two or more times	11	21
Knows five or more methods of birth control	15	58
Ever practiced birth control	14	63
Ever used three or more methods of birth control	1	21
Had an induced abortion	4	53

[a] Considerable apology is in order for calculating percentages on the basis of so small a sample size. In defense of this procedure, this note does not have statistical pretensions; rather the intention is to sensitize fertility surveyors to the complexity of the issues they deal with in their questionnaires.

for some reason, are believed not to have lied. What I did was virtually the same thing, assuming that "I knew everything" about the women in my lineage (which was certainly not true). Table 1 shows the outcome of a comparison I made of answers to certain socially less-desirable topics given by women interviewed and women "observed."

Such a table is nothing new. For most researchers it confirms what they already know: embarrassing questions in a survey produce unreliable answers. For some diehard statisticians it proves little and, from their point of view, they are right, because the comparison of samples begs an essential question, namely, how can we be sure that the differences in answers are not caused by real differences between the two samples?

I must now relate the coincidental event referred to at the outset of this note. By accident I was directly confronted with the "fraud" that some women perpetrated during the survey interviews. I discovered that six women from my lineage had taken part in the survey. They had been interviewed without realizing that their responses would eventually come under my eyes. When I compared their answers with what I knew about them, I was abashed. They had lied lavishly, presenting themselves in terms that they expected would make the nurses respect them. Some of their answers were so far removed from the facts as I knew them that I was confounded. Although I know that things may not always be so far removed from reality, these six Kwahu women have filled me with a lifelong distrust of questionnaire research. If anthropology wishes to remain respected by other sciences, it should promptly impose censorship on this accidental discovery of my research.

In Table 2 I present examples of self-contradictory answers given by two women of the lineage. I should add that, somewhat masochistically, I have selected the two most colorful informants.

As announced earlier, the conclusion that emerges from this brief note is in itself far from sensational. Hardly anyone will contend that a survey-interview is suitable for eliciting information about intimate and embarrassing thoughts and practices. However, I want to make two remarks that may lend some piquancy to this conclusion's dullness. The first reflects back on myself, the ethnographer; the second concerns demographic researchers.

In an intriguing article Nachman (1984) suggests that the ethnographer should not turn *away* from lies to look for "the truth," but that he should look at the lying itself. Lying is a cultural phenomenon. It is a strategy for survival, a code to preserve one's own and other people's self-respect. Pressing for the truth, as anthropologists may do, can make people extremely uncomfortable. Persistent lying may then provide their only escape from embarrassment. I endorse Nachman's (1984: 538) remark that "in general lying is reprehensible, but in particular instances, it is justifiable. In other words people usually must have reason to lie." My Kwahu informants had ample reason.

In retrospect, my encounters with lineage members were not always characterized by the empathy and rapport that anthropologists tend to claim.

TABLE 2 Contradictory answers obtained from two women through the use of different research methods

Information obtained from survey interview	Information based on participant observation
Opokua	
Married both according to custom and in Roman Catholic Church	Unmarried
Lives with husband	Has no husband
Eats with husband	Has no husband
Has been pregnant once	Has been pregnant twice
Has induced an abortion with a tablet (her husband helped her)	Has induced an abortion at the request of her boyfriend; she used a mixture of herbs, milk, and sugar
Nyamekye	
24 years old	31 years old
Divorced once	Divorced twice
Given birth to four children	Given birth to six children (two have died)
Has been pregnant four times	Has been pregnant at least nine times
Lives with husband in Accra (the capital)	Lives without husband in Kwahu town
A female servant prepares her meals	She has no servants
Has never used any method of birth control	Has experience with many methods of birth control
Never had an induced abortion	Had at least three induced abortions

Some encounters were more like interrogations that could be managed successfully thanks to my detective-like approach mingled with strategic joking. Looking back I realize that this type of communication may indeed have brought to light several hidden facts, but it was also less than successful at times in helping me to understand the full meaning and psychological implications of these facts.[4]

Ethnographers and other fieldworkers writing about lying informants are themselves liars when they do not tell the whole truth about the way in which they collected the lies from their informants, thus obscuring the likelihood that it was their interrogating technique which *produced* the lies in the first place.

The second remark holds a caveat for those who study demographic issues, especially in non-Western cultures.[5] Abortion and other methods of birth control are not only private affairs, tied up with feelings of shame; they are also "variables" for demographers who, infatuated with statistics, engage in large-scale survey research. Looking at the assertive figures published in some demographic surveys, I suspect that for some people the conclusion of this note may not be old hat after all.

If this note cannot persuade demographers to present their results with certain misgivings, let them take heed of the following statement by a Tiv informant, cited by Salamone (1977) as an epigraph for his article:

> When I read what the white man has written of our customs, I laugh, for it is the custom of our people to lie as a matter of course to outsiders, especially

the white man. We ask, "Why does he want to know such personal things about us?"

Notes

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1 Evans-Pritchard (1940: 12) writes that the Nuer are "expert at sabotaging an inquiry," and he recommends their techniques to all natives "who are inconvenienced by the curiosity of ethnologists." A few lines from his conversation with a Nuer informant suffice as an example:

> Who are you?
> A man.
> What is your name?
> Do you want to know my *name*?
> Yes.
> You want to know *my* name?

2 The term "town" is a literal translation of local parlance. "Village" would sound denigrating to Ghanaian ears. The "town" had about 4,000 inhabitants. The Kwahu, who belong to the Akan or Twi-speaking group, are closely related to the neighboring and better known Asante (Ashanti).

3 It should be noted, however, that most people involved in an abortion case have little difficulty keeping police out of it. I found that no abortion had been reported at the local police station in the six months preceding the research or during the research, not even the case of Afua O., although the whole town, including the police, knew the cause of her death.

4 Rosaldo (1986) too points out that a context of domination affects ethnographic accounts more deeply than their authors are prepared to admit. Discussing Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* and Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou,* he sees some parallels between the inquisitor in the latter and the ethnographer in the former study. The historian based his book on the confessions that an inquisitor extracted from the Montaillou villagers. The anthropologist, a British subject, collected information from unwilling Nuer informants in a period when the British raided their camps. Rosaldo concludes: "The introductory section of *The Nuer* parallels that of *Montaillou* in doing the rhetorical work of separating the context of colonial domination from the production of ethnographic knowledge" (p. 93).

5 An anonymous referee of this note comments: "Before modern fertility surveys were first fielded in the United States, it was widely predicted that respondents' modesty, embarrassment, etc. would invalidate the responses. It was later triumphantly reported . . . that the apprehension was unfounded: surveys found that American women were far more reluctant to reveal, say, family income than details about 'intimate behavior.' Are things different in Ghana?" Two answers: In the first place, respondents who are *not* reluctant may still lie. Second, I think indeed that Ghana's cultural milieu differs markedly from that of the United States. Cultural rules indicate what can and what cannot be said. For most of my informants, sex was not something to talk about but to practice. One difference that seems particularly relevant is that surveys, with guaranteed anonymity, are a familiar cultural practice in the United States but not in Ghana.

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The night-soil collector: bucket latrines in Ghana

SJAAK VAN DER GEEST[1]

One of my favourite proverbs in Twi, the largest African language in Ghana, is: *Wonkoa didi a, wonkoa bene* (If you eat alone, you will also shit alone). It is a blunt saying because of the directness of the term *ne* (to shit). People are usually more 'polite' and apply euphemisms to refer to defecation. The proverb points at the sociability of eating; someone eating alone is not considered to be a good person. S/he may be an egoist, or a miser, who will be punished for their bad behaviour and therefore will have to go to the toilet alone.[2] But what punishment is there in visiting the toilet alone? Most readers of this article probably prefer to be alone in that place.

The proverb refers to toilet conditions in the past of the Akan society of Ghana.[3] Some elderly informants explained to me that the toilet used to be a large pit covered by a scaffold of poles. The pit was always situated outside the 'town', in the 'bush'. Visiting the toilet alone, in the night, was not a pleasure. If one became sick after eating a meal in the evening, one would probably have the company of another person who ate the same meal. Only the lonely eater, however, had to walk alone. The memory of the poles on which people had to squat to relieve themselves has been retained in some of the euphemisms for defecation, for example *kɔ dua so* ('to go on a tree'). One of Christaller's proverbs (no. 407) also refers to the wooden poles of the traditional toilet: *Obi se 'ɔbɛma woane' a, ɛnte se woankasa wosɛn yanee so* (If someone says he will help you to shit, it isn't the same as sitting yourself on the poles).[4] Christaller explains in his Twi dictionary that *oyanee* means 'the scaffolding of poles outside the town used as a privy … wc'.[5]

My knowledge of the pre-colonial, colonial and early post-colonial history of the Akan toilet is entirely based on discussions with people and the dissection of a few traditional sayings. There is an absence in the literature on 'traditional' Akan society about faecal matters. Rattray, the 'Royal Warrant Holder' of Akan tradition, who wrote five books on Akan culture, ignores his informants' more mundane and natural necessities in life. Surprisingly, even in his collection of folk-tales, which, as he points out, are often vulgar and coarse, defecation does not occur.[6] In his ethnographic work there is only one reference to a toilet, when he lists the sixty-four rooms of a paramount chief's palace. Room 48 is named as *Kantamereso* ('the chief's lavatory'). There is no indication what that 'lavatory' looks like or what is in it.[7] Moreover, the reader may wonder where the other residents of the palace went to relieve themselves.

The overall picture that arises from my conversations with Ghanaians is that, in the olden days, people had public toilets in the bush which constituted a hole

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with beams spread over it. They cleaned themselves with a corncob (*brodua*), and when the hole was filled up, they closed it and dug a new one.

Private toilets were probably only found in the houses of some important people in rural communities. However, an observation by Bowdich, a colonial visitor to the Asante capital Kumasi in 1817, suggests that private toilets *were* common in Kumasi:

> What surprised me most … was the discovery that every house had its clocae, besides the common ones for the lower orders without the town. They were generally situated under a small archway in the most retired angle of the building, but infrequently upstairs, within a separate room like a small closet where the large hollow pillar also assists to support the upper storey: the holes are of small circumference, but dug to a surprising depth, and boiling water is daily poured with, which eventually prevents the least offence.

Sanitary conditions in Kumasi at that time seemed to be exemplary and impressed many visitors to the city. In 1874 one visitor wrote: 'The smells of Coomassie are never those of sewage' and 'The town was kept scrupulously clean'. In rural communities outside Kumasi, 'among the lower orders', conditions were different, however, as Bowdich observed.[8] And those conditions are still different nearly two centuries later.

In Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town in Southern Ghana where I carried out anthropological fieldwork intermittently between 1971 and 2000, public toilets are still widely used. Only a minority of people have their own toilet attached to their house. In 1995 about sixty houses out of an estimated number of five hundred had a private bucket latrine. It may be the beginning of a process of individualisation and 'privatisation' of toilet use, but the continued wide acceptance of public toilet use remains remarkable.

In this article I intend to focus on the social and cultural implications of bucket latrines and report on my meetings and conversations with the man who is responsible for cleaning them. But first I would like to start with a few words about my research and about the Akan concept of dirt in relation to public and private toilet use.

Fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo

Kwahu-Tafo is a rural town of approximately 6000 inhabitants at about 150 kilometres from the capital Accra on the Kwahu plateau.[9] Most of the inhabitants are—at least partly—engaged in farming and trading. It is a place like many others, although it may be a bit more run-down than the 'average' Akan town. During my research, the road leading to the place was often in a deplorable state, especially in the rainy season. Many houses in the centre of the town had collapsed and the few streets that there were had enormous potholes. In 2001 the roads in and to Kwahu-Tafo were repaired. The town has a supply of water and electricity, but the majority of the population have no access to these facilities. The town is located at the crossing point of five roads and thus occupies an important trading position. There are several schools, a health clinic run by Catholic missionaries, about fifteen different Christian churches, and a small mosque.

Going to the toilet is a concern for many anthropologists during their fieldwork, even though they never mention it in their writings. During the almost three and a half years I lived in Kwahu-Tafo, I failed to practise full participant observation as far as toilets were concerned. I avoided the toilets which my landlords offered to me or which were used by the other people in the houses where I lived. My first morning in Kwahu-Tafo, now more than thirty years ago, is still fresh in my memory.

I had hired a room in the house of a teacher and explained to my host that I wanted to take part in everything. I asked him to introduce me to his way of life, which he did meticulously. The next morning he took me to the public latrine. It was rush hour. About ten people were waiting outside. When it was my turn I entered the place. A penetrating stench hit me in the face. The floor was littered with used paper. Squatting people stared at me. I felt terribly uncomfortable, walked past them and left the place. I told my host that I did not have the urge, which was very true. I asked an American missionary with a real water closet if I could use his facility and I never returned to the public toilet.

In a recent dissertation on the anthropology of defecation[10] Rachel Lea takes my reaction as an indication of my own cultural perspective on excrement and defecation. Using her comments, in a round-about way, for self-reflection, I realise how my preoccupation with privacy shaped my discomfort. Not being able to excrete alone in that inconvenient situation took away my urge completely. To me, privacy was more important than the elimination of dirt from inside the body.

In 1994, when I revisited the town to conduct research among elderly people, I settled in the house of someone who had his own latrine. I asked him if I could use it and he generously gave me a key saying that I should not give it to anybody. The use of this toilet was a privilege. Only some grown-ups and his own children had access to it.

There were good reasons to restrict the number of people using his toilet. The bucket, which was emptied once a week, would otherwise soon be full and the place would become a mess. I discovered the place *was* a mess, at least in my eyes. Several times I found the bucket overflowing. Flies loved the place, as did chickens who entered through holes in the door and the walls. The ever-present pieces of used paper, either tissue or newspapers in all languages, added to my repulsion.

At that time, I brought a Ghanaian sociology student with me to the field as a research assistant. He stayed in the room next to mine and I felt I had to show solidarity with him concerning toilet use. This gave a new impulse to my determination to overcome my toilet phobia and become a more complete participant. It did not last very long. I soon started to cheat on my assistant and secretly use the priests' toilet. I cleverly combined occasional visits to the Catholic mission with visits to their toilet. My bowels agreed; as soon as I approached the priests' place, I felt the urge coming.[11]

I never revealed my unfaithfulness to my research assistant. I felt too uneasy about it, and feared it would damage our relationship and our work. So again toilet use disappeared from my participant observation, but this also made the phenomenon the more intriguing. This feeling of 'failure' to adjust may have fed

my interest in toilets. The most decisive impetus, however, came from my research about care for elderly people, which began in 1994.

Visiting the toilet seemed problematic for many elderly people, at least in my eyes. Walking fifteen minutes to a toilet and having to share the same room with other visitors, including children, seemed to me particularly unpleasant for people of old age. This topic was discussed over and over with both friends and the elderly, and I slowly realised that some of my concerns about privacy, and my perceptions of dirt and disgust, were different from theirs. I decided to delve deeper into the language and perceptions of dirt.

Terms and concepts of dirt

Dirt is a key concept in the Akan perception of the human being. It is something unwanted, something one should get rid of. Ideas about dirt and cleanliness pervade the entire culture. There are several terms which refer to dirt. *Efi* is dirt that comes from outside and attaches to the body, to clothes, to objects, or to a house. It has a temporary character. A man coming from his farm is dirty (*ne ho ayɛ fi* or *ne ho wɔ fi*) because of the work he has been doing, but he is not inherently dirty. A child playing in the mud is dirty, as is a yard which has not been swept.

*Atantane*ɛ (lit. nasty or hateful things) is dirt which is more detestable. Most people use the term for dirt coming from inside the body: vomit, phlegm, menstruation blood, urine, or faeces. When a latrine is dirty with human faeces, people say: *ehɔ yɛ tan* (lit. there is nasty).

As in most languages, terms of 'dirt' assume wider meanings. They are metaphorically applied to social, moral and aesthetic phenomena. Dirty = ugly = unattractive = nasty = bad = uncivilised = shameful = not respected. Examples from Christaller's Twi dictionary illustrate this: *efi aka no* (lit. dirt has stuck to him) means that someone has defiled himself morally, for example by committing evil or breaking a taboo. *Ne yere de fi abeka no* (lit. His wife has brought dirt to stick to him) means that his wife has disgraced him. *Efi* spoils things, it makes one vomit. So *efi* produces *efi*.

*Atantane*ɛ is derived from the root *tan* which means ugly. It pains the eye when one looks at it. *Tan* is also the term for 'to hate'. Hateful, nasty, shameful; they are one and the same thing. If someone has the habit of being dirty, people say *ommu ne ho* (lit. he does not respect himself). Telling someone that he is dirty is a serious offence. The strong emphasis on the different use of the right and the left hand shows the same concern about dirt. The left hand is reserved for 'dirty' activities, such as cleaning oneself after using the toilet, holding the penis while urinating, cleaning dirty things (e.g. a chamber pot), blowing one's nose, etc. Conversely, cleanliness (*ahote*ɛ) is the pre-eminent metaphor to express positive appreciation. Clean = beautiful = attractive = good = civilised = respectable. The most common term referring to being clean is *te*, which means 'to be open' or 'to be clear'. *Ehɔ te* (lit. There is open) must be understood to mean that the place is clear, free from unwanted things, free from dirt. *Ne ho te* (lit. His/her body is clear) is a compliment saying that the person is beautiful, attractive. In Ghanaian English, the expression 'she is neat' is

almost synonymous with 'she is pretty', with the connotation that she is also beautiful in a moral sense, 'pure'. The connection with respect is always present. Cleanliness engenders respect and expresses it. *Odi ne ho ni* means 'He respects himself' as well as 'He keeps himself clean'.

In summary, bodily cleanliness stands for physical and moral attractiveness, whereas dirt symbolises physical and moral decay. Dirt, or rather the abhorrence of it, plays a central role in the local 'anthropology'. To say that someone is dirty is almost a rejection of the whole person. Cleanliness of the body (the skin, the orifices, the teeth, the nails), and cleanliness with regard to housekeeping, clothing, or one's children, constitutes a basic condition for a person's attractiveness. Physical beauty and sexual attraction are commonly explained in terms of cleanliness.[12]

The concern about cleanliness accounts for the reluctance of people to build a toilet in their house. A toilet, by definition, is a dirty place so it should be kept outside the house, preferably outside the community. Thus it became the custom to construct the toilet at the edge of the town. In Kwahu-Tafo all four public toilets were initially situated on the outskirts, but when the town expanded over the years, some of them were gradually surrounded by houses. In larger towns and cities it has become impossible to keep the toilets outside the built-up area, for to do so would require some people to walk for an hour or more to visit the toilet. As a result, but contrary to the most basic feelings of what is appropriate, one finds dirty public toilets in the centre of the community and near markets and lorry stations in all larger Ghanaian towns.

The bucket latrine

When I inspected the toilet facilities in Kwahu-Tafo in 1996 I found that the town had four public toilets each with twelve squatting holes. Two of them had been closed down for various reasons.

Most people of the town prefer to go to the toilet early in the morning before they take their bath and breakfast.[13] It means that around 6 o'clock in the morning the public toilets are crowded and people may have to queue for their turn. Visiting a public toilet is not 'free'. The caretaker of the toilet takes a coin of 20 cedis (about one dollar cent) from each visitor. He has a pile of cut newspapers in front of him and hands each customer one sheet before taking their money. He is also responsible for the cleanliness of the place.

In addition there are some semi-public toilets in various schools which are used by both pupils and staff members. People living in the vicinity of the school also make use of the facility. An unknown number of people do not use a toilet, but relieve themselves on their way to the farm or on the farm. In the latter case, their faeces contribute to the fertility of the land, but I am not sure this is a conscious policy (as it is in some Asian countries). Most people with whom I discussed the advantages of human manure reacted with disgust to this idea. A more recent and pernicious technique to defecate without visiting a toilet is the use of plastic bags, which are later on thrown away in the bush or on the garbage heap outside town. Children may defecate directly on the dunghill near the public toilet; it will save them the 20 cedis they otherwise have to pay.

Finally, a limited number of inhabitants have their own toilet. Some of these are water closets. They can be found in the houses of the missionaries, in the health clinic, in the staff quarters of the Technical School, in some houses of well-to-do inhabitants, and in the house of the chief. A few houses, mostly towards the outskirts of the town, have their own pit latrine traditional style. All other private toilets are so-called bucket latrines. In 1996 the sanitary inspector estimated their number at sixty.

Most 'buckets' are square wooden containers which are emptied about once a week. A bucket latrine can be inside the house but in such a way that the bucket can be removed from the outside, through a little door at the back of the house. A bucket latrine can also be built as a separate wooden shed a few metres from the house. Users of the bucket latrine are not allowed to urinate in it, or to throw paper in it (people urinate in the bathroom where the urine is later washed away by the bathing water). The toilet paper is deposited in a basket and someone will burn the paper when the basket is filled up. In view of the fact that the bucket is emptied only once a week (the collector told me that it may be once in six days), the number of users needs to be limited. Children, for example, can be told to use the public latrine.

In 1971 I was doing research with a Ghanaian friend and stayed in the house of someone who had a private bucket latrine, behind his house. The door to the latrine was locked and the key was hanging on the doorpost of the owner's room, out of the reach of children. Everybody knew the rules as to who had the right to use the toilet. The two of us were among the privileged, although I never made use of my right. When the bucket began to overflow before its time, the owner realised that some residents in the house were cheating and he took the key inside his room. My friend discovered, however, that he could also open the padlock with a pair of compasses. He was probably not the only person who knew how to circumvent the problem of the key. As a result, the bucket kept overflowing.

My first personal experience with the bucket toilet only came in 1994, when I started to use my landlord's private latrine. I have described that experience at an earlier point in this article. There were always children playing in the vicinity of the toilet and everyone could see me entering the place. The door had several holes and chickens followed me to, and even into, the place. Worst of all was the situation inside the toilet. Here too, the bucket was often overflowing and the stench was repulsive. Flies and other insects completed my 'ordeal'. After some time I stopped. From that moment onwards my toilet 'participation' was limited to urinating in the bathroom.

For the elderly, the bucket latrine was an ideal solution. Most of them managed to make use of such a private toilet, either in their own house or with one of their neighbours.[14] One of them, a blind man, could find his way to the toilet thanks to a long rope which led from his room to the toilet. Bucket latrines are now on their way out, however. Local and higher-level governments are propagating water closets for the well-to-do and better quality public toilets for the others.[15] One way to improve the quality and cleanliness of the public toilets is privatisation.[16] Entrepreneurs exploit toilet facilities and users of public toilets now have to pay a small amount of money. It seems to be a lucrative business.

That bucket latrines are being phased out is understandable if one considers the type of work that is required for the regular removal of the waste. It is becoming more and more difficult to find people who are willing to empty the buckets. Who are those night-soil collectors and how do they look upon their work?

The night-soil collector

My first 'meetings' with a night-soil collector took place in the night without the man noticing me. Once a week I woke up in the middle of the night because of an intense stench drifting into my room. When it happened the first time I stood up and looked out of my window. I saw a short figure emptying the latrine bucket of my neighbour, just four metres from my window. His movements were steady and almost soundless. I observed how he poured the contents of the bucket into his own container and cleaned the bucket with a cutlass and a broom. He put the bucket back in its place, closed the little door, lifted the container on his head and walked away in the night.

It was only some years later that I met the man in daylight. Yaw Darko, one of my friends, who also was a research assistant, lived close to the man's house and one day introduced him to me. I felt uneasy at first, assuming that the man would feel uncomfortable about his work and my interest in it, but I was mistaken. Mr Atia, as his name was, took pride in his work and had no inhibitions telling us about it.

The night-soil collector is called *Kruni* in Twi. The term is derived from 'Kru', the name of an ethnic group in Liberia. Kru people, I was told, used to be the soil collectors in Southern Ghana. At present, most of them come from Northern Ghana or Burkina Faso, but the name *Kruni* has remained with them. That migrants and outsiders are the men performing this unpleasant work should not surprise us. *Atantaneɛ nti na yetɔ ɔdɔnkɔ* ('We buy a slave because of the filthy work'), Asante informants told Rattray in the 1920s.[17] The situation has not changed very much. What *did* surprise me was the self-esteem of Mr Atia. He saw his work as clean work and was aware of the fact that people needed him. He knew his value and 'he had his price'. In the minutes of the local council of the town of Larteh as long ago as 1940 we read about the respect allotted to the night-soil collectors: 'as the boys for carrying latrine excrement are sometimes scarce, they should be handled gently'.[18]

Mr Atia is a Frafra from the area around Bolgatanga in the Upper-East Region. He told us that he had been doing this work for twenty-eight years. Some years ago he was the only *Kruni* in the town, but due to his age (he must be about 65) he has now reduced the work to about thirty-five houses. Two other *Krufo*, also from the Bolgatanga area, serve the rest of the town.

Mr Atia was first a labourer, weeding the roadsides around Kwahu-Tafo. It is the type of work which many people from the North are doing in the South of the country. Some come to work on a season's basis and return home for sowing and harvesting, while others settle permanently but retain close ties with home.[19] Mr Atia is one of the latter. When he 'retired' from his first job, a Town Council Officer responsible for sanitation appointed him to work at the *bɔɔla* (refuse

dumping place), but he declined the offer because he did not like the work. When we asked him why he did not like it, he replied rhetorically: 'Who would like such a job?' (*Sɛ obiara ne nea ɔpɛ?*) He then decided to do the same kind of work but as a 'private entrepreneur'. During our conversation in 2000, he was charging each household 5000 cedis a month, which was then almost one American dollar. Assuming that he was serving thirty-five households, he made about 175,000 cedis per month, the equivalent of about 30 American dollars. The minimum salary of an unskilled labourer in that same period was about 50,000 cedis (less than 10 American dollars). He collected the money at the end of the month. If people failed to pay he simply stopped emptying their bucket. This technique usually worked, instantly obtaining appropriate payment. While we were conversing in front of his house a young woman approached him and whispered something into his ear which we were not supposed to hear. She informed him that her bucket was full and asked him if he could come that night to empty it. After she left we continued the conversation and he said he earned some extra income by castrating cats, dogs and goats.

Talking about his work he explained that first he worked during the day, but people complained about the 'nuisance', so he started to operate in the night. Usually he begins around 11.30 p.m. and continues until 4 or 5 a.m. In that time span he is able to 'do' six or seven buckets. For each bucket he has to walk a long distance, from the house to a dumping place outside the town, on average about one kilometre away. He does not work when the soil is wet and slippery. As he carries the load on his head, slipping would have extremely unpleasant consequences. In fact, one night when we had agreed to accompany him during his round, he cancelled the appointment because the soil was too slippery.

Mr Atia's equipment consisted of a large (about 15-litre) bucket, a soiled white shirt, a sack in which he carried a cutlass, a broom, and a hat with a layer of foam rubber (to place the bucket on). We asked him if there were particular risks in the work he does. There are, as an excerpt from one of our conversations shows:

> Yaw Darko/Sjaak van der Geest: You told us you don't work when it rains. Why?
> Atia: It is because the ground becomes too slippery. You know the weight of the load. If you are not careful, you are in danger.
> YD/SvdG: Do you take alcohol?
> Atia: Formerly I did, I was drinking too much. The doctor told me to stop. You see it is a difficult job. If you drink, you may one day find yourself covered by 'toilet' [excrements]. So, it is better not to drink, unless after you have finished the work.

Another time we asked him if the stench bothered him.

> Atia: Not at all. Not, if I take medicine.
> YD/SvdG: Is the medicine for prevention against the stench?
> Atia: No, it also protects me against witches. When I see them, I don't get afraid. They hide, when I see them.

Apart from the heaviness of the load and the danger of falling, the roaming about of witches in the night constitutes a danger to him. He remembers that he once saw a white image about 90 metres away from him. When the figure spotted him it diverted its course and disappeared in the bush.

To protect himself against the stench *and* against witches he uses a medicine which he calls *mɔtɔ*. I ask him to show it to me and he enters the house and returns with a black substance wrapped in paper. It looks like charcoal. I taste some of it and the taste too reminds me of charcoal, although I have never actually tried charcoal. He tells us that he gets the *mɔtɔ* from his hometown.

That same night, Yaw Darko accompanies him on his tour. I quote from Yaw's notes:

> Almost the whole atmosphere was dead. Everybody was asleep and I met nobody on the way. I got to Atia's place at 11.25 p.m. exactly. I knocked on his window and he came outside in his 'uniform', a white shirt with stains, a sack over his shoulder and a cutlass inside the sack. We went to the first house where his bucket was waiting. He hung the sack over a nearby flower hedge. He opened the door and pulled the full bucket towards him. He then pushed his own empty bucket against the full bucket. I began to feel [smell, svdg] the stench of the *ebin* (shit). Mr. Atia dipped his left hand (without gloves) into the shit of the bucket and scooped some of it into the empty bucket. He did this four times, because the other bucket was too full to lift without spilling. Then he took the full bucket, and poured the contents into his own bucket. He wiped his hand on the grass to clean it and took his small hat with the foam layer from his sack and put it on. He lifted the full bucket from the ground, rested it a moment on his lap and then placed it on his head, with ease. He then started walking to the dumping ground. During this exercise I had taken some pictures—with his permission.

Daylight

The bucket latrines will disappear and so will the night-soil collector. Mr Atia's children will not continue his occupation and no one else in the town of Kwahu-Tafo is prepared to do this type of work any more, certainly not the autochthones. Several people assured me that they would not take his position, 'Even if they paid me a million'. This brief article has first of all been a description of a phenomenon which will soon be extinct, a piece of urgent anthropology, one could say.

I have also written this article as a tribute to those who were forced to work in the night because their labour was too offensive for the people of the day. My description seeks to show their job to the daylight before it is eclipsed.

Notes

[1] I want to thank my friends who patiently explained complicated faecal matters to me: Patrick Atuobi, Anthony Obeng Boamah, Benjamin Boadi and Yaw Darko. Special thanks go to Mr Atia, the night-soil collector, to whom I dedicate this article.

[2] The proverb is used in a much wider sense, however. It expresses criticism of someone who is told that he should bear the consequences of his 'stupid' behaviour. The roughness of *ne* (to shit) suits the abusive intent of the saying.

[3] The Akan include the Asante, Fante, Akyem, Akuapem, Kwahu (or Kwawu), Bono and several other smaller groups. This article is situated in Kwahu society. Other studies dealing with Kwahu include: P.F.W. Bartle: 'Urban Migration and Rural Identity: An Ethnography of a Kwawu Community', Ph.D. thesis, Legon, University of Ghana, 1977; W. Bleek, *Marriage, Inheritance and Witchcraft: A Case Study of a Rural Ghanaian Family*, Leiden: African Studies Centre, 1975; W. Bleek, 'Sexual Relationships and Birth Control

in Ghana: A Case Study of a Rural Town', Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1976; S.F. Miescher, 'Becoming Man in Kwawu: Gender, Law, Personhood, and the Construction of Masculinities in Colonial Ghana 1875–1757', Ph.D. thesis, Anthropology, Northwestern University, Evanston, 1997.

[4] J.G. Christaller and K.R. Lange, *Three Thousand Six Hundred Ghanaian Proverbs from the Asante and Fante Language*, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000, p. 34.

[5] J.G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi)*, Basel: Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, 1933.

[6] R.S. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folk-Tales*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930, p. ix.

[7] R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929, p. 60.

[8] Cited in D. Maier, 'Nineteenth-Century Asante Medical Practices', *Comparative Studies of Society and History*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1979, pp. 63–81.

[9] 'Town' in Ghanaian English stands for the Twi term *kurom* and is used for any major settlement. For non-Ghanaians, Kwahu-Tafo with its 6000 inhabitants would perhaps be a 'village'. Within Ghana, 'village' (in Twi: *akuraa*) refers to a settlement of just a few houses or huts. Depending on its context, 'village' may have a derogatory meaning. I shall, therefore, use the term 'town'.

[10] R. Lea, 'The Performance of Control and the Control of Performance: Towards a Social Anthropology of Defecation', Dissertation, Brunel University, London, 2001, p. 53.

[11] I have described that first 'defeat' (and the subsequent ones) several times, most extensively in S. van der Geest, 'Akan Shit: Getting Rid of Dirt in Ghana', *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 8–12.

[12] See again, S. van der Geest, 'Akan Shit', pp. 8–12.

[13] S. van der Geest, 'Healthy Bowel Movements in Kwahu-Tafo: A Brief Note' (submitted for publication).

[14] S. van der Geest, 'The Toilet: Dignity, Privacy and Care of Elderly People in Kwahu, Ghana', in S. Makoni and K. Stroeken (eds) *Sociolinguistic and Anthropological Approaches to Ageing in Africa*, London: Ashgate, 2002, pp. 227–244.

[15] N. Obirih-Opareh, 'Public or Private? A Policy Dilemma of Liquid Waste Management in Accra', in S. van der Geest and N. Obirih-Opareh (eds) *Toilets and Sanitation in Ghana*, Accra: Stepri, 2001, pp. 13–23.

[16] N. Obirih-Opareh (see note 16) and J. Post, 'Managing Liquid Waste: The Case of Public Toilets in Kumasi', in S. van der Geest and N. Obirih-Opareh (eds) *Toilets and Sanitation in Ghana*, pp. 25–34.

[17] R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, p. 44.

[18] D. Brokensha, *Social Change at Larteh, Ghana*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966, p. 67.

[19] J.S. Nabila, *The Migration of the Frafra of Northern Ghana. A Case Study of Cyclical Labour Migration in West Africa*, East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1974; C. Lentz and V. Erlmann, 'A Working Class in Formation? Economic Crisis and Strategies of Survival Among the Dagara Mine Workers in Ghana', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 1989, pp. 69–111; K. van der Geest, '"We're Managing". How Farmers in Northern Ghana Adapt to Climate Changes', Master's thesis, Human Geography, University of Amsterdam, 2002.

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Over het noodlot: Ghanese liederen en spreekwoorden*

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Op 4 juli 1989 verliet een Russische piloot per vergissing zijn MiG-23. Het vliegtuig vloog onbemand van Polen over Oost- en West-Duitsland en Nederland en stortte omstreeks tien uur in de morgen in het Belgische dorp Kooigem neer, slechts enkele kilometers voor de Franse grens. Het miste net een drukke autoweg en boorde zich in een huis waar een jongen van 19 jaar lag uit te slapen van een feestje dat de vorige avond was gevierd ter ere van zijn slagen voor het eindexamen middelbare school. De jongen was op slag dood. Er bevonden zich geen andere mensen in het huis.

Het voorval werd uitgebreid beschreven in kranten en TV-journaals, maar nergens werd de vraag gesteld: waarom moest dit onbestuurde vliegtuig na zijn lange vlucht uitgerekend dit huis treffen, op dat moment? Was het vliegtuig wel onbestuurd? In een andere samenleving, een Afrikaanse bijvoorbeeld, zou die vraag zeker gesteld zijn. Wij hebben die vraag afgeleerd. Beide, de vraag stellen (en beantwoorden) en de vraag niet stellen dienen eenzelfde doel: verder leven.

Noodlot

De geschiedenis van de westerse filosofie biedt tal van voorbeelden hoe denkers getracht hebben de ongerijmdheden van het bestaan in een rijmschema te passen. Met name de ervaring van het kwaad, het fysieke en het morele, was moeilijk in overeenstemming te brengen met het geloof in een goede en almachtige God. De theodiceeën, van de Gnostici en Scholastici tot en met Leibniz, staan vol salto-mortales om dit doel te bereiken.

Zulk een worsteling om orde te stichten waar chaos dreigt en tot een bevredigende verklaring van het onverklaarbare te komen (cf. Geertz 1966) is ook geregistreerd in niet-Westerse culturen. De overvloedige antropologische literatuur over 'hekserij' laat niet alleen zien hoezeer men in diverse samenlevingen met het probleem van het kwaad bezig is, maar bewijst tevens dat de antropologen zelf er door gepreoccupeerd worden.

Waar antropologen weinig over geschreven hebben, is het geloof in de onontkoombaarheid van ongeluk – en van geluk, maar daar zijn antropologen altijd al minder in geïnteresseerd geweest.[1] In het Nederlands benadert de term 'lot' of 'noodlot' een dergelijke opvatting het meest. Bij de Akan in Ghana zijn er diverse woorden die het geloof in voorbestemming tot uitdrukking brengen. De Ghanese filosoof Gyekye analyseert een van deze termen als volgt:

> *Nkrabea* is composed of two words *nkra*, message, and *bea*, manner. *Nkrabea* therefore literally means 'the manner of the message' and it has come to mean the message given by the Supreme Being to the individual soul, which (message) was to determine the manner in which the individual was to live in the world (1987:108).

Hij wijst er vervolgens op dat sommige auteurs van mening zijn dat *bea* in deze context beter als 'plaats' vertaald kan worden. Ik schaar me bij deze auteurs; *bea* als 'manier' of 'wijze' lijkt me een afgeleide van de meer concrete betekenis 'plaats'. De oorspronkelijke betekenis van *nkrabea* lijkt daarom geassocieerd te moeten worden met het idee van 'bestemming', de plaats waar men zal eindigen. Het idee van een reeds bepaalde bestemming ligt ook opgesloten in de term *ɔkra*, gewoonlijk vertaald met 'ziel' en waarschijnlijk gerelateerd aan *nkra* (boodschap) en het werkwoord *kra* (afscheid nemen). In ieder geval wordt die relatie wel gelegd zoals ondermeer blijkt uit het volgende spreekwoord: *Wokra Onyankopɔn a, obi nnyina hɔ* ('Als je afscheid neemt van God, is niemand daarbij'). De uitleg die gewoonlijk gegeven wordt, is dat het afscheid van God een boodschap, advies of groet inhoudt die de levensloop van een mens bepaalt. Die boodschap, die tegelijkertijd zijn 'lot' is, wordt gezien als een 'ziel' (*ɔkra*) die de mens in zich draagt. Het karakter van iemand en zijn bestemming worden door God aan het begin van zijn leven vastgelegd. Rattray (1916:26–27) haalt de volgende legende aan in zijn commentaar bij het begrip *nkrabea*:

> *Onyankopɔn* gave a soul which was setting out for earth two bundles, a large and a slightly smaller one. The soul was told to hand over one of the parcels, the larger, to another soul which it found on reaching the earth. The soul to whom these destiny parcels were given changed them, taking as its own the one it had been ordered to give up to another. On coming to the world, the soul, now an incarnated one, found its parcel contained only rubbish, whereas the one (the wrong one) it had handed over to the other soul, contained nuggets and gold dust.

Hier wordt niet alleen de goddelijke oorsprong van het noodlot benadrukt, maar wordt bovendien gesuggereerd dat de mens zijn ongunstig lot aan zichzelf te danken heeft. Een stukje Akan theodicee: gepoogd wordt Gods goedheid, de onafwendbaarheid van het kwaad en de menselijke vrijheid in één verhaal te vangen. In hoeverre de rol van een hoogste god door de Islam of door Christelijke missionarissen is binnengebracht is moeilijk te zeggen. Rattray (1916:18–9) denkt dat het door hem aangetroffen godsbegrip in ieder geval geen produkt van Christelijke missionering is. Het is echter zinloos de vraag te stellen wat het 'oorspronkelijke' Akan concept van god of God was.

Het begrip *ɔkra* ('ziel') is bijna een synoniem met *nkrabea*. Men zegt bijvoorbeeld: *ne kra yɛ* (letterlijk: 'zijn ziel is goed') wat zoveel betekent als: 'hij heeft geluk in zijn leven'. *Nkrabea* lijkt daarom een pleonastische term te zijn. Het idee van een voorbestemd einddoel is terug te vinden in beide deeltermen waar het woord uit opgebouwd is.

Een synoniem is *hyɛbea* of *hyɛbere*, ook wel *hyɛbrɛ*. *Hyɛ* komt van het werkwoord *hyɛ* dat een zeer algemene betekenis heeft van 'plaatsen', 'zetten', 'bevestigen' en in samenhang met andere woorden allerlei vormen van doelgerichte beweging (letterlijk en metaforisch) kan uitdrukken. Christaller (1933:205–7) noemt niet minder dan 41 betekenissen. *Bea*, zoals we gezien hebben betekent 'plaats', en volgens Gyekye (1987:110) is *bere* een verbastering van *bea* en heeft niets te maken met de Akan term *bere* ('tijd'), zoals anderen beweren. Christaller (1933:208) lijkt dat ook te beweren en ik sluit me bij hem aan.

Het idee dat de levensloop van een mens vastligt en dat ieders lot weer anders is, wordt uitgedrukt in veel spreekwoorden, waarvan hier enkele voorbeelden volgen. De eerste vier komen uit de verzameling van Christaller (1879)[2]; de laatste drie zijn ontleend aan Gyekye (1987):

> *Nkrabea nhina nsɛ* (1762): Alle lotsbestemmingen zijn verschillend.
>
> *Krabea wɔnkwati* (1762): Men ontkomt niet aan zijn lotsbestemming.
>
> *Ɔbosomaketere hyɛ hye a, ɔhye* (621): Als de kameleon is voorbestemd te verbranden, zal hij verbranden.
>
> *Wo kra nyɛ a, na wunya safo nsam' amanne* (1760): Als je geen geluk hebt, val je in de handen van soldaten.
>
> *Wɔabɔ wo dɛ ibenya adze a, wo 'kra nnkyir pɛtɛ* (Fante): Als je voor het geluk bent voorbestemd, is de gier geen taboe voor je ziel.[3]
>
> If you are destined to die by the gun, you will not die by the arrow (geen Twi versie beschikbaar).
>
> Antelope's soul (destiny) is one, duiker's another (idem).

Vaak wordt het idee van lotsbestemming gekoppeld aan dat van wilsbeschikking door *Onyame/Onyankopɔn* (God). De eerste vijf spreekwoorden zijn weer ontleend aan Christaller (1879):

> *Onyame nkrabea nni kwatibea* (2538): Er is geen ontkomen aan Gods lotsbeschikking.[4]
>
> *Asɛm a Onyame adi asie no, ɔteasefo nnan no* (1855): Wat God heeft voorbeschikt, kan de mens niet veranderen.
>
> *Onyame anku wo a, wunwu* (2539): Als God je dood niet heeft bevolen, zul je niet sterven.
>
> *Onyankopɔn amma asonomfoa katakyi biribi a, ɔmaa no ahodannan* (2547): God gaf de zwaluw misschien geen heldenmoed, Hij gaf hem in ieder geval snelheid.

Onyankopɔn hyɛ wo nsa kora-ma na ɔteasefo ka gu a, ohyia wo so bio (2545): Als God je een kalebas vol palmwijn geeft en een mens stoot hem om, zal Hij hem weer vol gieten.

Aburuburo nkesua, adeɛ a ɛbɛyɛ yie nsɛe da, efirisɛ Agya Nyame nsa wɔmu: De eieren van de *laburuburo* (soort duif) bederven niet want Gods hand ligt op hen (uit Brempong 1986:205).

Een spreekwoord zonder context citeren – zoals in dit artikel gebeurt – kan eigenlijk niet. De Akan hebben zelfs *daar* een spreekwoord voor: *Yɛnna a, yɛnso dae* (als we niet slapen, dromen we ook niet). Als we toch menen een spreekwoord los van zijn context te begrijpen, dan komt dat omdat we die context erbij denken; omdat we ons kunnen voorstellen hoe die woorden in een bepaalde situatie zouden vallen.

Een spreekwoord is een flits van wijsheid, een kortstondige visie op een situatie, een opmerking waaruit moed of troost geput wordt, of waarmee een debat wordt beslecht. Het is, in Burke's woorden, 'a strategy for dealing with a situation' (1957:256). Een treffend voorbeeld daarvan deed zich voor tijdens mijn eerste verblijf in Ghana. Een hevig conflict was uitgebroken in de familie (*abusua*) waar ik bij logeerde. De partijen leken onverzoenlijk. Toen citeerde een oude man het volgende spreekwoord: *Onipa ara na ɔyɛ bɔne; aboa mfiri wuram mmɛyɛ onipa bɔne* (alleen een menselijk wezen doet kwaad; een dier komt niet uit het bos om je iets te misdoen). Zijn opmerking riep op tot verzoening en relativeerde het conflict. Het is nu eenmaal menselijk om fouten te maken. De situatie waarin deze woorden vielen en de persoon die ze uitsprak, gaven het spreekwoord zijn betekenis.

Spreekwoorden brengen geen ultieme waarheid naar voren. Vele spreekwoorden hebben zelfs een pendant die het tegenovergestelde beweert. De kracht van het spreekwoord ligt in zijn spitsvondigheid en beeldrijkheid, vaak van metaforische aard. Het werkt als een *spotlight* dat even op een bepaald object valt en daarmee de aandacht van andere zaken wegtrekt. Het brengt even rust, maar het doet niet wat religie doet – althans volgens de antropologische theorie: het levert geen verbindende tekst, het schept geen definitieve orde. De tegenstrijdigheden en spanningen worden slechts aan het oog onttrokken; ze blijven bestaan.

In het gebruik van spreekwoorden die het geluk of ongeluk van mensen als onveranderbaar en door God gegeven voorstellen, wordt een beroep op mensen gedaan zich neer te leggen bij de loop der gebeurtenissen. Er kunnen vele redenen zijn om dat niet te doen, bijvoorbeeld de onrechtvaardigheid van de situatie, vermoedens dat er kwade opzet in het spel is (fraude, toverij, hekserij) en dat er dus tegen-actie nodig is, de overtuiging dat iedereen voor zijn eigen lot verantwoordelijk is, of dat het kwaad onmogelijk van God kan komen. Maar die argumenten, hoe geldig ze ook mogen zijn, worden op dat moment terzijde geschoven. De volle aandacht valt op *nkrabea* en het spreekwoord verleidt tot berusting. De troost die geboden wordt mag schraal lijken, maar toch helpt het

als ik weet dat verzet geen zin gehad zou hebben en dat het ook niet 'mijn fout' (*me mfonso*) is. Berusting impliceert rust, de orde keert terug.

Met even veel recht had echter een ander spreekwoord geciteerd kunnen worden, bijvoorbeeld een oproep om de bron van het kwaad in de eigen familie te zoeken (hekserij) of een verwijt dat het individu zelf de schuld is van zijn ongeluk. Maar deze keer gebeurt dat niet.

Noodlotsliederen

De wispelturigheid van de spreekwoorden die nu eens A en dan weer B zeggen, treft men ook aan in *Highlife*-liederen[5] die allerlei facetten van het leven belichten. Opvallend veel *Highlife*-liederen gaan over ongeluk en noodlot en verbinden daar, soms, een moraal aan. Ze handelen over onmin in het huwelijk, het lot van het weeskind, het verdriet van de vrouw zonder kinderen, over de dood, over roddel en haat, over hekserij en armoede, over twaalf ambachten en dertien ongelukken. Het volgende lied van de *African Brothers Band* is een voorbeeld:

Kofi Nkrabea (Kofi Noodlot)

Aao, aao, aao, aao, aao.
Een eenzaam mens,
ik voel me verlaten en ellendig.
Amma Hyɛbere (Noodlot), Kofi Nkrabea.
Ik draag mijn lot.
Mijn noodlot is hard.
Ik draag mijn lot met mij mee door de wereld.
Iedere ouder houdt van zijn kind.
Mijn moeder bemint mij innig.
Ze begrijpt niet waarom ik zo'n leven moet leiden.
Daarom besloot ze me ergens naar toe te brengen
om uit te vinden wat mijn lot was.
Eerst bracht ze me naar Mpata,
vervolgens naar Mpatrapa.
Daarna ging het naar Mpiti
en toen naar Mpitripi.
Daarna bracht ze mij naar Mpoti
en tenslotte bereikten we Mpotripi.
De mensen vroegen of er geen geneesmiddel was
tegen mijn noodlot.
Overal waar we kwamen, werd ons verteld
dat het noodlot niet veranderd kan worden.
En als een insect je bijt,
dan moet het wel in je eigen kleren zitten.
Als ik dus wilde weten
wat de oorzaak van mijn ongeluk was,
dan moest ik thuis maar informeren.

Mijn leven is glad als olie.
Mijn leven is verward.
Mijn leven is een puinhoop.
Aao, aao, aao, aao, aao.
Ik ben een eenzaam en ellendig mens.
Maar Kofi Nkrabea,
Kofi, ik huil niet meer.
Ook al zink je zeven maal weg in de rivier
een maal zul je hem oversteken.
Ik lijd in mijn ellende, in mijn ongeluk.
Ik leg al mijn zorgen in de handen van God.
Pas aan het eind van de weg kunnen we zeggen:
Ik ga, ik kom niet meer terug.
Voor dit zwoegen en lijden
ben ik in de wereld gekomen.
Als ik sterf en naar de wereld der geesten ga,
zal ik dan weer terugkeren?
Dat weet niemand dan ik alleen.
Aao, aao, aao, aao, aao,
ik ben een eenzaam en ellendig mens.
Aao, Nkrabea, ik ben eenzaam en ellendig.

Op het eerste gezicht biedt dit verhaal noch troost, noch herstel van de orde. Om met het laatste te beginnen: het idee van een overanderlijk noodlot wordt doorkruist door andere verklaringen, bijvoorbeeld door de insinuatie dat de oorzaak van Kofi Nkrabea's ongelukkig leven gezocht moet worden in hekserij die vanuit zijn eigen familie op hem gericht wordt. Die suggestie wordt zelfs met een spreekwoord ondersteund: een insekt dat bijt moet wel in je eigen kleren zitten. Ook van troost of bemoediging lijkt nauwelijks sprake te zijn. Het lied eindigt met het vooruitzicht op een terugkeer na zijn dood waarna dezelfde ellende weer kan beginnen.

De troost die dit troosteloze verhaal biedt, wordt door Van Peer (1986:412) omschreven als voortkomend uit een 'amalgaam van authentieke beleving en existentiële distantie': '...[D]e held gaat ten onder, de toehoorder niet'. Enerzijds associeert de toehoorder zich met het lot van Kofi Nkrabea, herkent hij misschien eigen ervaringen in het levensverhaal van deze ongelukkige, maar als redding uitblijft, redt de toehoorder zichzelf door zich te dissociëren van Nkrabea's lot. Het ongeluk en de chaos worden bezworen door ze terug te verwijzen naar die ander of ze te reduceren tot de illusie van het verhaal. De toehoorder kan opgelucht adem halen dat het hem beter gaat dan de trieste held van het lied. Er is geen jaloezie dat het anderen zoveel beter gaat. Integendeel, er is reden tot voldoening over het eigen lot.[6] De toehoorder kan verder leven.

Precies hetzelfde kan opgemerkt worden met betrekking tot het volgende lied waarin noodlot eveneens 'verward' wordt met de gevolgen van hekserij en waarin slechts zelfbeklag van de ongelukkige vernomen wordt. Het lied bevat vele herhalingen die ik hier weglaat.

Hyɛbrɛ (Nòodlot)[7]

Oh, mijn lot staat op een kruispunt.
Waar moet ik heen? Waar moet ik heen?
De wereld is bitter voor mij.
Mijn lot staat op een kruispunt.
Oh, dit noodlot.

Kinderen en geld hebben mij geslagen.[8]
Ik heb geen kleed om aan te doen.
Er zijn alleen de kinderen van anderen.
Iedere morgen trek ik hetzelfde kleed aan.

Ik ben een schildpad.
Als ik op mijn rug lig,
is er niemand die mij omkeert.
God, mijn lot staat op een kruispunt.
Waar moet ik heen?

Het is niet omdat ik altijd pech heb.
Het is niet omdat ik de zoon van een bijvrouw ben.
Het is niet omdat mijn ziel het goede afwijst.
Mijn ongeluk komt van mijn eigen familie,
daarom is mijn lot niet goed.
Ik ben diep te schande gemaakt,
mijn lot verloopt niet goed voor mij.
Ieder werk dat ik doe, brengt mij schande.
Mijn lot staat op een kruispunt.
Waar moet ik heen? Waar moet ik heen?

De onontkoombaarheid van het lot komt het sterkst tot uiting in verhalen waarin de ongelukkige geen enkele blaam treft en door een onwaarschijnlijke samenloop van omstandigheden getroffen wordt. Het moest blijkbaar zo gebeuren. Die verhalen doen denken aan de Griekse tragedie waarin de held, ondanks de verheven poëzie van dialogen en reien, uiteindelijk schlemielig ten ondergaat: door een stom misverstand, door 'niets' eigenlijk. Het tragisch gevoel zegt: dit had niet gehoeven; de leer van het fatum antwoordt: het moest zo gebeuren. De MiG-23 *moest* de 19-jarige jongen treffen. De dood *moest* zijn klant in Ispahaan halen.[9] Ik citeer twee *Highlife*-liederen die deze ijzeren hand van het noodlot tot thema hebben.

Ɛsrɛso ɔprammire (De savanne-slang)[10]

De savanne-slang zei dat hij geen gierst kon eten.
Maar wat was er gebeurd?
De muis die in zijn maag zat, had gierst gegeten.
Dit verhaal laat zien dat het ongeluk onontkoombaar is.
Dus, dierbare broer en zus,
het is niet mijn fout.
Jullie weten het zelf: als het ongeluk komt,
kan niets het tegenhouden.

Ik ben een eenzame arme man,
ik zoek geen moeilijkheden.
Maar als ze komen, waar komen ze dan vandaan?
Adu Gyamfi, zie hier mijn lot,
maar eigenlijk stelt het niets voor.
Als je in deze wereld voor het ongeluk bent voorbestemd
kun je op een steen bijten als je een ei eet.[11]

Kijk, een dier, een savanne-slang heeft gezworen
dat het voedsel genaamd gierst zijn mond niet zal raken
tot de dag dat hij naar het rijk der doden gaat.
Luistert, vrienden, naar wat er is gebeurd.
Op een dag ving hij een muis.
Die muis had gierst gegeten
en kwam terecht in de maag van de slang.
Toen stierf de slang.

Het tweede voorbeeld, *Nkrabea mu nsɛm*, wat misschien vrij vertaald kan worden als 'Wat het noodlot in petto heeft', is een lied van de *African Brothers Band*. Het begint als volgt:

Sommige problemen zijn voorbestemd.
Tegen het noodlot kan men niets doen.
Wat is dat voor een noodlot?
Soms raken mensen verwikkeld in een zaak.
Ze worden gearresteerd en voor de rechter geleid
terwijl ze onschuldig zijn.
Maar omdat er geen getuigen zijn
en vanwege hun noodlot,
worden ze tot hun schande gevangen gezet.

Dan volgt het verhaal van een man genaamd *Mempɛ-meho-asɛm* ('Ik zoek geen moeilijkheden'), die met niemand onenigheid heeft en alom gerespecteerd wordt. Op een dag gaat hij zijn vriend in een ander dorp bezoeken en neemt een zak met wat spullen mee, waaronder een portie vis voor zijn vriend. Onderweg wordt hij vermoeid en rust even uit. Terwijl hij ligt te slapen komt de moordenaar van de dochter van de koning voorbij rennen, achterna gezeten door een groep mensen. De moordenaar stopt het hoofd van de prinses in de zak van de slapende man en maakt zich uit de voeten. De man wordt wakker en vervolgt zijn weg. Bij zijn vriend aangekomen geeft hij diens vrouw de zak met vis. 'Eei, maar wat is dit?' De zaak wordt aan de koning gerapporteerd en de man wordt opgehangen.

Wat over de spreekwoorden gezegd is geldt ook voor de liederen. Nooit hebben ze het laatste woord. Er is tegenspraak, binnen de tekst en tussen verschillende teksten. De verhalen van de slang en van *Mempɛ-me-ho-asɛm*, die zonder schuld aan hun eind komen omdat dat hun noodlot was, zouden bestreden kunnen worden met andere liederen die benadrukken dat het leven is wat je er zelf van maakt. De volgende regels uit het lied *Ɔbra* ('leven') van de *African Brothers Band* illustreren dat:

Het leven, ach het leven.
Het leven is wat je ervan maakt.
Dit leven, mens, dit leven,
wat doen we ermee?
Alleen de hen bepaalt de plaats
waar zij haar eieren legt.
Aoo, dit leven hangt alleen van jou af.

Maar dat lied wordt een andere keer gezongen.

Conclusie

Geertz' (1966) bekende essay over religie als een cultureel systeem is gebouwd op een definitie van religie die uit vijf elementen bestaat. Het derde element is dat religie 'conceptions of a general order of existence' formuleert. Daarin betoogt Geertz dat wan-orde slechts gekeerd kan worden als er een overkoepelend zingevend denksysteem bestaat. Alle gebeurtenissen, ook het onverwachte, of het lijden of wat strijdig lijkt met ons ethisch besef, moeten verklaarbaar zijn 'within the accepted scheme' (ibid.:15).

Zo beschouwd zijn ook antropologen op een 'religieuze missie'. Ook zij trachten hun bevindingen te 'plaatsen' in een theoretisch kader dat sluitend is. Informanten èn antropologen hebben een gemeenschappelijk belang in de constructie van een bouwwerk van logica waarin alle vragen en antwoorden onderdak kunnen vinden. Treffende voorbeelden van zo'n onderneming zijn te vinden in Gyekye's (1987) poging om samen met zijn informanten een 'Akan conceptual scheme' te bouwen rond begrippen van lotsbestemming, kwaad en verantwoordelijkheid. Voorbeelden treft men ook aan in Robert Pools studie (1989) over interpretaties van ziekte en ongeluk in Kameroen. In zijn gesprekken met oud en jong over waar ongeluk nu vandaan komt, wordt over heksen en voorouders, God, goden en toeval gefilosofeerd. Iedereen probeert zijn betoog 'sluitend' te krijgen, maar soms is er geen touw aan vast te knopen. Velen spreken elkaar en ook zichzelf tegen, en de termen die gebruikt worden zijn verre van eenduidig. De vertalingen in het Engels ('*witch*', '*ancestor*', '*god*') maken het nog ingewikkelder. 'Het religieuze *systeem*' blijft onvindbaar.

Wat moeten we hiermee? Antropologen zullen zich moeten neerleggen bij het failliet van het '*grand système*' en genoegen nemen met de brokstukken en met het niet-weten van zichzelf en hun gesprekspartners. Orde scheppen kan op één andere manier, op kleinere schaal, door een oogje dicht te knijpen. We hadden dit kunnen weten als we wat meer introspectie in ons vak hadden toegelaten. Als wij de moeilijke vragen in ons eigen leven mogen wegduwen, waarom mogen onze informanten dat dan niet? Geborgenheid kan blijkbaar ook gevonden worden in flitsen van inzicht, '*glimpses of the unthinkable*', '*Pensées*' à la Pascal; in spreekwoorden of gewoon in een melodramatisch *Highlife*-lied. Het noodlot van de antropoloog is dat er zelfs geen noodlot is.

Noten

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1. Dat is niet zo verwonderlijk. De arts interesseert zich niet voor een gezond lichaam en de journalist schrijft zelden over mensen die het goed maken.
2. Uit de verzameling van 3680 spreekwoorden die in 1879 door Christaller werd gepubliceerd, werden er in 1916 door Rattray 830 geselecteerd, vertaald en van commentaar voorzien. In 1985 werd door Kofi Ron Lange de complete verzameling (in eigen beheer) uitgegeven, voorzien van een – letterlijke – Engelse vertaling. De nummers achter de spreekwoorden verwijzen naar hun plaats in Christallers collectie.
3. De betekenis is: dan heb je van de gier (een dier dat ongeluk brengt) niets te vrezen.
4. Van dit spreekwoord bestaat ook een variant waarin *Onyame* (God) vervangen is door *onipa* (de mens).
5. Over *Highlife*, moderne West-Afrikaanse muziek, is inmiddels veel geschreven. Hier kan worden volstaan met de opmerking dat het een populaire muziekstijl is die in Ghana ongeveer aan het eind van de vorige eeuw ontstaan is. Aanvankelijk ging het om Ghanese musici die zich conformeerden aan de Westerse smaak van de nieuwe Ghanese elite. Deze muziek werd om begrijpelijke redenen met de term '*Highlife*' aangeduid. De *Highlife* muziek heeft zich echter ontwikkeld van een koloniale dansorkest-stijl tot een eigen vorm waarin Ghanese artiesten uitdrukking geven aan hun *eigen* gevoelens voor een *eigen* publiek. Meer informatie over *Highlife* is te vinden in Collins (1985), Collins & Richards (1982), Gales (1983), en Brempong (1986).
6. Van Peer (1986:449) haalt in dit verband – naar mijn smaak iets te cynisch – de volgende regel van Euripides aan: 'Het schept genoegen van ontbering te horen'.
7. Hyɛbrɛ wordt gezongen door de *Cool Guys Band* en is opgenomen in de collectie van Brempong (1986:602–7). Deze collectie bevat diverse liedteksten die het noodlot tot thema hebben (zie ondermeer: pp. 292–302, 322–27, 333–37, 353–74, 380–83, 602–27).
8. Betekenis: Ik ben een geslagen mens want ik heb kinderen noch geld.
9. De onontkoombaarheid van de dood is een populair thema in de vele *Highlife*-liederen die op begrafenissen gespeeld worden (zie b.v. Van der Geest 1979:33–35).
10. Deze slang is ongeveer anderhalve meter lang, heeft een gele nek, grijze buik en donker-blauwe rug en staart. De tekst van het lied en de aanvullende informatie zijn ontleend aan Brempong (1986:353–57). Het lied wordt gezongen door de *Ashanti Brothers Band*. De tekst wordt hier zonder zijn vele herhalingen geciteerd.
11. Een spreekwoord: *Wudi kosua, ɛyɛ a na wabɔ boɔ mu.*

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6

Not Knowing about Defecation

SJAAK VAN DER GEEST

In his celebrated essay that inspired the theme of this book, Murray Last writes: "I suggest that under certain conditions not-knowing or not-caring-to-know can become institutionalised as part of a medical culture."[1] That institutionalization of not knowing makes the not knowing such an important issue in understanding a culture. If we know why people systematically do not know certain things that are part of their everyday experience, we will be better able to understand their culture.

Murray's essay, on (the absence of) Hausa medical knowledge, made us aware of anthropologists' wrong assumption that people always know their culture. The *Aha-Erlebnis* that this article produced was that there are indeed many things people do not really know and feel perfectly comfortable not knowing. Yet they "forget" their not knowing when they are interviewed and pressed to give "proper" answers. Too often anthropologists do not accept "Don't know" as an answer, although that sometimes is the best answer.

My contribution deals with another kind of institutionalized not knowing: not knowing about defecation. That not knowing does not refer to lack of knowledge on the part of informants about their defecation practice. They know very perfectly well, to the smallest detail, when, where, and how they defecate. Not knowing in this case lies with the anthropologists who never asked questions about it. Why? Is it important to know about the not knowing of anthropologists about defecation? Does it teach us something about the culture of practicing anthropology? I think it does. It shows that anthropologists are more caught in the web of their own culture than we realized. They seem to be restrained by

relatively trivial codes of decency, which stop them from openly speaking or writing about such dirty and childish matters as human defecation.

I only know two anthropological studies of defecation. Interestingly both authors write about their own culture. The first is Flavien Ndonko's[2] study on "cultural representations of faeces" in two Cameroonian societies, the Bamiléké and the Yasa. Ndonko describes these people's resistance to the government's introduction of latrines. Latrines, Ndonko shows, threaten the very basis of their cosmology and ecology. The second is Rachel Lea's[3] dissertation on defecatory practices in Britain. The ethnographic contribution of her study is more limited: conversations with a few friends about their ideas and practices and those of their children. The emphasis of Lea's study is theoretical: her discussion of defecation literature (and art) is unparalleled.

These two studies are, however, exceptions. Overall, defecation is practically absent as a focal point of ethnographic interest in anthropological work. My first reaction to this is amazement: why did—and do—anthropologists hardly study defecation? One can think of many reasons why they should be interested in it, medical anthropologists in particular. I will discuss several reasons.

Ten Reasons for the Study of Defecation

The first reason is its everyday character. Anthropologists have a strange relationship with ordinary life. They claim that it is the daily routines they are after—is that not what we mean by culture?—but in their own daily practice of fieldwork they show more interest in dramatic events and in festivals that occur only once a year. The acclaimed "discovery of everyday" did not really take place in anthropology. Everyday life can rather be found in the work of sociologists. Is that perhaps the reason that some anthropologists find them boring?

Defecation certainly—and hopefully—is a daily routine, one of those "drab, everyday, minor events," which Malinowski admitted he did not treat "with the same love and interest as sensational large happenings." Loudon,[4] who quoted these words, applied the critique to himself. More "shaming" than the subject itself, he wrote:

> is that I have only the smallest amount of direct concrete evidence about the mundane minutiae of such a seemingly straightforward matter as where and when the people among who I worked for two years usually defecated, and what they thought about it.

If the everyday appearance of feces could not capture the curiosity of the anthropologists, what about their *dis*appearance, or—to speak with

Leder[5]—their *dys*-appearance? Anthropologists have always been fascinated by the unseen. One of the paradoxes of the anthropological quest is that we swear by participant observation but feel attracted by what we cannot observe and cannot participate in. Hidden knowledge, black magic, forbidden practices, covert conflicts, secret societies, and nocturnal rituals are some of the unobservable popular topics in ethnography. Yet defecation, one of the most concealed activities, has never been on the short list of anthropological favorites.

A third reason to be interested in defecation is its central role in learning culture, as Freud pointed out a long time ago. Toilet training is the first step to the acquisition of culture by children (not by anthropologists, apparently). Learning to distinguish between what is dirty and what is clean is essential for proper functioning in a society. Children are taught not to touch what comes out of their body, because it is "dirty." Certain objects, body parts, animals, and activities are also considered unclean. In each household the anthropologist can observe how culture is manufactured in the way children are treated. What is concealed in the lives of grown-up members of society is still visible among small children. Unfortunately, the anthropologists—even those who were interested in socialization of children—largely overlooked these mundane enlightening practices.

One of anthropology's roots is in the never-ending nature-nurture debate: from Tylor and Boas onwards, resistance against biological determinism has indeed been a major source of inspiration and motivation to study cultural variations of phenomena and habits that were regarded as "natural" at home. Defecation—like health and illness, and the senses—seems an eminent subject to study the complex intertwinement of what we call "nature" and "culture." How much culture is there in nature's call? In a newspaper clipping from 1991, I read that the famous Irish cyclist Stephen Roche had to leave the world's most prestigious cycling event, the Tour de France, because he arrived too late at the start of the second day. Reason: an urgent call by nature. Certain facts of nature, the message seems to tell, one can never escape. "Shitting comes before dancing" (*Poepen gaat voor dansen*) a Dutch proverb goes. First nature, then culture. As many wisdoms, this one is too simple. Roche was an experienced cyclist. In 1987 he had won all three top prizes of cycling: Tour de France, Giro d'Italia, and World Championship. He probably had good reasons to let nature take its course this time. There may have been strategy in his defecation, or, to stay with the Dutch proverb, dancing in his shitting. The fact that toilet training, as we have just seen, signals the beginning of culture, suggests that we witness a crucial nature-culture interface in the lonely act of defecation, but anthropologists forget to pay attention.

One particular nature-culture encounter that has always intrigued anthropologists is the human body. From Mauss to Foucault, Czordas, and Devisch—with excursions to history, psychology, philosophy, and art—body and embodiment have been almost constant foci of anthropological research. Themes that were discussed over the years included the cultural construction of the body, its symbolic representation of cosmos and society, the body as a means of communication, as the focus of identity, as object and subject of political control, and the ongoing process of embodiment. Body products—and faces in particular—seem very tangible metonyms of bodily presence in the world. They could be "key informants" for understanding the meaning of body and embodiment in the context of culture. Their near absence in the anthropology of the body is—again—remarkable. It is mainly studies dealing with the failing, sick body[6] that take up the matter of defecation, that is: defecation as a problem. Those dealing with the "normal" healthy body remain reticent about the ultimate proof of its normality: regular defecation.[7]

More recent is the anthropological interest in the senses. After Stoller's[8] plea for "tasteful ethnography" anthropologists have increasingly attempted to extend their sensory arsenal of participant observation. Seeing and hearing were too limited to understand culture, smelling in particular, but also touching and tasting had to be part of the fieldwork experience. They always had been, of course, but not as consciously as now was proposed. One would expect that feces, around which the most intense sensory experiences take place, had become a more regular topic in this new "sensitive" ethnography but—once more—it has not. As Lea[9] points out, Stoller himself "forgot" about the "distasteful" appearance of feces and other dirt during his fieldwork. His plea for tasteful, after all, had to be taken in the conventional meaning of the term: decent, clean.

My seventh reason for expecting the rise of defecation in anthropological writing is of a somewhat different kind and will be discussed more lengthily. Growing reflexivity has treated us to a wave of publications in which the personal anxieties of the author in the field are presented and discussed, sometimes in intimate detail. Surprisingly—or perhaps not—one of the main worries of fieldwork, defecation, remains conspicuously absent. Miller[10] praises the bravery of anthropologists who "endured life without toilet paper," but how and if they defecated remains a mystery. Van der Veer,[11] who is one of those brave anthropologists, writes that "the symphony of the bowels" dominates the diaries of anthropologists in the field but rarely can be heard in their academic publications—he undoubtedly speaks of his own experience. The diarrhea of the diary turns into constipation at the threshold of civilization. Sometimes, it does not even enter the diary. Malinowski's strictest diary never

mentions that most mundane "drab, everyday" activity. Seeing his tent pitched on the shore in one of the photographs of his *Argonauts*, one cannot help becoming curious. It is ironic, to say the least, that he canceled out his own defecation while preaching his creed of "biopsychofunctionalism."

Thinking of the "horror" of my own toilet experience on my first morning in the field in Kwahu, Ghana, and the events that followed, I wonder how one can cut out such incidents from reflexive contemplation. I have described my own experiences elsewhere[12] and it would become a monotonous symphony to repeat those stories here. It suffices to note that it was not only the rebellion of four of my five senses (fortunately, taste was not involved), which made me run away from the filthy public toilet. The absence of privacy was equally decisive for my fear of the situation. Feeling the eyes of the squatting figures on me—though nobody looked at me directly—I found it impossible to squat between them, incapable to cope with the technical and social problem of handling my own dirt and the dirt around me.

Relating this incident to the rest of my fieldwork, as a reflexive anthropologist should do, I can see one major implication. My running away from that place and my subsequent almost continuous avoidance of local toilets has made me aware of a serious shortcoming in my participation in the daily life of the community. If toilet training constitutes the entrance to culture, as we have just seen, my truant reaction made me lose that essential opportunity. How can I write intelligently—as I have tried to do—about dirt and cleanliness in Kwahu society if I failed to attend the initiation where the principles of purity and danger are taught?

Assuming that many of my colleagues, in similar circumstances, did the same, I suggest that that omission can be an important motive for silence. Not speaking the local language and failing the toilet test are two awkward shortcomings in anthropological fieldwork. Both are usually concealed. Without directly lying about it, anthropologists tend to give an impression of language capacity by liberally using vernacular quotes. About defecation they just hold their tongue, as they should in the civilized world of academic discourse.

Even if we feel uncomfortable about the topic in our own ethnographic work, should we not be more open about it for the sake of our students? Several of my colleagues who have been involved in the supervision of students' fieldwork told me about their students' fear of defecation in the field. One told me that he could read the emotional burden of fieldwork from his students' "infantile obsession with their own defecation." That silence reminds me of the secrecy surrounding initiation rituals. When Freilich[13] many years ago called fieldwork an initiation rite, he was more right than we realized at the time.

That is not to say that all fieldworkers are always silent about it. Some made one or two remarks about their experience, keeping it decent and limited. Dentan[14] who did research in Malaysia, writes that he always got company when he went to relieve himself:

> I found it hard to adapt to the fact that going to the river to defecate meant answering cries of "Where are you going?" The evasive answer, "To the river," merely led people to ask, "Why are you going to the river?" A mumbled "To defecate" brought a reply of either "Have a good defecation" or, sometimes, if the speaker was a man, "Hang on, I'll come with you."

Evans-Pritchard also seems to have complained about the lack of privacy and found it increasingly difficult to defecate before the eyes of his Nuer public (I never found the exact quote). Goodenough[15] provides a more relaxed picture of his toilet use on one of the Gilbert Islands in the Pacific. He was the only person using the outhouse on the beach; the children used the place to fish and to play. Whenever he needed to go there the children politely gave him passage. On his return they would ask him the traditional question: "Did you?" The reply was a joyful "I did." Some, who enjoyed a comfortable toilet, went there to find privacy. Scott,[16] for example, in Malaysia, found his toilet a "place of—apparently pleasant—solitude." For some it was even a place to jot down fieldwork notes.

A few anthropologists volunteered to tell me about their uncomfortable (or peaceful) toilet experiences in the field. Irene Agyepon, from Ghana, wrote to me that she could not stay overnight in a fishing village because of the toilet conditions. Defecation had to be done in the bush and the feces were immediately consumed by pigs. That was too much for her. Peter Ventevogel,[17] anthropologist and psychiatrist, sent me a paragraph from his personal diary, also in Ghana:

> Been to the toilet. A ditch of one by ten metres, three metres deep. My diarrhoea is back. While the yellow strings fall down an old man is hunching at the other side, in his hand an empty cornhusk to clean his buttocks. My God, everything goes wrong.... I must give up all ambitions. I will never become a medical anthropologist (17 October 1991).

Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall wrote an extensive diary (three volumes) about their fieldwork among Hamar people in Ethiopia.[18] There is very little in it about defecation but in an e-mail message (May 2003) Strecker summarized their experiences as follows:

> [W]e found it enchanting to go—as the Hamar do—into the bush and relieve ourselves there in the heart of nature, surrounded by plants, birds

> and insects crawling on the ground who would turn our faeces to dust in no time. During the morning hours the air would still be cool and the world would still be fresh, during midday one would search for a shady place and at night we would walk carefully to avoid getting scratched by the thorny bush, and not to disturb and get bitten by a snake.... The plant we preferred as 'toilet paper' was *baraza* (grewia mollis). It is used in countless rituals of the Hamar. There are several entries in the work journal where we mention how we got sick and how this brought us close to the Hamar.

His remark about sickness is significant. Falling sick and defecating (the two are not unrelated) are intense examples of sharing life conditions, of being, after all, of the same species. They constitute crucial elements in the experience of participatory fieldwork.

After this defecatory reflection on fieldwork we still have to deal with three final reasons why defecation deserves more attention in anthropology. The most important one is the theoretical relevance of dirt. The concept of dirt offers people the opportunity to order their life. The old functionalist paradigm that order is the heart of culture has never been abandoned, however loudly structural-functionalism was criticized. The classification of dirt shows how that order is constituted and where the boundaries between good and bad, right and wrong, inside and outside lie. Mary Douglas's concept of "matter out of place" has been most influential here.[19] Excretions of the body are the most strongly felt matters out of place and, therefore, the most informative pointers of cultural boundaries and identity construction. The more surprising it is that feces are practically absent in anthropological theory, even in Douglas's own classic book.

It stands to reason that for medical anthropologists feces and defecation are particularly relevant. A regular and smooth movement of the bowels is both a sign of good health and a condition for it. Crawford's[20] definition of health as the perfect balance between control and release applies first of all to the defecation experience. The focus on regular excretion to maintain health seems widespread. But, unfortunately, even in medical anthropology, the ethnographic and theoretical focus on defecation ideas and practices is scanty. Lea's[21] study is an outstanding exception.

The only domain in anthropology that *has* been frequently calling attention to the social and cultural aspects of defecation is applied medical anthropology. Anthropologists involved in sanitation and public health projects have repeatedly pointed out that health policies must take into account local perceptions of dirt and hygiene.[22] It is indeed mainly sanitation development work and concern about conditions surrounding children's diarrhea that have evoked most interest in the anthropological study of defecation. Ironically, that research and those publications are

little respected in mainstream (medical) anthropology and considered too quick and too dirty (!) to satisfy the "proper" anthropologists. These publications are mainly found in project reports, newsletters, and other "gray" literature (on and outside the Internet), hardly in the established prestigious journals.

Avoiding Defecation

Having discussed so many good reasons for studying the culture of defecation, we should ask why anthropologists, some excepted, preferred not to know about it.

In 1975 J. B. Loudon delivered a paper on body products at the Annual Conference of the British Association of Social Anthropology in Belfast. He remarked that there was probably no human society where excreta and the act of excretion were not subject to public or private arrangements involving the establishment of boundaries. This, to my knowledge, was the first serious sign of anthropological interest in defecation. In the shortened version of his talk, which appeared a few months later in the newsletter of the Royal Anthropological Institute, he concluded his appeal for research on the matter as follows:

> Like sex and food, faeces and defecation have a social component as well as a biological one. No doubt the code is relatively limited. The space-time clock initiated by the gastrolic reflex has restricted meanings. But deciphering them is relevant to the study of small-scale social relations, of concepts of intimacy, privacy and distance, of the link between thinking and stinking.[23]

This statement outlined some important themes in the anthropology of defecation, but was an understatement. Much more is at stake in ideas and practices around defecation, not only at the level of small-scale relations, but also at the level of national governments, not only concepts of intimacy and privacy, but also of politics and power.

By far the most prominent—and almost universal—arrangement that Loudon talked about is the concealment of both the act and the result of defecation. Most of the few ethnographic accounts of defecation across the world emphasize its disappearance from public life and the existence of embarrassment, shame, fear, and disgust surrounding the topic. Malinowski[24] reported that people of the Trobriand Islands were very particular about defecation. A Trobriander, he writes,

> shows far more delicacy than most Europeans of the lower classes, and certain 'sanitary' arrangements in the south of France and other Mediterranean countries would horrify and disgust him.

Trobrianders had specially reserved places in the bush at some distance of the village and would never go there together.[25] They felt disgusted by feces, in particular their smell. The Cameroonian anthropologist Ndonko made similar observations in two societies, the Yasa and the Bamiléké, in his home country: concealment is the rule and even speaking about it is considered wrong.[26] The Australian anthropologist Seymour writes that routine bodily functions such as defecation are "cloaked in secrecy":

> Not only does the management of these activities take place behind closed doors, but beyond crude jokes or clinical situations, civilised behaviour provides few opportunities to openly discuss these topics. Talking about such things makes people feel uncomfortable; embarrassment, humiliation and shame compound the furtive, hidden nature of the activities. No one escapes the need to eliminate bodily wastes, yet these routine functions are often hidden in euphemism and furtive behaviour. Propriety has created disgust at the normal activities of healthy bodies.[27]

Sixty percent of a thousand respondents in an American survey in the 1960s reported that they would interrupt or postpone defecation if they had no privacy.[28] Significantly, together with sex and death, defecation has proved the most frequent reason for using euphemisms. The need to avoid the topic, however innocent and natural it may seem, occurs worldwide.

That avoidance is also noted in anthropology. Rachel Lea rightly remarked that defecation "was ignored in ethnography just as it is ignored in daily life."[29] Clearly, the two are related; not writing about feces seems part of a general complex of avoiding the issue.

One academic explanation for the near absence of defecation in anthropological writing is the claim that defecation, like sleeping, is a non-issue, an activity which is asocial and acultural because it takes place in a social and cultural vacuum. Defecation may be relevant for biology, medical sciences and psychoanalysis but not for social scientists as it lacks any social dimension.[30] My point is that widespread concern about privacy rather constitutes evidence of its high social and cultural relevance. The anthropological silence is directly related to that social and cultural relevance (read: embarrassment). Fiske[31] in his handbook on human relations, rejects what he calls the "Null orientation," the supposed existence of nonsocial behavior. Taking defecation as an example, he emphasizes its social orientation. Defecation, he writes,

> is social in that most adults take care to do it in private, since it is embarrassing to be observed. Similarly, most action that is asocial in the

> immediate, narrow sense of the term is asocial just because cultural implementation rules define it so. Thus for the most part it is the culture itself that determines the domains in which people act individualistically....[32]

I agree with Lea, quoting Frankenberg, that the "presence of absence" of "coprology" in anthropology is significant and raises intriguing anthropological questions.[33]

Several authors emphasize an ambivalence about feces; on the one hand they see them as substances that have been rid, just matters out there; on the other hand they regard them as ultimately linked with the body, part of it and therefore vulnerable, a cause of embarrassment and liable to evil practice, if they are not taken care of.[34] A Bamiléké riddle, quoted by Ndonko,[35] strikingly expresses that ambivalence: "I am your intimate friend, we walk together day and night without seeing one another and if you see me, we separate."

If speaking, let alone writing, about shit, to call the substance by its name, is improper, an anthropology of defecation would be equally improper. It does what it is claiming is not done. If shit is dirt, the anthropologist will become dirty by association, an example of bad taste, or worse, a childish or psychiatric character, or a case of "narcissistic epistemology."[36] As the Ghanaian proverb goes, "If you talk about shit, the smell clings to you."

Writing, like speaking, is a metonymic act of making present. Writing about defecation takes this activity out of its hiding place and shows it in public. The impropriety of defecating in public extends itself to rules of not speaking about it or referring to it in any other sense, including academic writing. It is true that there are certain situations in which the topic can be discussed, where it is "framed" or "bracketed off" as Lea calls it. They are mainly medical contexts and temporary rites of inversion such as during carnivals and other folk festivities. Anthropological literature does not belong to these free havens of defecatory talk.

My "explanation" of the anthropological avoidance of defecation, in spite of its high cultural and social relevance, is embarrassing and ironic. It shows how much anthropologists remain encapsulated in their own culture.

Anthropologists claim taking distance from of their own culture. They love to justify their ethnographic work as cultural critique, a contribution to defamiliarization by what Marcus and Fischer[37] call "cross-cultural juxtaposition." For many anthropologists reflecting back upon their own culture constitutes the raison d'être of their work. More recently the same authors concluded that anthropologists have taken that job "much less seriously than that of probing the cultures of others."[38] The Dutch anthropologist Ton Lemaire[39] made a similar observation when he remarked that anthropologists tend to be progressive abroad ("in the field")

but conservative at home. Anthropologists, both in their ethnographic and their comparative reflection, appear more ethnocentric than they may be willing to admit. This small excursion into the culture of defecation suggests that they even seem to be "imprisoned" by their own cultural code of propriety when it comes to choosing a topic for their research.

Shit is an improper topic at home; it is not so much a taboo, it is worse, it is a childish and ridiculous topic. Colleagues will not take you seriously when you write about it. It happened to Ndonko when he arrived in Cameroon after defending his dissertation in Germany. His colleagues were shocked and embarrassed: why had he not studied a proper Cameroonian topic?

Paradoxically, my own interest in the topic not only met frowned eyebrows and insipid jokes. I realized that the subject—although of bad taste—generated lively and most interesting conversations. When I brought up the topic, it guaranteed an entertaining evening, especially if those present were from different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, many friends and colleagues sent me notes from novels, films and newspapers, references, and personal anecdotes on defecation, since they knew I was interested in the topic. They never did this when I was studying kinship or medicines. Loudon[40] and Lea[41] had the same experience: their colleagues and friends showed an extraordinary interest in their project but declined to write about it themselves.

Notes

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32. Fiske, *Structures of Social Life*, 399.
33. Lea, "The Performance of Control," 5; see also Ndonko, *Répresentations culturelles des excrements*, 25.
34. S. Kark and E. Kark, "A Practice of Social Medicine," in *A Practice of Social Medicine: A South African Team's Experiences in Different African Communities*, ed. S. L. Kark and G. E. Stuart (Edinburgh: E&S Livingstone, 1962), 2.
35. Ndonko, *Répresentations culturelles des excrements*, 216.
36. Quigley, cited in Lea, "The Performance of Control," 14.
37. G. Marcus and M. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Movement in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
38. Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 258.
39. T. Lemaire, *Over de waarde van kulturen. Een inleiding in de kultuurfilosofie: Tussen europacentrisme en relativisme* (Baarn: Ambo, 1976).
40. J. B. Loudon, "On Body Products," in *The Anthropology of the Body*, ed. J. Blacking, 161–78 (London: Academic Press, 1977).
41. Lea, "The Performance of Control."

Poep en omstreken: Over scatologie, cultuur en welbevinden

Sjaak van der Geest

The whole procedure of evacuating the bowels and the bladder as completely as possible is made pleasurable by a feeling of well-being which says, 'Well done'.
Erik H. Erikson

Poep is vuil, maar slechts in relatieve zin. Hoe meer poep 'de orde verstoort', hoe viezer het is. Als poep niet vies gevonden wordt, wijst dat op een intieme relatie met de producent ervan. Poep blijkt een knooppunt van culturele en maatschappelijke creativiteit. Via 'poep' worden uitspraken gedaan over goed en slecht, mooi en lelijk, gezond en ziek, eigen en vreemd en over maatschappelijke ongelijkheid. Deze beschouwing concentreert zich op de relatie tussen diverse scatologische thema's en menselijk welbevinden en houdt een uitnodiging in om een paper over poep en welbevinden te schrijven voor het gelijknamige symposium in december 1998.

[ontlasting, wc, vuil, welbevinden, cultuur]

Op vrijdag 11 december 1998 wordt een symposium gehouden over ontlasting en menselijk welbevinden (zie aankondiging p. 159). Dit artikel schetst de variaties in maatschappelijke context en culturele betekenis van de wijze waarop mensen met hun ontlasting omgaan. Het is in de ware zin des woords een terreinverkenning, want hoewel 'vuil' een klassiek thema is in de antropologie en talloze antropologen tijdens hun veldwerk gepreoccupeerd worden door het probleem van (waar en hoe te) poepen, bestaat er nauwelijks etnografische literatuur over toiletgang. Het doel van deze terreinverkenning is collega's in de antropologie en daarbuiten op het thema 'poep' te wijzen en aan te zetten tot het schrijven van een bijdrage voor bovengenoemd symposium; een 'smaakmaker' voor een discussie over een misschien wat onsmakelijk maar fascinerend onderwerp.

Poep als vuil

Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1970) wordt algemeen beschouwd als een van de belangrijkste antropologische publicaties van de afgelopen eeuw. Douglas laat op overtuigende wijze zien hoe gevoelens van afkeer en ongemak, ideeën over 'vuil', verbonden zijn met de meest wezenlijke aspecten van menselijke cultuur. Haar studie vond zijn inspiratie zowel in het antropologisch milieu (heersende opvattingen over 'primitieve' religie) als in haar eigen huishouden (de geringe vuil-tolerantie van haar echtgenoot dwong haar zich te bezinnen op de relativiteit van vuil).

De hoofdthesis van haar boek is dat 'absoluut vuil' niet bestaat. Vuil bestaat alleen 'in the eye of the beholder'. Vuil is wanorde. Afschuw van vuil is niet een ingeboren angst, zoals sommige oude godsdienstantropologen beweerden. Vuil is een inbreuk op de orde ("Dirt offends against order", p.12). Het verwijderen of vermijden van vuil is daarom niet een negatieve gebeurtenis maar een positieve handeling waarmee mensen hun omgeving trachten te beheersen. "Schoonmaken is feitelijk niets anders dan 'cultiveren', een manier om de gevaren van buiten... te bezweren en onder controle te brengen" (Van Beek 1996: 20).

Het begrip 'vuil', met andere woorden, biedt mensen de gelegenheid hun leven te ordenen. Nog preciezer gezegd: het onderscheid tussen 'vuil' en 'schoon' *is* een daad van ordescheppen, van cultuur-productie. Met behulp van dat onderscheid kunnen mensen grenzen trekken, classificaties maken en besluiten nemen. De culturele bruikbaarheid van het begrip 'vuil' is, volgens Douglas, instrumenteel en expressief. Zijn instrumentele waarde ligt in het feit dat een gemeenschappelijke angst en afkeer ten aanzien van vuil mensen bij elkaar houdt binnen één sociale en culturele orde. Tegelijkertijd behoren uitspraken over 'vuil' en 'schoon' tot de krachtigste expressies van culturele identiteit. Een van de effectiefste manieren om het verschil tussen wij en zij, binnen en buiten, eigen en vreemd aan te geven, is dat te doen via de kwalificaties 'schoon' en 'vuil'.

Is vuil inderdaad een relatief begrip, zoals Douglas opmerkt? Hoe zit dat dan met menselijke uitwerpselen? Is poep niet altijd en overal vies? Bestaat er een cultuur waar men geen afkeer heeft van poep? Is er ooit zo'n cultuur geweest? Is poep niet gewoon vies van zichzelf, waar het zich ook bevindt: in een luier, in een wc-pot, in het riool, of op een boterham?

De laatste vier voorbeelden suggereren al dat er bij poep gradaties van vies-zijn bestaan. Poep in het riool is gewoon vies maar op een boterham is het – althans voor de meeste mensen – buitengewoon smerig. In het laatste geval is het duidelijk 'out of place'. Maar waarom is poep ook vies als het op zijn plaats is, in de wc-pot of – even later – in het riool? Zou het volgens Douglas dan niet juist 'schoon' moeten zijn?

Ik weet niet of Douglas ooit op deze vragen gereageerd heeft, maar ik zou daarop het volgende antwoord geven. Strikt genomen is poep die zich het riool bevindt schoon; het is waar het hoort te zijn. Hoe komt het dat we poep toch als vuil blijven zien, terwijl het op de juiste plek ligt? Omdat poep niet alleen in ruimtelijke zin 'opgeborgen' hoort te zijn maar ook in sociaal opzicht. Poep is een intiem product waar men zich privé van scheidt en waar men verder ook geen mededelingen over doet. Poep ter sprake brengen

in een conversatie of er over schrijven, zoals nu gebeurt, is dus ook een 'matter out of place', een verstoring van de goede orde, een inbreuk op de etiquette of, zoals we straks zullen zien 'dikke pret'. Poep die veilig weg is, uit het zicht, uit de gedachte, is 'schoon' omdat hij niet bestaat. Poep waarover gesproken wordt, is vuil. Om die reden is een muur waarop met grote letters staat geschreven "Hier niet urineren" even vies als een muur waar men daadwerkelijk tegen piest.[1]

Antropologen en poep

Als vuil zo'n fundamentele rol speelt in menselijke culturen, waarom hebben antropologen dan zo weinig aandacht besteed aan het meest fascinerende vuil, menselijke ontlasting? Die vraag wordt nog dringender als we bedenken hoe zeer antropologen in een vreemde omgeving zich soms zorgen maken over hoe en waar hun behoefte te doen.

In zijn *Antropologen te velde* wijdt Zwier (1980: 38-40) terecht enkele pagina's aan dit precaire probleem. De omstandigheden waaronder zij moeten defaeceren en urineren zijn vaak verre van aangenaam. Ten eerste wijken de fysieke condities van het 'toilet' vaak sterk af van wat zij gewend zijn en worden zij veel uitdrukkelijker dan thuis geconfronteerd met uitwerpselen, van zichzelf maar ook – en dat is ernstiger – van anderen. Kortom extreme voorbeelden van 'matter out of place'. In de emmer-latrine waar ik in Ghana soms gebruik van maakte, waren de drollen van mijn voorgangers niet alleen goed zichtbaar en ruikbaar in de emmer maar ook daarbuiten, op de houten zitting en op de grond als de emmer overstroomde. Resten van poep kleefden ook aan het papier dat in en naast een mand op de grond gedeponeerd was.

Erger dan het fysieke ongemak is in veel gevallen het gebrek aan privacy waar antropologen in hun eigen cultuur aan gewend zijn. Zwier citeert de ervaringen van de antropoloog Dentan die steeds gezelschap kreeg als hij zich – tijdens zijn verblijf bij de Semai – wilde afzonderen om zijn behoefte te doen. Samen piesen of poepen was blijkbaar een goed Semai-gebruik. Het gezelschap afwijzen zou waarschijnlijk niet begrepen worden. Ook Evans-Pritchard schijnt ergens geschreven te hebben dat het hem steeds weer moeilijk viel "voor de ogen van een Nuer-publiek zijn behoefte te doen."

Het wordt allemaal nog erger als de antropoloog diarree krijgt, bepaald geen zeldzaamheid in een onbekende omgeving met ander eten en andere hygiënische gebruiken. Van Binsbergen (1988) opent zijn relaas van veldwerk in een Tunesisch dorp met een schrijnende diarree-scène van de hoofdpersoon Pieter:

> Hij perste alsof zijn darmen zelf naar buiten moesten komen, en kermde zacht, zonder overtuiging, om zijn moeder. Maar er kwam niets dan wat geelbruin schuim en slijm. De scherpgerande proppen die Pieter in zijn buik voelde, bestonden alleen als kramp. Zo diep mogelijk neerhurkend steunde hij met één arm op zijn dijbeen. Hij omklemde de sinds de vorige dag gehalveerde rol closet papier. Met de andere hand hield hij zijn broek weg van wat er uit zijn lijf kon komen en wat er al onder vloeide (p. 9).

Jos van der Klei (1989: 269) die vele jaren studenten antropologie op hun eerste veldwerk begeleid heeft, merkt op dat hij de emotionele last van het veldwerk bij hen afleest

aan de kinderlijke wijze waarop zij vooral de eerste tijd geobsedeerd worden door hun eigen stoelgang. "De symfonie van het darmkanaal overstemt vaak dagen, en soms wekenlang de rest van de aantekeningen in het dagboek. De obsessie met spijsvertering en stoelgang dringt echter zelden door tot de etnografie..." schrijft Van der Veer (1988: 21) in zijn essay 'De hurkende mens'. Kortom de stoelgang van de antropoloog is geen lolletje en preoccupeert hem. Waarom lezen we er dan zo weinig over?

Ik kan hier slechts – overwegend autobiografisch – over speculeren. Ten eerste is daar weer Mary Douglas: poep is privé, daar schrijf je niet over; poep hoort niet thuis in een wetenschappelijke studie. Over (eigen) poep schrijven is exhibitionistisch en getuigt van slechte smaak. Maar als de eigen poep intiem en privé is, is die van anderen het ook. Het is niet netjes anderen letterlijk – of via interviews – te volgen tot bij hun meest verborgen gedragingen en dat aan de grote klok te hangen. Om diezelfde reden hebben antropologen ook weinig over seks geschreven. Niet netjes. Hun etnografische terughoudendheid ten aanzien van ontlasting (en seks) kwam niet alleen voort uit hun eigen gevoeligheden maar werd in de meeste gevallen – dat is althans mijn inschatting – ook gedeeld door de mensen waarbij zij onderzoek deden. Vragen stellen over toiletgang en seks – laat staan spioneren – hoort niet. In Ghana groeten mensen elkaar niet eens op weg naar het toilet en iets zeggen tegen iemand die – voor iedereen zichtbaar – zijn/haar bad neemt is zeer bedenkelijk.

Een tweede verklaring die ik kan bedenken is dat de stoelgang van de antropoloog zijn falen in de participerende observatie aan het licht zou brengen. Er zijn twee onderwerpen waar antropologen opvallend zwijgzaam over zijn, precies om die reden: de lezer zou ontdekken dat zij veel minder 'aangepast' waren aan hun omgeving dan eigenlijk zou moeten voor goed antropologisch onderzoek. Het eerste onderwerp is de gebrekkige kennis van de plaatselijke taal, het tweede: waar en hoe zij hun behoefte deden. Het eerstgenoemde is het ernstigst maar het tweede is symbolisch voor veel meer; als de antropoloog zich in het intieme verre heeft gehouden van de lokale leefwijze, roept dat vragen op over zijn vermogen door te dringen tot de denkwijze en de beleving van de mensen bij wie hij te gast is. Ik spreek uit ervaring. Tijdens mijn onderzoek in een Ghanees dorp 'sjoemelde' ik met mijn participerende observatie als het op wc-gebruik aan kwam. Met name in de publieke latrine waar ik – althans dat dacht ik – zorgvuldig geobserveerd werd door de zwijgende hurkende gestalten om mij heen, heb ik nooit mijn behoefte kunnen doen (cf. Van der Geest 1998). Dat onvermogen zit me nu nog steeds dwars.

Toch zijn er wel enkele antropologen die over poep hebben geschreven. Er bestaan diverse artikelen of passages in boeken die handelen over het gebruik ervan in rituelen (Panoff 1970; Wilson 1957) of voor andere doeleinden (Loudon 1976), maar ik ken slechts twee antropologische studies waar het poepen zelf midden in de aandacht staat.

Het eerste voorbeeld is het proefschrift van de Kameroenese antropoloog Ndonko (1993) die een minutieuze beschrijving geeft van de ideeën en praktijken van twee bevolkingsgroepen in zijn land: de Yasa die aan de kust wonen en hun behoefte doen op het strand en de Bamiléké die in een savanna-omgeving leven en zich in het open veld ontlasten. Ndonko schrijft dat hij op dit ongewone onderwerp voor zijn onderzoek gekomen is toen hij zich hij bezoeken van diverse dorpen realiseerde dat er helemaal geen

wc's waren. Zijn interesse groeide toen hij zich verdiepte in het beleid van lokale overheden om toiletten te introduceren. Dat beleid bleek totaal niet aan te slaan. Men had grote afkeer van een toilet en gaf er de voorkeur aan zijn behoefte op een schone manier (in de frisse lucht!) te blijven doen. Voor Ndonko was het toiletgedrag een sprekend voorbeeld van wat Goffman de 'uitvinding van het alledaagse' heeft genoemd. Bovendien was het een onderwerp waar mensen probleemloos over logen omdat zij niet van zins waren hun gewoonten aan te passen aan de ideeën van de prefect over hygiëne. Om zijn onderzoek te kunnen uitvoeren besloot Ndonko zelf ook te liegen en te veinzen want een onderzoek naar de cultuur van het poepen, zo dacht hij, zou wel erg morbide overkomen. Om te voorkomen dat mensen zouden denken dat hij in de excrementen zelf geïnteresseerd was, vertelde hij hun dat hij onderzoek deed naar ziekten bij kinderen, naar waterbronnen en algemeen naar de geschiedenis van het dorp (p.20). Ndonko begint zijn studie met een nuttig overzicht van de literatuur over poep in diverse culturen waarbij hij ook enkele historische werken aanhaalt zoals Bourke 1981, Elias 1982, Guerrand 1985 en Laporte 1978. Ndonko's studie is een mijlpaal in de 'scatalogische antropologie' en het is opmerkelijk dat de auteur – althans gedeeltelijk – over zijn eigen cultuur heeft geschreven. Hij laat zien hoe centraal en tegelijkertijd verborgen menselijke uitwerpselen zijn in de twee betreffende culturen. Zijn beschrijving strekt zich uit tot fysiek milieu, gedrag, symboliek, taal, opvoeding en vermaak.

De tweede studie is een ongepubliceerde MSc. Thesis door Lea (1993) aan de Brunel University of West London. De auteur beschrijft hoe zij op het idee van haar onderwerp kwam terwijl zij op het toilet zat en telefoneerde met een vriendin die zich ook in de wc bevond. Als Ndonko zichzelf nog buiten schot houdt, geldt dat niet voor Lea die haar eigen ervaring als uitgangspunt kiest voor de betekenis van excretie. Zij ziet het zich ontlasten als een symbolische handeling die toont dat men gezond is en zichzelf onder controle heeft. De regelmatige afscheiding van faeces is een reiniging van het lichaam die 'orde op zaken stelt' zoals dat ook geldt voor de geregelde schoonmaak van een huis of het opruimen van een bureau. Lea vergelijkt de afscheiding van faeces met de biecht waarbij men zich eveneens ontdoet van 'vuil' en een nieuw begin maakt. Ziekte is het geen controle meer hebben over de ontlasting. De houding tegenover menselijke excreta is ambivalent: enerzijds is er afschuw en worden zij beschouwd als vuil, anderzijds worden zij gewaardeerd en gekoesterd als tekenen van gezondheid en welbevinden. Het is niet alleen het kind dat met trots en voldoening naar zijn drol kijkt. Het nadeel van de moderne 'diepspoel toiletten' is dat het product meteen onder water verdwijnt en de producent beroofd wordt van dat intieme moment van tevredenheid als hij vorm, substantie en kleur van de drol aanschouwt. Aan het einde van haar betoog vergelijkt Lea het schrijven van haar thesis zelf als een proces van excretie waarbij het product echter publiekelijk aanschouwd kan worden.

Ik begon mijn verklaring voor de schaarsheid van poep in antropologisch onderzoek met een verwijzing naar het taboe-karakter van het onderwerp. Wat taboe is, oefent echter ook aantrekkingskracht uit. Ik voorzie dat poep (evenals seks, gevoelens en andere intieme zaken) in toenemende mate 'populair' zal worden onder antropologen. Deze schets van scatologie in cultureel perspectief maakt deel uit van die groeiende belangstelling.

Ideeën over poep

Om met Lévi-Strauss te spreken: Poep is goed om mee te denken. Gedachten over poep zijn derhalve ook gedachten over andere zaken; over zichzelf versus anderen; over saamhorigheid en vijandschap, vreemdheid en vertrouwdheid, mooi en lelijk, liefde en haat.

Als Ndonko (1993: 100) over de Yasa in Kameroen schrijft, verwerpt hij Goethe's omschrijving van *Erdenrest*, een beetje aarde. Poep is geen neutrale substantie, maar vol vitaliteit en verbonden met een bepaald persoon. Lea's vergelijking tussen excretie en haar dissertatie is meer dan een stylistisch grapje. Beide zijn een metonymisch product, een *pars pro toto*, dat de identiteit draagt van degene die het product heeft voortgebracht. Ze dragen de kenmerken van die persoon en waardering voor of afkeer van het product impliceren waardering voor en afkeer van die persoon. Gelukkig besparen mensen elkaar de pijnlijke situatie van afkeer van elkaars poep te voelen door hun uitwerpselen aan het oog en de neus van anderen te onttrekken. Alleen de baby en de behoeftige zieke of oudere zien zich gedwongen hun faeces aan anderen te tonen. In de wijze waarop een ouder de poep van zijn/haar kind behandelt, toont deze zijn/haar gevoelens voor het kind. In gelijke zin toont de verzorger of verpleegkundige zijn/haar genegenheid voor een zieke of oudere in de wijze waarop hij/zij omgaat met de ontlasting van die persoon.

Dat de poep van een kind minder vies – of helemaal niet vies – is dan de poep van een volwassene is geen toeval. Het kind is nog een deel van de ouder, de moeder, en groeit daar slechts langzaam vandaan. De poep van het kind *is* in zekere zin nog de poep van de moeder en de moeder die de billetjes van haar baby schoonmaakt, maakt zichzelf schoon. Zindelijkheidstraining impliceert derhalve verwijdering tussen moeder/vader en kind.

De faeces van een volwassene, daarentegen, roepen bij de meeste mensen instinctief afkeer op.[2] De faeces van die ander opruimen is ofwel een doorbreking van de persoonlijkheidsgrenzen ofwel een technisch-professionele daad. In het eerste geval impliceert de handeling een verlegging van de grenzen en een delen in de intimiteit van de ander; in het tweede geval is er sprake van zakelijkheid waarin iedere persoonlijke betrokkenheid juist ontkend wordt. Door geen persoonsgerichte aandacht te tonen blijft de verzorger buiten de intimiteit van de patiënt hoewel hij/zij strikt genomen de meest intieme delen van die persoon aanraakt. Die zakelijke opstelling is te vergelijken met de ontveinzing van lichamelijke aanraking in overvolle treinen. Die instelling wordt treffend verwoord door een verzorgster in een verpleegtehuis tijdens een interview in de Groene Amsterdammer. Boom (1998):

> Je leert je gedachten uit te schakelen. Ik mag niet met mijn gedachten bij dat lijf komen. Wel met mijn handen.

Dieren hebben die identiteit en intimiteit niet. Hondenpoep is vies maar een hondendrol die ik aantref op de stoep van mijn huis is minder een invasie van mijn privacy en dus minder vies dan wanneer die drol van mijn buurman zou blijken te zijn. Hetzelfde geldt uiteraard voor kattenstront. De faeces van paarden, koeien, geiten, schapen, konijnen

en kippen hebben nog minder identiteit en wekken nauwelijks afkeer op. In de dorpjes van Beieren – en elders – liggen de mesthopen vóór het huis, naast het café en de kerk. Ze verfraaien het dorpsgezicht en ruiken lekker. In Ethiopië wordt elke koeienvlaai met zorg verzameld, gedroogd en opgestapeld: het bruine goud. Om de huizen treft men pittoreske muurtjes aan die uit gedroogde koeienvlaaien blijken te bestaan. En de lekkerste *enjerra's* (lokale 'pannenkoeken') worden op koeienstront gebakken. Faeces en voedsel raken hier elkaar zonder dat dat problemen oplevert. Dat gebeurt trouwens ook bij de bemesting van het land. Het is geen toeval dat menselijke faeces veel minder voor bemesting worden gebruikt.[3]

Poep-praktijken

Er zijn diverse – vaak anekdotische – voorbeelden bekend waarin de praktijk van het poepen als een communale bezigheid wordt voorgesteld. Het voorbeeld van de Franse koning die in gezelschap zijn behoefte deed maar er de voorkeur aan gaf alleen te eten wordt in talloze publicaties aangehaald. Ook diverse antropologen (zie het eerdere voorbeeld van Dentan, geciteerd door Zwier 1980: 39) melden dat men geacht wordt *samen* te poepen, maar in verreweg de meeste culturen lijkt men toch privacy op prijs te stellen als men zijn behoefte doet. In Nederland mag men dan een volksgezegde hebben dat "Hollandse jongens (niet: meisjes) nooit alleen pissen (niet: poepen)" maar die wijsheid lijkt eerder te slaan op de aanstekelijkheid van het urineren dan op een culturele regel dat men zoiets samen *behoort* te doen.

In onze eigen cultuur is het poepen waarschijnlijk de meest solitaire activiteit. Seks praktiseert men – in de meeste gevallen – met zijn tweeën, maar poepen doe je alleen, wil men alleen doen. In het openbaar zijn behoefte doen is eęn van de grofste inbreuken op het publieke fatsoen. Het komt nauwelijks voor want er zijn weinig mensen die het willen of zouden kunnen. Voor de activiteit van het poepen heeft men in onze cultuur ruimtes ontworpen waar men echt alleen kan en mag zijn. De techniek heeft zich uitgesloofd om de privaatheid van dat vertrek steeds verder te vervolmaken. Het ideaal is dat de gebruiker van het toilet niet alleen door niemand wordt gezien terwijl hij zijn behoefte doet, maar dat hij ook niet gehoord wordt en geen enkel spoor achterlaat, zelfs niet een luchtje. Slechts dan blijft het private in alle opzichten privaat, alsof het er nooit geweest is; zoals bij de perfecte misdaad.

Die haast volmaakte privaatheid heeft iets vanzelfsprekends gekregen in onze maatschappij. We zijn ons die behoefte nauwelijks bewust, totdat we in een situatie komen waar de privacy van dat moment bedreigd wordt, in een vreemde omgeving waar we de weg niet weten of in een openbaar toilet, waar we moeite hebben ons onzichtbaar, onhoorbaar en onruikbaar voor anderen te maken en waar we tegen onze wil geconfronteerd worden met de intimiteit van anderen, dus met vuil. Die ervaring is goed beschreven door Hofland:

> De zwaarste, de meest weerzinwekkende onder de kleine invasies is de stank van (anderen). De onzichtbare muur van walgelijkheid waar je doorheen moet als je kort na je

> voorganger de wc binnenkomt, de latrines van de kazernes en de stations.... Via de neus wordt het hele wezen belaagd, en hetzelfde gebeurt met je oor als je gedwongen bent een wc te gebruiken die deel uitmaakt van een batterij, waarbij de schotten tussen de compartimenten niet tot het plafond reiken.... Ze zijn in strijd met al onze moderne zorgen om wat we noemen de onaantastbaarheid van de persoonlijke levenssfeer. Maar wat de neus en oren kan overkomen, is gering vergeleken bij het allerbrutaalste wat soms de ogen te wachten staat: de aanblik van de drol van je voorganger op het witte porselein. Dit is, dunkt mij, het gemeenste wat op dit gebied het netvlies kan raken.... (geciteerd in Van der Bruggen 1991: 45).

Behoefte aan privacy is er ook in andere culturen. Malinowski (1929) merkt fijntjes op dat wat dat betreft de Trobrianders heel wat beschaafder zijn dan Zuid-Europeanen. Zij hebben een speciale plaats waar ze hun behoefte doen, een plek voor de mannen en een plek voor de vrouwen, op een redelijke afstand van het dorp. Nooit zullen ze gezamenlijk naar die plek gaan en als twee personen gelijktijdig hun behoefte doen zullen ze discreet afstand van elkaar houden.

Ndonko (1993: 124) benadrukt diezelfde zorg om privacy bij de Yasa. Wie aandrang voelt hoort zich zonder iets te zeggen te verwijderen.

> La règle est d'aller sans rien dire; on se doit d'être le plus discret possible, surtout si l'on est en présence des parents, des aînés ou des beaux-parents; on quitte l'assemblée sans rien annoncer et c'est la direction empruntée qui informe les autres sur les raisons de ce départ.

Zonder dat zij over de geavanceerde technieken van geurverdrijvers, geluidsisolatie en diepspoelers beschikken, slagen ook de Yasa erin hun behoefte bijna onopgemerkt te doen. Waar die vrije ruimte en frisse lucht en de golven van de zee ontbreken en men gedwongen is in elkaars gezelschap zijn behoefte te doen, bijna op elkaars lip gezeten, zoals in de publieke latrines van het Ghanese dorp waar ik onderzoek verricht, daar heeft men sociale technieken om de gewenste privacy tot stand te brengen: men negeert elkaar zoals in de overvolle trein waar men tijdelijk beroofd wordt van het stukje privé domein. Als in de fysieke werkelijkheid de gestelde grenzen overschreden worden en gevoelens van afkeer dreigen, hebben mensen nog de mogelijkheid die werkelijkheid anders te *denken*.

Elias (1982) ziet de toenemende verheimelijking van poepen (en andere lichamelijke verrichtingen) in onze Westerse cultuur als een beschavingsproces dat zich over een lange periode voltrekt. 'Schaamte- en pijnlijkheidsstandaards' verschuiven. Met name die verrichtingen die mensen met de (andere) dieren gemeen hebben, worden zoveel mogelijk aan het oog onttrokken. Cultuur is zich onderscheiden van het dier. Als het dier zich kenmerkt door gulzigheid, is vasten een teken van beschaving; als het dier seksueel promiscu is, is monogamie – en meer nog seksuele onthouding – beschaafd; als het dier zijn uitwerpselen overal – en voor het oog van iedereen – deponeert, doet de mens dat slechts op speciale, verborgen plaatsen. Mensen lopen niet met hun dierlijkheid te koop: ze bedekken hun lichaam en verrichten hun meest dierlijke handelingen in het verborgene. Eten en drinken, maar vooral urineren, defecatie en seks worden

steeds intiemer. In een etiquette-boekje uit 1729 wordt deze trend op treffende wijze geïllustreerd:

> Wanneer men moet urineren, hoort men zich altijd terug te trekken op een afgelegen plek; en ook wat betreft de andere natuurlijke behoeften die kunnen opkomen schrijft de wellevendheid (zelfs aan kinderen) voor om deze slechts daar te verrichten, waar men niet gezien kan worden. Wanneer men in gezelschap is, is het zeer onbeleefd lucht uit het lichaam te laten ontsnappen, hetzij van boven, hetzij van onderen, zelfs wanneer men dit geluidloos zou doen, en het is beschamend en ongepast om het zo te doen, dat anderen het kunnen horen (geciteerd in Elias 1982: 184).

De eis van respect voor andermans privacy tijdens het defaeceren wordt duidelijk gesteld in een *Die galante Ethica* uit 1720/1731:

> Komt men aan een persoon voorbij die doende is zich te ontlasten, dan gedrage men zich alsof men dat niet opmerkt, en het is dan ook in strijd met de hoffelijkheid om deze persoon te begroeten (geciteerd in Elias 1982: 185).

Samengevat: de activiteit van zich ontlasten veroorzaakt geen problemen zolang deze onttrokken wordt aan de waarneming van anderen. Zodra mensen geconfronteerd worden met de poep-activiteit of de uitwerpselen van anderen, zal dat gewoonlijk leiden tot een acuut gevoel van afkeer. De faeces van een *ander* zijn in *mijn* leven 'out of place', ze doorbreken de grenzen tussen mij en de ander. Ze verstoren de orde en zijn om die reden vies.

Getuige zijn van het defaeceren van een ander bedreigt ook een andere grens, die tussen mens en dier. Wie in het openbaar zijn behoefte doet gedraagt zich als een beest en roept weerzin op. Het is deze weerzin die de grenzen bewaakt tussen mens en dier.

Het spreken over poep

'Spreken over' is een metoniem van waar men over spreekt. Als de substantie poep en de activiteit van het poepen niet in de openbaarheid thuis horen, dan geldt dat ook voor de woorden die er naar verwijzen. In de meeste culturen en gezelschappen behoort men niet over uitwerpselen te praten. Met name tijdens de maaltijd is het zeer ongepast dit onderwerp aan te roeren. Via het woord komt de substantie als het ware tussen de warme gerechten op tafel te staan en bederft de eetlust.

Woorden die naar excreta verwijzen zijn met name ongepast (ze 'passen' niet, zitten op die plek niet goed) in deftig gezelschap. Hoe hoger de persoon, hoe kwalijker het is die te confronteren met poep of woorden van poep. Malinowski (1929: 376-77) citeert een verhaal over een gevecht tussen twee Trobriand hoofdmannen. Tijdens een pauze in het gevecht klom een man in een boom en schreeuwde naar de hoofdman van de andere partij een verwensing die Malinowski deftig vertaalt als "To'uluwa, eat thy dirt", maar in het Nederlands waarschijnlijk zou klinken als: "Vreet je eigen stront op!" Het was een zeer ernstige belediging, schrijft Malinowski: "It was adressed to a chief, it was said aloud and in public, and the personal name was added." Toen de oorlog

voorbij was en de vrede getekend, werd de man die de belediging had geuit alsnog door enkele mannen van To'uluwa "in broad daylight" met een speer doodgestoken. Niemand protesteerde; iedereen begreep dat de man deze straf had verdiend.

Samen met seksuele onderwerpen en ziektes zijn faeces en defeceren favoriete ingrediënten voor schelden en verwensen. In een groot aantal Europese talen levert poep de inhoud van de meest gebruikte uitroep die teleurstelling of ergernis uitdrukt, in ieder geval in het Deens, Duits, Engels, Frans, Pools, Russisch, Spaans en Zweeds.[4]

In het Twi, in Ghana, is *ebin* ('stront') een grof woord waarmee men extreme afkeuring uit. Uitdrukkingen als *mene wo so* ('ik schijt op je') en *mene w'anom* ('ik schijt in je bek') zijn eigenlijk te vulgair om op te schrijven, maar ik heb ze wel horen gebruiken in hoogoplopende ruzies. Malinowski (1929: 377) meldt dat Trobrianders hun afkeer van homoseksualiteit uitdrukken in een faeces-metoniem: "This man copulates excrement".

Het taboe-karakter van poepwoorden leidt tot twee reacties: enerzijds het gebruik van eufemismen en anderzijds de populariteit van poep-woorden en poep-verhalen. Van beide reacties vindt men talloze voorbeelden in het tijdschrift *Maledicta*.

Wat het eerste betreft; eufemismen voor poep, stoelgang (zelf reeds een eufemisme) en de plek waar men zich ontlast (idem) bestaan waarschijnlijk in alle talen, en in grote getale. De meest gangbare eufemismen voor urineren en poepen in de medische wereld zijn respectievelijk 'mictie' en 'stoelgang'. "De weg naar de wc in geplaveid met verhullend idioom", schrijft Reinsma (1929: 68).

Ndonko (1993: 130-27) geeft een aantal voorbeelden van de aantrekkelijkheid van het spreken over poep: poep-verhalen en -raadsels bij de Yasa in Kameroen. Het speciale genoegen dat men in deze verbale bezigheden schept hangt direct samen met hun taboekarakter. Spreekwoorden krijgen extra kracht als zij een verwijzing naar faeces bevatten. "Als een man schijt, ziet de vis het, maar niemand ziet de vis schijten" wordt gezegd als men iemand zijn geheimen toevertrouwt, terwijl deze zijn eigen geheimen voor zich houdt. Mijn grootmoeder, die op een boerderij dichtbij Leiden woonde, gebruikte vaak een spreekwoord waarin het negatieve van stront – en zijn lucht – werd gecontrasteerd met de schoonheid van gepoetst goud. Het spreekwoord zelf was een afkeuring van het roddelen: "Hoe meer men goud poetst, hoe meer het blinkt; hoe meer men stront roert, hoe meer het stinkt." Maar 'poep' leent zich ook voor de taal van de tederheid. 'Mijn lekkere scheet', 'mijn drolletje' zijn termen die men kan gebruiken voor iemand die haast even nabij is als de eigen ontlasting.

Poep als cultureel symbool

Het is al gezegd: Juist omdat poep getaboeïseerd wordt, oefent het onderwerp aantrekkingskracht uit op diegenen die zich van de officiële regels en omgangsvormen wensen te distantiëren. Poep-verhalen drukten een milde vorm van verzet uit, van jongeren tegenover ouderen, van ondergeschikten tegenover gezagsdragers, van lage klassen tegenover hoge klassen. Zoals hierboven al is opgemerkt, poep laat zich goed 'denken' en 'spreken'. Dundes (1984) tracht het Duitse 'volkskarakter' te schetsen in scatologi-

sche termen en beelden: "The German may pay lipservice to cleanliness, but deep down he continues to revel in dirt" (p. 103). De Duitse preoccupatie met stront aldus Dundes, is te vergelijken met de sleutelsymbolen die antropologen als Benedict, Mead en Kroeber voor andere culturen hebben beschreven. Hij zoekt naar poep in liederen, spreekwoorden, raadsels, kinderversjes, legendes en geschreven literatuur (bijv. Dürrenmatt, Lenz en Thomas Mann). In de titel van zijn boek, "Life is like a chicken coop ladder", wordt met behulp van poep de maatschappelijke ongelijkheid kernachtig weergegeven. De kippen die hoog zitten, zitten goed; de lagergezetenen krijgen de stront van de hogergezetenen op hun kop.

Uitgaande van stront, meent Dundes, kan men veel in de Duitse cultuur begrijpen, van modderbaden en eetgewoonten tot de muziek van Mozart en antisemitisme. Overigens lijken Duitsers en Nederlanders op dit punt op elkaar. Legman schrijft dat Duitsers èn Nederlanders grappen over poep en stront de leukste vinden (geciteerd in Dundes 1984: 88), in ieder geval dertig jaar geleden toen Legman (1968) zijn studie over de schuine mop publiceerde. De Duitse schoonmaakwoede (die Dundes relateert aan de jodenvervolging – *Judenreinmachen* – en de holocaust) verschilt, vrees ik, niet zoveel van de Hollandse properheid zoals die door Van Ginkel (1997) wordt beschreven. De filosofische uitspraak "Das leben is wie ein Kindernachthemd: kurz und beschissen" bestaat ook in een Nederlandse versie.

De plek

Het toilet of de plek waar men zijn behoefte doet, is in de meeste gevallen een private ruimte. Diverse woorden voor 'toilet' die in de Nederlandse taal gebezigd zijn vanaf ongeveer de zestiende eeuw drukken dat private karakter uit: heimelijk, privaat, heimelijkheid, sekreet, huisje, bestekamer, achteraf en kabinet (Reinsma 1992: 69). Maar, zoals we gezien hebben, ook in andere culturen, zelfs op het open veld of aan de zee, zijn er strenge regels die privacy garanderen voor de mens die zijn behoefte doet. De geschiedenis van het toilet in onze eigen maatschappij is het verhaal van steeds groter technisch vernuft dat een steeds 'schonere' en meer private manier van ontlasting mogelijk maakte (cf. Gastelaars 1996).

Het toilet heeft zich ontwikkeld tot een ruimte waar men zich ten alle tijde kan terugtrekken en de deur kan afsluiten zonder argwaan te wekken. Het 'recht' op een ongestoorde private stoelgang heeft daarmee een bijdrage geleverd aan de infrastructuur van de individualisering. Het belang van zo'n toevluchtsoord voor alle mogelijke privéactiviteiten mag niet onderschat worden. In het toilet kan men ongezien 'verboden' dingen doen: een sigaret roken, drugs gebruiken, masturberen, huilen, een boek of krant lezen, opruiende of obscene graffito's schrijven, mediteren en een bom verstoppen (zoals in 1992 in de Londense metro gebeurde). In een toilet van de Amsterdamse Universiteit las ik ooit: "The toilet solves all your problems". Het is overdreven, maar niet eens zo veel. Zwartrijders in de trein gaan op het toilet zitten en inbrekers laten zich op het toilet insluiten. Het moderne water closet is een oxymoron: dankzij een ingenieuze constructie staat het meest private direct in verbinding met het meest publieke, de totale

anonimiteit, het stelsel van rioleringen. Door die vereniging van tegenstrijdigheden biedt het water closet speciale mogelijkheden. In het toilet kan men zich in het verborgen ontdoen van alles wat men wil laten verdwijnen, niet alleen uitwerpselen en andere lichaamsafscheidingen maar ook de pillen die men niet wil innemen of gestolen, illegale belastende voorwerpen, mits zij niet te groot zijn. Door zijn speciale constructie biedt het toilet een ideale mogelijkheid om er een ander persoon te worden. Het is een plek van transities, de geografie van de liminele fase: men kan er zich opknappen, van kleren verwisselen (de gevangene kan er bewaker worden; een patiënt een bezoeker), en ook wie er 'slechts' zijn behoefte gedaan heeft, komt er ook uit 'als een ander mens'.

Wc's zijn een teken van beschaving. Ze drukken een stukje volksaard uit. In een boekje over de eigenaardigheden van het Nederlandse volk weiden de Amerikaanse auteurs breed uit over dat merkwaardige kleine hokje in Nederlandse huizen met zijn primitieve wc-pot waarin de drol nog een tijdje blijft liggen om zijn lucht te verspreiden. Typeert dat toilet de Nederlander die zijn uitwerpselen wil zien voor zij voorgoed verdwijnen? Een correspondent van *NRC-Handelsblad* in Londen heft in die krant (2/8/97) een lofheid aan op het Britse diepspoel toilet: "Een triomf van hygiëne, schoonheid en techniek tegelijkertijd." De Amerikaanse Erica Jong schrijft in haar "gloriously wicked, sexy novel" *Fear of flying* dat ze na haar Europese reizen een classificatie van nationaliteiten zou kunnen maken op basis van toiletten. Haar visie op het Britse toilet is misschien ook een lofzang maar met een andere toon:

> The British toilet as the last refuge of colonialism. Water rushing overhead like Victoria Falls, & you an explorer. The spray in your face. For one brief moment (as you flush) Britannia rules the waves again (Jong 1973: 22).

Wc's zijn ook symbolen van status, stand en gender. In veel culturen zijn er dames- en herentoiletten die gender verschillen uitdrukken. Zo is er een groot verschil tussen de graffito's in mannen- en vrouwen-wc's.[5] In een interview in een krant meldde Werthcim dat er vroeger op het Ministerie van Justitie in Batavia vier soorten toiletten bestonden die nauwkeurig de hiërarchie weerspiegelden: de directeur, de ambtenaren boven de rang van refendaris, de ambtenaren beneden die rang en de 'inlanders'. Als Mr Biswas in Naipauls (1969) roman een nieuwe hoofdredacteur krijgt, eist deze een aparte wc voor hemzelf: een onmiskenbaar teken dat de hiërarchische verhoudingen bij de krant drastisch veranderd zijn.

Poep, gezondheid en welbevinden

Een geregelde stoelgang met een drol van goede kleur en substantie is een teken van goede gezondheid (cf. Van der Bruggen 1991: 73-88). Dundes haalt in dat verband een Zuid-Duits volksgezegde aan: "Guat geschissen ist halbat gevöglt" ('goed gescheten is half geneukt'). Volgens een tweede gezegde dat hij citeert is een goede stoelgang echter nog meer waard: "Gut Scheissen das kan sehr beglücken, viel mehr nog als manchmals das Ficken (= 'neuken'). In een ander verband heb ik al eens een wijshcid van een oude oom van mij (op dit moment 103 jaar oud) geciteerd: "Als je drol nog goed is, is er niks

aan de hand." In diverse landen wordt druk gediscussieerd over wat voor type drol nu het beste, het gezondste is, de 'floater' of de 'sinker'. De meerderheid is van mening dat de 'floater' de gezondste drol is. Overigens is er een diepspoeltoilet voor nodig om de diagnose te stellen. Onze voorouders, die het met vlakspoeltoiletten moesten doen, hadden geen benul van 'floaters' en 'sinkers'.

In zijn *Groepsfoto met dame* voert Böll een non ten tonele die het produceren van perfecte drollen tot een kunst heeft verheven en ook de drollen van haar leerlingen inspecteert. Zij wordt daarom "Zuster Haruspica" genoemd. Wie een perfecte drol legt, hoeft zijn achterste niet eens schoon te maken. De perfecte drol symboliseert het perfecte welbevinden, de opperste controle over het lichaam.

Maar als "de drol niet goed is", is dat een onmiskenbaar teken van een probleem, van ziekte of een andere vorm van onwelbevinden. Diarree, buikloop, wijst op een verstoord-zijn van de ingewanden of is het gevolg van te grote spanningen. Constipatie is eveneens een slecht teken. In de Ghanese gemeenschap waar ik onderzoek verricht, is men gefixeerd op dagelijkse stoelgang. Wie één dag 'niet geweest is' spreekt al van constipatie en neemt iets om de verstopping op te heffen: een laxeermiddel of een klysma. Constipatie, zo redeneert men, betekent een opeenhoping van vuil in het lichaam. Het vuil gaat broeien en gisten, zoals men dat ziet bij een mesthoop; het verspreidt zich via het bloed door het hele lichaam en veroorzaakt allerlei ziekten en ongemakken zoals aambeien, maagzweren, hoofdpijn en huiduitslag.

Naast bloed worden poep ('stoel') en urine op grote schaal onderzocht voor diagnostische doeleinden. Dat gebeurt niet alleen in moderne laboratoria, ook in het verleden werden faeces en urine vaak bij de diagnose betrokken. Hippocrates beval zijn leerlingen reeds om bij een zieke diens stoel, urine, sputum en braaksel te onderzoeken (Lloyd 1983: 100).

Een goede en geregelde stoelgang is het teken van een goede fysieke gezondheid en duidt op psychisch en sociaal welbevinden. De geregeldheid van de stoelgang representeert, metaforisch en metonymisch, de geregeldheid van iemands leven in algemene zin. "Goed poepen" symboliseert controle zoals Lea (1993: 28) schrijft. Kinderen wordt geleerd zo snel mogelijk zindelijk te worden; zindelijk-zijn is mens-zijn. In de Nederlandse cultuur kan men zeker spreken van een preoccupatie met zindelijkheidstraining bij ouders met kleine kinderen.[6] Niet zindelijk-zijn is een van de ernstigste bedreigingen van iemands sociale en psychische positie. Wie niet zindelijk is, is òf nog geen volwaardig mens, òf is dat niet meer. Het geen controle meer hebben over de ontlasting is een aanslag op iemands algehele gevoel van welbevinden. Het impliceert de pijnlijkste vorm van onzelfstandigheid. Zelf-controle en privacy moeten prijsgegeven worden; men wordt afhankelijk in het meest intieme en meest noodzakelijke van het dagelijks functioneren. Die afhankelijkheid, meldde een dwarslaesiepatië in een televisie-interview, is veel erger dan bijvoorbeeld het niet meer kunnen lopen.

Het is niet verwonderlijk dat de industrie zeer veel hulpmiddelen heeft ontwikkeld die de ongemakken van incontinentie en andere problemen rond mictie en ontlasting verminderen. Die middelen zoals katheters, stoma-zakjes, speciale luiers en hulpmiddelen op het toilet reduceren op de eerste plaats het ongemak voor de betrokken persoon maar verlichten ook het werk van eventuele verzorgers.

Voor verzorgers in de thuissituatie kan het incontinent-worden van de zieke of afhankelijke persoon het 'breekpunt' worden, het moment waarop zij denken hun taak van verzorger niet meer aan te kunnen. Òf het een breekpunt is, hangt niet alleen af van de fysieke krachten van de verzorger maar ook van de relatie tussen verzorger en verzorgde. Naarmate er meer afstand tussen beiden bestaat, stijgt de viesheidsgraad van de ontlasting en wordt de belasting zwaarder.

In een gezondheidsinrichting of verpleeghuis wordt de aanwezige staf geacht een 'professionele' houding ten opzichte van poep te hebben, dat wil zeggen dat ze er neutraal mee leren omgaan waardoor de betreffende patiënt of bewoner niet het gevoel krijgt dat zijn privé-wereld wordt geschonden. Vaak lukt dat echter niet. Een arts toelaten tot de meest intieme delen van het lichaam is blijkbaar minder pijnlijk dan hulp en aanwezigheid te moeten accepteren van anderen bij het poepen of plassen, vooral als daar 'ongelukjes' bij gebeuren.

De Lange (1991: 96) beschrijft de situatie in een verpleeghuis voor dementerende ouderen.

> In het begin schamen dementerenden zich, wanneer ze incontinent zijn en wanneer de ziekenverzorgenden hen verschonen. Dat kan ook een reden zijn om niet te durven vragen waar de wc is, of om te zeggen dat ze niet hoeven. Ze voelen dat hun waardigheid in het geding is.... Later zoeken ze een stil plekje op om hun behoefte te doen. De ziekenverzorgenden vinden het dan later in een hoekje van de kamer, in een nachtkastje, in de prullenmand of in een waterglas.

Het 'vieze', schrijft De Lange (199: 97) "staat soms lichamelijke nabijheid in de weg, bijv. iemand wordt niet op schoot genomen omdat ze wel eens nat zou kunnen zijn".[7]

Van der Bruggen (1991), docent in de Verplegingswetenschap, heeft een proefschrift gewijd aan de stoelgang van patiënten in het ziekenhuis. De auteur wijst er terecht op dat veel patiënten die voor geheel andere aandoeningen zijn opgenomen, in het ziekenhuis er nog klachten bij krijgen die betrekking hebben op hun stoelgang. Uit zijn onderzoek bleek dat 41% van de patiënten zich zorgen maakte over hun stoelgang. Van der Bruggen onderstreept dat dit probleem veel meer aandacht zou moeten krijgen van de verpleegkundigen. Een comfortabele stoelgang komt het welbevinden ten goede en bevordert het genezingsproces. De schrijver benadrukt dat vooral de privacy van de patiënten beter gerespecteerd dient te worden. Meer privacy leidt tot een meer ontspannen stoelgang en vermeerdert het welbevinden van de patiënt. In een andere publicatie (Munnichs 1984) worden de problemen van toiletgang bij ouderen besproken en doen de auteurs eveneens concrete aanbevelingen om gerieflijker en waardiger condities te creëren voor ouderen die hulp nodig hebben bij hun bezoek aan het toilet.

Mensen beroven van de mogelijkheid zich op fatsoenlijke wijze te ontlasten is een van de ergste vormen van 'marteling'. Overlevenden van de concentratiekampen herinneren zich de onmenselijke toilet-toestanden als het pijnlijkste en meest vernederende van hun verblijf daar. In zijn boek *The Survivor* heeft Des Pres (1976) een aantal van deze ervaringen bij elkaar gebracht in een hoofdstuk dat hij "Excremental assault" heeft genoemd. Het is de schokkendste literatuur die ik ooit gelezen heb. "The anguish of existence in the camps", schrijft Des Pres (1976: 55), "was thus intensified by the

mineral movement of life itself... The demands of the bowels are absolute, and under such circumstances men and women had to oppose, yet somehow accomodate, their most intimate necessities." Een auteur herinnert zich:

> Imagine what it would be like to be forbidden to go to the toilet; imagine also that you were suffering from increasingly severe dysentery.... Naturally, you would try to go away. Sometimes you might sueceed. But your absences would be noticed and you would be beaten, knocked down and trampled on.... I soon learned to deal with the dysentery by tying strings around the lower end of my drawers (Maurel, in Des Pres 1976: 55-56).

De gevangenen werden systematisch onderworpen aan smerigheid.

> They were the deliberate target of excremental assault. Defilement was a constant threat, a condition of life from day to day, and at any moment it was liable to take abruptly vicious and sometimes fatal forms. The favorite pastime of one *Kapo* was to stop prisoners just before they reached the latrine. He would force an inmate to stand attention for questioning; then make him "squat in deep knee-bends until the poor man could no longer controle his sphineter and 'exploded'"; then beat him and only then, "covered with his own excrement, the victim would be allowed to drag himself to the latrine" (Donat, in Des Pres 1976: 58).

Wie deze beelden 'gezien' heeft zal zich voor altijd bewust zijn van de 'luxe' van goede toilet-mogelijkheden en van hun onmisbaarheid voor een menswaardig leven.

De gedachte van menswaardig leven speelde ook in de campagnes voor de introductie van latrines in tal van gezondheidszorgprojecten over de gehele wereld. In 1980 lanceerde de Wereldgezondheidsorganisatie het 'Water en Sanitatie Decennium' met als een van de doelstellingen dat in het jaar 1990 iedereen ter wereld toegang zou hebben tot een adequate voorziening voor ontlasting. Het gevolg was een spectaculaire toename in de bouw van latrines, vooral op het platteland, maar daarbij werd onvoldoende rekening gehouden met de aanvaardbaarheid en het onderhoud van de toiletten. Het gebrek van onderhoud en het niet-legen van volle putten of containers veranderde latrines vaak in gevaren voor de volksgezondheid. Een ander probleem was de afwijzing van latrines om culturele of andere redenen. Zoals we gezien hebben werd Ndonko's belangstelling voor excrementen gewekt door de onwil van Kameroenese dorpelingen om gebruik te maken van latrines. Afkeer of principiële afwijzing van toiletten is veelvuldig gemeld door gezondheidswerkers en door sociale wetenschappers die preventieve gezondheidszorgprojecten hebben geëvalueerd (zie bijv. Jenkins & Howard 1992: 7). De latrines, meldt Ndonko (1993: 109), betekenen een terugkeer van de excrementen binnen het domestieke domein, iets wat men nu juist niet wil. Poep is vuil dat naar 'buiten' moet. Het bouwen van latrines op het erf is daar direct mee in strijd. Kark & Kark (1962: 26) schreven geruime tijd geleden dat mensen in Zuid-Afrika tegen publieke latrines waren omdat ze hun uitwerpselen niet op één plek wilden concentreren. Ze wilden zo voorkomen dat heksen er hun magie op zouden toepassen.

Tot besluit

Poep is vuil, maar, zoals Douglas heeft opgemerkt, slechts in relatieve zin. Hoe meer poep de orde verstoort, hoe viezer het is. De vuilheid is 'in the eye of the beholder (and in the nose of the smeller). Poep die niet vuil gevonden wordt, is naar alle waarschijnlijkheid afkomstig van een intieme bekende. 'Poep en omstreken' heb ik deze terreinverkenning in de cultuur van menselijke ontlasting genoemd. Poep, het zich ontlasten en de plek waar dit plaats heeft, vormen het centrum van veel culturele en maatschappelijke productiviteit. Via 'poep' worden uitspraken gedaan over goed en slecht, mooi en lelijk, gezond en ziek, eigen en vreemd, en over maatschappelijke ongelijkheid. In deze schets heb ik me enigszins geconcentreerd op de relatie tussen bovengenoemde scatologische thema's en menselijk welbevinden. Mijn voorlopige conclusie is dat kennis over poep en zijn context ons veel kan leren over denk- en gedragswijzen in diverse culturen, maar dat dit nog nauwelijks op een degelijke en systematische wijze is gedaan. Het komend symposium over poep, cultuur en welbevinden biedt de mogelijkheid hier een begin mee te maken. Hopelijk heeft deze beschouwing u in de juiste stemming gebracht.

Noten

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1. Het Duitse gezegde dat stront in geschreven vorm niet stinkt, is dan ook alleen in zijn platte betekenis correct.
2. De verbreking van de intimiteit tussen ouders en kinderen bij het opgroeien vindt niet overal in die mate plaats. Malinowski (1929: 133) schrijft over de Trobrianders dat als een man gestorven is zijn botten door zijn zonen worden uitgezogen. Ze leggen daarbij een directe verbinding met de wijze waarop de vader vroeger voor hen heeft gezorgd. Hij was niet vies van ons, wij zijn niet vies van hem: "It is right that a child should suck the father's ulna. For the father has held out his hand to its excrement and allowed it to make water on his knee."
3. Voor een overzicht van praktijken en ideeën betreffende menselijke mest, zie Timmer & Visker 1998.
4. Het is merkwaardig dat men in het Nederlands voor een dergelijke uitroep de voorkeur geeft aan het vrouwelijk geslachtsdeel of het Engelse 'shit'.
5. Voor een 'kleurrijk' voorbeeld hiervan, zie de bijdrage van Sacha Wijmer & Peter Paul de Baar in het Amsterdamse Universiteitsblad Folia Civitatis van 1978: de vrouwentoiletten zijn veelal 'maagdelijk' schoon terwijl de muren van de herentoiletten bedekt zijn met obscene grappen, filosofische verzuchtingen en politieke verwensingen.

6. 'Kind en poep' verdient veel meer aandacht dan hier mogelijk is. Voor Freud speelt de drol een cruciale rol in het proces waardoor het kind zich bewust wordt van zijn eigen identiteit. De fascinatie van het kind voor zijn eigen uitwerpselen heeft terecht vele wetenschappers gefascineerd. Erikson (1965: 76) beschrijft de kringspier als een metoniem van twee wezenlijke menselijke gedragingen: 'retention' en 'elimination', vasthouden en loslaten. Het vinden en leren beheersen van een goed evenwicht tussen beide is het begin van een 'gezonde mens'.
7. Het onderwerp poep wordt veelvuldig gebruikt in uitspraken over mentale stoornissen. Mensen die 'vies' zijn, worden bij uitstek gezien als mensen die in de war zijn; anders zouden ze immers wel schoon zijn. Schoon = cultuur; vuil = deviant. Gekken smeren hun stront op de muur. Wilson (1957: 49) meldt dat bij de Nyakyusa het eten van uitwerpselen gezien wordt als het karakteristieke kenmerk van de gek.

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Getting out of the shit : toilets and the daily failure of governance in Ghana[1]

Sjaak van der Geest[2], Nelson Obirih-Opareh[3]

The politics of sanitation

In a chapter on the politics of public sanitation between 1920-1940 in Windhoek, Namibia's capital, Gewald (2000 : 125-144) tries to find an explanation for the fact that "after years of consistent protest and demand on the part of location residents, there was no improvement in public sanitation facilities". The author leads us through a series of graphic quotes from official reports, letters and newspaper clippings about the horrible state of sanitation in the town. In one report from 1925 we read :

> "In Windhoek proper there are trenches, but these have developed onto cesspools and the stench coming from them is unbearable. Some of these trenches have been in use (open) for more than a year and the natives complain bitterly of their filthy conditions. In an experience of 25 years I have never seen anything worse (Gewald 2000 : 133)".

A few years later, in 1929, a German newspaper reports :

> "... everyone can imagine what odours there are emanating during the hot and rainy season. It is simply unbearable. But it must be endured.... Some of these WCs stand in the middle of the location. Is it surprising that the mortality was so high of late ? Shall we only pay our taxes or should we not also be allowed to elect people to our liking who are concerned about our welfare? Gewald (2000 : 136)".

Township inhabitants used this situation to protest against the South African colonial administration and those who cooperated with the administration, with only limited success. Gewald concludes by listing four reasons for the authorities' lack of concern about public sanitation. One reason was the "squeamish unease in talking about and dealing with an issue which was generally felt to be below the level of suitable discussion". The second reason referred to the costs involved. The third was that the authorities wanted to discourage the African inhabitants from settling permanently in the town and the last was that they regarded the inhabitants as uncivilised, and not deserving of decent sanitary facilities (Gewald 2000 : 144).

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1 This paper draws upon an earlier publication on toilets and sanitation in Ghana (Van der Geest & Obirih-Opareh 2001).

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Visiting some of the poor neighbourhoods of Accra in the beginning of the 21st century one would imagine oneself walking through Windhoek in 1925. It happened to the two authors of this paper when they went to "inspect" two public toilets in Nima, which is one of the most densely populated suburbs of Accra. The toilets were located in an open space between the houses and the road. Women and children were selling foodstuffs only a few yards away. The same space held two containers for solid waste disposal, which were overflowing. Goats were searching for food in the rubbish on the ground near the containers.

Both toilets had 16 squatting holes, eight for each sex. People visiting the toilet had to pay a small amount to the caretaker. In one toilet the pit was completely full and the faeces came up to and over the brim of the holes. Used toilet paper was lying about or had been deposited in large baskets, which were blocking the passage. The stench was as enormous as the physical and visual filth. For one not used to it, it seemed a miracle that people managed to relieve themselves in such conditions and reappear from the toilet totally spotless.

Close to one of the toilets, in the open air, was a huge container in which night-soil collectors emptied their buckets containing faeces from private houses. The buckets, which they used for their work were standing next to the container.

Little children often did not enter the toilet but defecated behind the toilet in the open space, apparently they could not spend the money or they preferred the "fresh air".

While we were inspecting the place, taking some pictures and discussing the procedures with the caretaker, a group of people assembled around us and expressed their anger and dismay about the sordid sanitation conditions in their neighbourhood. They talked about promises which had been made to them by the city authorities and accused them of total lack of concern and of stealing the money allotted to the construction of proper sanitation facilities.

Governance

If "governance" can be taken to mean, as Stoker (1998) suggests, the successful management of community affairs through a mixing of public, private and voluntary actors, sanitation is an excellent case to test the workings and adequacy of governance. In the area of sanitation public and private concerns and manners of addressing them come together. Defecation, which is a private and intimate activity, constitutes a public problem both in terms of health risk and environmental pollution. It may, therefore, be expected that the "blurring of boundaries and responsibilities" and the importance of "self-governing networks of actors", which Stoker (1998 : 18) mentions as key elements of governance, will manifest themselves in the management of human waste. Governance, with its emphasis on (governmental support of) autonomy of actors, reminds one of

a concept, which was popular a few decades ago in the domain of health policy : Primary Health Care (PHC). The term is no longer used in policy plans as it conjures up a too-optimistic picture of people's ability and determination to solve their problems by their own means. The term also assumes an overly positive image of the determination of governments to contribute to sustainable improvement at the level of local communities.

More than ten years ago, one of us argued that PHC meant different things to different stakeholders with different (often conflicting) interests at different levels of social and political organisation (Van der Geest et al. 1990). For representatives of international agencies, PHC was a – somewhat utopian – ideal to realise "Health for all by the year 2000", a prescription for health – and overall – development from below. For national governments in developing countries, PHC was first of all a strategic term and buzzword to increase foreign financial aid and reduce spending on local health care. For local inhabitants, PHC meant a cut in government support, "second-hand health care", and "forced self-reliance".

We do not want to fall into cynicism but cannot help wondering if "governance" is the reincarnation of abandoned policies of the past, such as PHC (and "Community Development"[4]). In this paper we will present and discuss two cases of sanitation in Ghana, one rural, one urban, and suggest that the poor management of human waste epitomises the limitations and failures of governance – or PHC – in present-day Ghana.

Public and privat toilets in accra

Policy-makers of the Accra Metropolitan Area (AMA) responsible for liquid waste management face a dilemma: should they promote and improve public toilet facilities in the city or should they encourage and assist inhabitants in having their own toilet in the house ? Many homes in Accra do not have their own toilet. Toilets and bathrooms in houses in the central business areas have sometimes been converted into rooms and stores. As a result, the residents of such homes rely on public toilets, which may be inadequate and face serious maintenance problems. According to the metropolitan authority, public toilets are meant for visitors to the city and not for residents. The opposite is the rule however. Public toilets have become permanent features for many residents in Accra as places to ease themselves. Accra faces acute sanitation problems. These are manifested in unsanitary conditions in and around most of the public toilets, poor and dilapidated infrastructure for liquid waste management, inadequate funding for maintenance, poor sanitary habits, deficient management of existing toilet facilities, indiscriminate defecation in open spaces, into water bodies

storage tanks, as well as from pan latrines, and limited connections from houses to the central sewage system.

Present situation

The existing toilet facilities in Accra, both private and public, include pan (or bucket) latrines, pit latrines, septic tank latrines, KVIPs (a particular type of storage tank), and water closets (WCs) with or without connection to the central sewage system. There are two types of public toilet ownership, namely (i) those built by the local authority, and (ii) those built by private firms and individuals for commercial purposes. The types and numbers of public toilet facilities available in the six, sub-metropolitan assemblies of AMA, are as follows : Ashiedu Keteke 26, Ablekuma 40, Osu Klottey 19, Okaikoi 11, Ayawaso 28, and Kpeshie 34. Privately built public toilets are few in number. The public toilet facilities are inadequate compared to the size of the population lacking toilet facilities in their houses. Long queues could be observed during early morning and evening rush hours. According to residents, some people defecate in empty spaces because of (i) the cost of a public toilet visit, (ii) a lack of toilets in the vicinity, (iii) long distances between public toilets and their houses, and (iv) the untidiness of the toilet facilities. In May 1999, user-fees ranged from ¢70.00 to ¢150.00 per visit, depending upon the facility. The AMA determines the user-fees.

The existing infrastructure of the Accra central sewage system is inadequate. In 1999, there were less than 1,000 units connected to the central sewage system (GW&SC 1999). In most places, the infrastructure for waste management is either non-existent or in a deplorable state. As Akuffo (1999) noted, there are about 18 sewage systems and sewage treatment plants in Accra, but none of them is operating according to plan. The system that was built for Central Accra in the early 1970s by the Busia government is no longer adequate. There are few connections and links to water to enable flushing are insufficient. Waste management has broken down due to a lack of human, logistic and financial resources. The present approach based on harangue, sermonising and clean-up campaigns is not helpful. There is a need for injection of capital into the system, including strengthening existing institutions. Investments in plants and equipment in the present circumstances of complete institutional breakdown are clearly not the right approach.

If availability of toilet facilities and the method of removal and disposal are indications of level of development, the city of Accra cannot be rated high on the scale of development. A survey of toilet facilities in Accra by

- 5% had access to private KVIPs and
- 10% of the population had no access to any toilet facility and defecated in open spaces.

The critical shortage of toilet facilities in Accra is obvious from these figures. Let us briefly look at the various types of services.

Cesspit service

The AMA and private firms carry out cesspit service with suction trucks. In addition to these, other organisations such as the Volta River Authority, the security services (army, police, prisons, and fire service), the University of Ghana, and the Ghana Civil Aviation Authority, etc., run their own suction trucks to empty the cesspits of staff bungalows and a few private houses. These organisations discharge their waste at the Waste Management Department's (WMD) treatment plants.

Pan latrine service

Night-soil collectors empty the bucket or pan latrines during the night. Liquid waste collection from pan latrines has been fully privatised since December 1987. The Waste Management Department provides surface and underground storage facilities and collection vehicles to empty the tanks. New pan latrines are not allowed. People have been ordered to convert the old ones to KVIP latrines or to use available public toilets.

KVIP latrines

Most of the initial KVIPs installed at several city locations as public and private toilets were pre-financed through a revolving fund set up by the German Technical Co-operation Unit (GTZ) to support the phasing out of pan latrines. The major push towards conversion from pan latrines to KVIPs began in late 1987 with the establishment of the Urban Sanitation Improvement Team (USIT) in the Waste Management Department. This unit comprises representatives of the Medical Officer of Health and the Metropolitan Engineer to facilitate approval of building permits for conversion from pan latrines to KVIP latrines. It was then envisaged that the promotion of the project would be maintained and additional funds secured to enlarge the revolving fund for the project. The KVIPs were supposed to be built in areas with porous soil so that the liquid found in the toilet could be absorbed by the soil, leaving the scum to be scooped out for use as manure in gardening and agriculture. Unfortunately however, the soil in Accra is clayish and as a result cannot absorb the liquid from the toilet as expected. The toilet is therefore always wet and needs dislodgement by suction pumps.

Public septic tank latrines

Most of the public toilets in the city have septic tanks. They are particularly found in areas without a central sewage system. The tanks have to be emptied periodically by suction trucks.

Liquid waste treatment sites

The liquid waste from septic storage tanks, together with the waste from the central sewage system, is collected at three treatment plants. These are found at Achimota (with a capacity of 55 000 metric tons), Teshie (10 000 metric tons), and Korle Gonno (33 000 metric tons). However, these treatment plants find themselves in various degrees of disrepair and are not functioning properly.

Central sewage system

The central sewage system is provided, controlled, maintained and owned by the Ghana Water and Sewage Corporation (GW&SC). The sewage infrastructure requires tremendous levels of capital outlay. The areas with fee-based toilet facilities connected to the central sewage line are Accra

Toilets with septic storage tanks are emptied by service providers i.e. WMD, private agencies or in the case of Labadi, by a community-based organisation (La Mansaamoo Kpee). Quasi-public organisations such as SSNIT, the University of Ghana, (Legon), and the security services ; (army, police, prisons, etc.) have their own liquid waste collection and transportation services to designated sites.

Institutional arrangements for collection and removal of liquid waste in the metropolitan area differ and can be summarised as follows: (i) cesspit emptying service for private households with a water carriage latrine system, (ii) public toilets' dislodgement for septic tank latrines, KVIPs, and WCs, (iii) surface containers for pan latrines, and (iv) the central sewage system. Each type of household facility has its own specific arrangement for removal.

The frequency of waste removal is directly linked to the type of facility and its capacity. Pan latrines are emptied twice or thrice a week to a central cesspit surface container, which in turn is removed every night, hence the name "night-soil". However, irregular waste collection is the rule rather than the exception. Toilet facilities without a connection to the central sewage system (WCs, KVIPs, and septic tank latines) are emptied when they are full, which varies from once in six months to once in three years.

Mode of payment

There are different modes of payment in the liquid waste management sector. Owners of toilet facilities with a sewage connection pay registration and monthly charges to the GW&SC. Owners of all other categories of toilets without a connection to the central sewage system pay fees to other service providers. The service providers include the AMA, AMA's accredited agents, non-AMA accredited agents, and community-based organisations, e.g. the La Mansamoloo Kpee. Quasi-public organisations such as : Cocobod, SSNIT, and the University of Ghana, which provide their own services, pay discharge fees to the AMA. The security services (army, police, prisons, and fire service), which also have their own service trucks do not pay any fees for the discharge of waste. All categories of public/communal toilets with or without connections to the central sewage system pay registration and licence fees to the AMA to operate as a commercial entity in the metropolitan area. Owners or managers of all non-sewage public/communal toilet facilities pay dislodgement fees to service providers. Operators of toilets owned and operated by the AMA pay all revenues to the AMA. Operators of privately managed AMA toilet facilities pay dislodgement fees to service providers including the AMA.

The owners of communal toilets charge a user-fee per visit. Income generated from the user-fees is used for the facilities' maintenance and operation. The fees are subject to approval by the AMA. In most cases, however, particularly in the private-private arrangements, the rates are fixed by the service provider without the involvement and consent of the AMA, but within its approved rates. The fee may differ from one type of

facility to the other. For example, the fees for WCs differ from those for a septic tank latrine or KVIPs. WCs with a sewage connection attract higher rates than those without water or with frequent water shortages. Factors such as cleanliness, environment, atmosphere, presence of toilet paper rolls, etc. all affect the price of the service. Most people settle for modest services with affordable prices even though all the service consumers prefer WCs with a sewage connection.

Monitoring, evaluation and supervision

Since the 1990s, the management of publicly owned toilets in the metropolitan area has been decentralised to the lower levels of government whilst others have been privatised. In line with its decentralisation policy, the AMA gave suction trucks and other equipment to the sub-metropolitan districts. Officers were posted to the districts to supervise the day-to-day cleaning of the toilets and to effect better monitoring and evaluation of public toilets. Publicly owned communal toilets are now under the supervision of the sub-metropolitan assemblies. The toilets are controlled and supervised by District Cleansing Officers, who, in turn, are supervised by the Environmental Health Technologist at the headquarters. The operators are expected to clean the toilets daily. Cleansing Officers from the WMD inspect the public toilets' premises from time to time. Every two or three years, the septic tank of a public toilet is emptied.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) helps to provide guidelines on monitoring public toilets. The EPA periodically inspects treatment plants and leaches at dumping sites. The WMD liaises with the Metropolitan Health Department to sue waste and sanitary offenders. The Health Department assists in environmental health education. Standard Boards also help by checking periodically for items that have expired and recommend their destruction. Private organisations such as SSNIT, the Cocoa Board, the police, and other security agencies that handle their own liquid waste meet periodically with the WMD to discuss liquid waste management strategies. There is also constant interaction between the AMA and pan latrine contractors.

However, a lack of funds at the sub-metropolitan level makes it difficult to manage and maintain equipment, including trucks. Therefore, even though the operation of waste management has been decentralised to the lower levels, the day-to-day management is still being directed from the WMD head office. There are plans to further privatise the system to ensure a more effective means of service delivery.

The most feasible, achievable and efficient system

Though the most efficient system of liquid waste management is the WC connected to the central sewage system, the majority of the people do not have access to this type of facility. Only a limited number of WCs are connected to the central sewage system. For areas without a sewage

system, WCs with a septic storage tank provide the best alternative. Irregular water supply in some areas affects their operation, however. For poor and deprived areas, the KVIP is the best alternative since it does not require water to function. However, the initial cost of building a KVIP and its maintenance, including the periodic removal of waste put it beyond the reach of many households. In view of this, policy-makers have embarked upon measures to increase and improve public toilets for the large portion of the population, whilst at the same time, encouraging increased use of household, private toilets.

According to some people, the real problem surrounding the management of public toilets in the past was not so much centralisation per se, but the fact that there was insufficient money to run them efficiently. Cost-recovery, if any, was very low. The result was poor maintenance in the absence of proper government funding. The problem has somehow been reduced through the introduction of user-fees since the 1980s, decentralisation of the waste management system since 1992, and privatisation of some aspects of liquid waste management some years later. Public toilets are operated either by contracting out or franchising. The invitation extended to private firms and individuals to build and operate public toilets on a commercial basis has greatly helped liquid waste management. As long as the economic situation of the majority of the people remains very poor, public toilets will remain an essential feature of Accra's liquid waste management.

Stakeholders

Three types of actors or stakeholders can be identified : service providers, consumers and policy-makers. The survey showed that service providers are satisfied with the present functioning of the institutional arrangements, but that 87% of the consumers prefer WCs connected to the sewage system. The position of policy-makers, as we will see, is ambivalent.

Service providers

There are three main types of service providers, namely (i) providers of toilet facilities, (ii) managers of toilet facilities, and (iii) those who remove and transport liquid waste (i.e. night-soil collectors and suction truck operators). Each of these has its own interests, depending on how much it gains from the service.

Public toilet service providers want more public patronage in order to make higher profits. Public toilet operators are content with the institutional arrangement for provision, utilisation and payment, cost recovery, and cost-sharing arrangement, even though there is room for improvement. The housing code requires every household to have its own toilet, but taking into account the profits earned from the operation of public toilets and the lucrative payments of user-fees for removal services, the discontinuation of public toilets is unlikely to occur in the near future. Suction truck operators

want households to continue using septic storage tanks and public toilet operators want residents to continue relying on their facilities.

Consumers

Owners of toilets with a sewage connection pay fees and monthly charges to the Ghana Water and Sewage Corporation (GW&SC). For all other categories of toilet facilities without connection to the central sewage system, suction truck operators empty the storage tanks periodically. The removal of liquid waste is carried out by either the WMD or by private contractors. However, rich households prefer WCs connected to the central sewage system to spare them the inconvenience and agony of searching for service providers to empty their septic storage tank whenever it is full. Besides, when the toilet is removed or dislodged, it leaves a terrible stench in the area for hours, if not days. Pan latrines needs emptying twice or thrice a week. Irregular collection poses a severe sanitation problem, including stench. Flies are always abundant in the place. Besides, pan latrines have outlived their usefulness in the city and are a nuisance, particularly to the immediate neighbours. If toilet facilities are not emptied regularly, they pose health hazards and become breeding grounds for vectors of disease.

Though service consumers are relatively satisfied with the functioning of the institutional arrangements for provision and management of toilets, more suction trucks must be provided to prevent long queues for waste removal.

Owners of public toilet facilities think the institutional arrangements for the provision, utilisation and payment (cost recovery, cost-sharing arrangements, etc.) are good. Users of public toilets, however, want cleaner and more pleasant toilets at affordable prices. The households prefer WCs connected to the sewage system. In their absence, they want efficient and affordable suction truck services. Pan latrine owners want efficient services from night-soil operators.

Policy-makers

Policy-makers would prefer central sewage facilities covering the entire metropolitan area. However, in the present economic situation, this seems impossible Although WCs connected to the central sewage system are preferred by all residents, poverty prevents most households from having their own toilet. For them, the public toilet remains the only choice. Policy-makers also acknowledge the high propensity for increased demand for public toilets as more and more houses spring up without their own toilet facilities. Besides, the growing number of homeless people will further increase the reliance on public toilets. To combat this problem, policy-makers search for better institutional arrangements for liquid waste management.

Policy-makers consider the institutional arrangements for provision, utilisation and payment (cost recovery, cost-sharing arrangements, etc.) for

liquid waste management as functioning well, even though they acknowledge that there is room for improvement.

Future policy

Most respondents agreed that decentralisation in itself does not solve the problems of waste management unless it is backed with fiscal transfers to enable lower government structures to manage the responsibilities entrusted to them. Some residents want wider coverage by the central sewage system whilst others expect more from strict enforcement of housing regulations: new houses should have their own private toilets. At the same time, more and decent public toilets with neat and pleasant surroundings must be developed to take care of those without access to private toilets. As the operation of public toilets becomes more lucrative, so will the corruption in its revenue management. Ghana has a poor maintenance culture. The situation is worst in the waste management sector. The majority of the people think that the decision to lease or contract out the management of government-owned public toilets is the best policy so far. This has indeed led to improvements in the conditions of most of them. Privatisation has led to competition in the management of public toilets and suction truck service provision. This will improve even further, of course, if revenues for their maintainence are handled properly. Contract awards should therefore be made in terms of efficiency, transparency and capability.

The best policy for AMA seems a two-pronged one. Obviously, an overall policy of 'one house, one toilet' is not realistic for the time-being. Financial resources, both public and private, would not tolerate such a programme. For the poorer areas of the metropolis, therefore, the local government should embark on a thorough improvement of public toilet facilities. "Improvement" includes among other things: cleaner sanitary conditions, better management, easier access and more privacy. Privatisation and external contracting, if executed in a "humane" and reasonable manner, can help to achieve this objective.

Public and private toilets in a rural community

Defective toilet facilities are particularly depressing in densely populated places such as the townships of Accra. The lack of facilities in rural places causes less direct inconvenience if 'nature' is near and mercifully hides and 'digests' the traces of human pollution. Moreover, many of the inhabitants are – at least part-time – farmers and have the possibility to relieve themselves on their way to the farm or on their farm. The small town of Kwahu-Tafo (in Southern Ghana), where one of the authors carried out anthropological fieldwork, may serve as an example of rural coping – and lack of coping – with inadequate liquid waste management.

There are two public toilets, each with twelve squatting holes (six for each sex), in Kwahu-Tafo. This means there are just 24 public facilities for the entire town of about 5 000 inhabitants. Some people have to walk about

ten minutes to reach a public toilet (to and fro twenty minutes). In addition there are semi-public toilets in two schools, which can be used by both teachers and pupils. The number of private latrines (almost all bucket latrines) is unknown. The sanitary inspector estimates their number at sixty. Finally, there are about ten private pit latrines and ten WCs, one in the chief's house, the others in the Catholic mission and the teachers' bungalows of the Technical School.

In and around public toilets

It is impossible to say how many people are in fact using the public toilets. Estimates vary from one-third to eighty percent of the population, which in absolute figures would be 1 000 to more than 4 000 people. Unknown is also the number of people who don't use toilets at all but ease themselves in the "bush" at the edge of town or on the way to their farm. Some people defecate into a plastic bag and dump the bag somewhere out of sight.

The combination of plastic and human faeces is no doubt the most appalling form of pollution taking place in Ghana. Apparently some people view the plastic bag as a handy, portable and disposable, private toilet. It seems an attractive compromise : one can defecate at home and yet one is not stuck with the unpleasant presence of a permanent toilet in the home.

If we take a conservative estimate of forty percent of the people visiting the public toilet, it means that every day, about 2 000 people use 24 holes, that is almost ninety per hole, per day. Taking into account that both toilets are closed from about 9 pm until 5 am, one can conclude that the holes are occupied every five minutes. On the average both public latrines would receive about 1 000 visitors per day. When we discussed this with the caretaker of one of the latrines he estimated a number of only about 200-300. He based his calculation on his daily income. Whatever the exact number, it is not surprising that there are queues early in the morning as most people prefer to ease themselves before they start the day.

For elderly people the way to the public toilet seems particularly painful. It may be far and the conditions do not befit their status of respected elder. Most elders therefore use a private latrine, either in their own house or in that of a kind neighbour. They are also likely to avoid the morning rush hour if they have to go to the public toilet (cf., Van der Geest 2002a).

Visiting a public toilet is not "free". The caretaker of the toilet (who is also responsible for cleaning the place) takes twenty cedis (about US$ 0.01) from each visitor. In that way the old coins, which have lost nearly all their value, are still useful (the same amount is charged for a bucket of water from the public tap). The caretaker of one public toilet was observed sitting in a small kiosk with a pile of cut newspapers in front of him. He handed each customer one sheet and received twenty cedis. If customers brought their own paper, he said, they only had to pay ten cedis. Each day he had to pay 3 000 cedis to the sanitary inspector. He could keep

whatever he earned above that amount. Funerals and other busy days were golden times for him.

The privatisation of public toilet management has certainly improved conditions. The squalor that the author noticed about two decades earlier, when the public toilets were free and under the responsibility of the local authority had disappeared. The place was relatively clean but the immediate surroundings had become a dumping place for all kinds of dirt. First there was the town's official, refuse dump (*sumina*) about fifty meters away from the toilet. However, right behind the toilet another "*sumina*" had come into existence : town inhabitants emptied their chamberpots there, the labourers who cleaned the KVIP put its contents there, and – worst of all – some people brought their faeces in plastic bags and deposited them at the same spot. They did this usually at night when no one could see them. The combination of plastic with faeces is particularly pernicious as it prevents the faeces from decomposing.

Private bucket latrines

The sanitary and cultural conditions surrounding the private bucket toilet also deserve our attention, although no one has ever conducted a systematic survey of them. In 1994 the buckets were emptied every week for 800 cedis a month. That sometimes buckets overflowed may be due to the fact that the owner failed to pay his monthly dues or that the work force could not cope with their task. A man who is referred to as *Kruni*[5], empties the buckets in the night. *Krufoò* earn 50 000 cedis per month, according to the sanitary inspector. I suspect that they get some extra rewards from the different houses they serve.

Natives of the town would never think of performing this kind of dirty work "...even if they paid me ten times as much", as one man stated. The work is extremely unpleasant. The *Kruni* carries a container on his head in which he empties the bucket. He has a broom to clean the bucket and a lantern to find his way. The bucket is behind a small door on the outside of the house. He has to carry the container for a long distance to a dumping place on the outskirts of the town.

The *Krufoò* are literally "people of the night". They are the personification of the Akan horror of shit and have to make themselves and their load invisible. Just opposite the window of the room where I was staying was the bucket of the neighbour. Once a week I woke up when the *Kruni* came to empty the bucket, not because of the noise he made – he moved as silently as a mouse – but because of the stench drifting into my room.

It is unlikely that there will be any *Krufoò* in the near future. Those who

one *Kruni* in Kwahu-Tafo. The man was getting old and could hardly cope with the work. He had no successor. Two years later we held some interviews with him and observed his style of working and his way of protecting himself against the stench and the dangers of his job. By then he was sharing the work with another *Kruni* (Van der Geest 2002b). It is unlikely that all bucket latrines will have been replaced by pit or KVIP latrines (as the official policy stipulates) by the time these two men stop their work as night-soil collectors.

Discussion and conclusion : governance of daily life

There is hardly any activity, which fits the theme of "Governance of daily life", as well as the daily visit to a toilet. Defecation should take place everyday. One "missed day" constitutes a health risk in the popular cultural perception (Osei 1987, Van der Geest 2003). If we accept human "well-being" as the best criterion of good governance, sanitation presents itself as a crucial test case of governance. In the quality of toilet facilities we discern medical as well as social and political indicators of welfare. Toilets are significant markers of social status and political power. Various authors, from Douglas (1966) to Curtis (1998) and Green (1999), have argued that experiences of dirt and cleanliness have far-reaching consequences for self-esteem, social identity and physical and mental health. What conclusions can be drawn from the two cases in this paper ?

Our observations on the management of human waste in Accra as well as in the rural community of Kwahu-Tafo show a lack of concern and initiative with regards to sanitation both from the government and the local community. It is mainly the "invisible hand" of small entrepreneurs that succeeds in bringing about modest improvements in the quality of sanitation. Let us briefly look at the different actors.

Proper sanitation, one would expect, is one of the most convincing legitimisations of politics. Individual initiative can hardly achieve building effective infrastructural facilities to dispose of human waste, but state resources can. Public authorities have the "chance" to prove their concern about the well-being of their citizens by providing sanitary amenities and thus strengthening their political support in the community. That "chance", however, is hardly utilised. Local authorities, both in urban and rural areas, have a poor record when it comes to the building of sanitary facilities.

Three of the four reasons suggested by Gewald (2000 : 144) to account for the lack of political will to improve sanitary conditions in Windhoek almost one hundred years ago, still apply to Ghana today. Financial constraints and cultural disgust are obvious factors – or excuses – to explain the government's inertia in sanitary matters. Most shocking is the fact that the racist attitude of the South African government towards the Herero population in the 1920s can still be detected in the discriminatory behaviour of Ghanaian politicians to the poor members of their society. Having access to their own clean private toilets, they close their eyes to the

squalor of public facilities on which their less fortunate co-citizens rely. "Squeamish unease" and outright discrimination conveniently merge into politics of neglect (see also Frantzen & Post 1999).

Surprisingly, local inhabitants and users of public facilities also do very little to improve the situation. If good governance involves both "governors" and ordinary citizens, we may conclude that both sides lack political initiative in this respect. We call this lack of initiative "surprising" because it seems to contradict a strong cultural concern about cleanliness as a physical and moral state. During our visit to the public toilets in Accra people complained bitterly about the authorities' lack of concern and their failure to improve sanitary conditions, but they themselves showed no initiative to do something about it either. Their concern about cleanliness did not motivate them to take sanitary governance into their own hands ; it rather seemed to discourage them from doing anything. Elsewhere one of us (Van der Geest 1998) has proposed that cultural rules of cleanliness have led to the paradoxical situation that people cope with the daily confrontation with dirt by keeping defecation at bay, both geographically and mentally. Governance of sanitation is mainly a matter of not thinking about it. Ironically, this applies to political authorities as well as to local inhabitants.

Entrepreneurs who are able to make a profit out of the management of public toilets and the collection of human waste from private bucket latrines provide the best "governance". The slight improvements which have been achieved in the management of liquid waste seem to be mainly the result of the incentives of privatisation. Private caretakers of public toilets have tried to make the visit to the toilet less unpleasant by keeping the place relatively tidy. Examples of this have been reported from Accra (Obirih-Opareh 2001) and the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo (Van der Geest 2001), but also from the city of Kumase (Frantzen & Post 1999, Post 2001).

The performance of the night-soil collector (van der Geest 2002b) is another example of private enterprise. Ironically, it is the inadequacy of public services responsible for the further disposal of human waste which thwarts the good performance of the toilet manager. In Accra failure to empty the storage tanks in time causes an overflowing of the toilet holes. In Kwahu-Tafo they deposit the contents of the KVIP tank right behind the toilet turning the place into a mess.

From the limited evidence of our observations in Accra and Kwahu-Tafo we are inclined to conclude that both policy-makers and users of public toilet facilities have their "reasons" to remain inactive with regard to the improvement of public toilets but that some effect may be expected from the privatisation of public toilets. Privatisation should not be restricted to the management of the facility, however, but also include the further removal of liquid waste.

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BIJNA DE HELFT VAN ALLE PATIËNTEN IN ZIEKENHUIZEN MAKEN ZICH ZORGEN OVER HUN TOILETGANG

Poep en welbevinden in verpleging en verzorging

SJAAK VAN DER GEEST

Een goede en geregelde stoelgang is een teken van gezondheid, wist Hippocrates ons reeds te melden. Ontlasting wordt in laboratoria onderzocht voor het stellen van een diagnose en verpleegkundigen houden zorgvuldig het poepgedrag van bepaalde patiënten bij, omdat dat indicatief is voor het verloop van de ziekte. Poepen is echter meer dan een biologische verrichting. Het heeft ook een sociale en een culturele dimensie.

Elke cultuur heeft zijn regels over waar en hoe men zijn behoefte dient te doen. Antropologen en sociologen zijn de experts op sociaal en cultureel gedrag, maar wie hun wetenschappelijke geschriften doorpluist, vindt nauwelijks iets over het onderwerp 'poep'. Hoe komt dat?

In een wetenschappelijk betoog past het woord 'poep' niet. Het doet wenkbrauwen fronsen en werkt op de lachspieren. Het woord deelt het lot van de substantie waar het naar verwijst; het hoort niet 'in gezelschap'. Ondanks zijn alledaagsheid is poepen ongeveer het meest verborgene van alle menselijke activiteiten. Je doet het alleen, achter een gesloten deur en je praat er niet over. Het is geheimzinniger dan seks waaraan men - meestal - met zijn tweeën deelneemt en waar bovendien talloze foto's en filmbeelden van bestaan.

> Met ademhalen en eten behoort poepen tot de meest basale, bewust uitgevoerde biologische activiteiten van mensen. Poepen heeft echter ook een sociale en een culturele dimensie. Zodra mensen hun ontlasting niet meer zelf kunnen regelen wordt toiletbezoek en de confrontatie met poep een uiterst onaangename gebeurtenis.

CONTROLE De Britse antropologe Mary Douglas heeft ooit gezegd dat vuil 'matter out of place' is. Dingen worden vuil als ze van hun plaats afkomen. Als het glas omvalt verandert de kostbare wijn ogenblikkelijk in 'vuil': een gemene rode vlek op het witte tafellaken, terwijl de substantie niet veranderd is. Blijkbaar is wijn niet altijd wijn. Is poep wel altijd poep?

Haar redenering gaat ook op voor poep. Zolang mensen hun eigen ontlasting kunnen regelen in de intimiteit van hun toilet en met de middelen waarmee ze vertrouwd zijn, is er nauwelijks sprake van een confrontatie met vuil. Op die wijze is poepen voor de meeste mensen zelfs een prettige ervaring, zoals Lea Rachel (1999) beschrijft, een aangenaam gevoel van controle en ontspanning. Maar zodra die orde verstoord wordt, als er geen papier is, als de privacy ontbreekt, of als men bij het betreden van het toilet de drol van een voorganger aantreft, wordt het bezoek aan het toilet en de confrontatie met poep een uiterst onaangename gebeurtenis.

AFHANKELIJKHEID Mensen die voor hun toiletgang afhankelijk zijn van anderen hebben een soortgelijke ervaring. Uit onderzoek van Van der Bruggen (1991) is gebleken dat bijna de helft van alle patiënten in ziekenhuizen zich zorgen maken over hun toiletgang. Zij voelen zich ongemakkelijk omdat ze uit hun gewone doen zijn en/of de aanwezigheid van een verpleegkundige moeten dulden terwijl ze hun behoefte doen. De stress die dit oplevert leidt soms tot nieuwe klachten en is in algemene zin niet bevorderlijk voor een vlot herstel van de gezondheid. Een meer comfortabele stoelgang, daarentegen, zou het welbevinden en het genezingsproces wel ten goede komen. Toch krijgt dit probleem nauwelijks aandacht in de opleiding van verzorgers en verpleegkundigen. Van der Bruggen benadrukt dat met name de privacy van de patiënten beter gerespecteerd zou moeten worden.

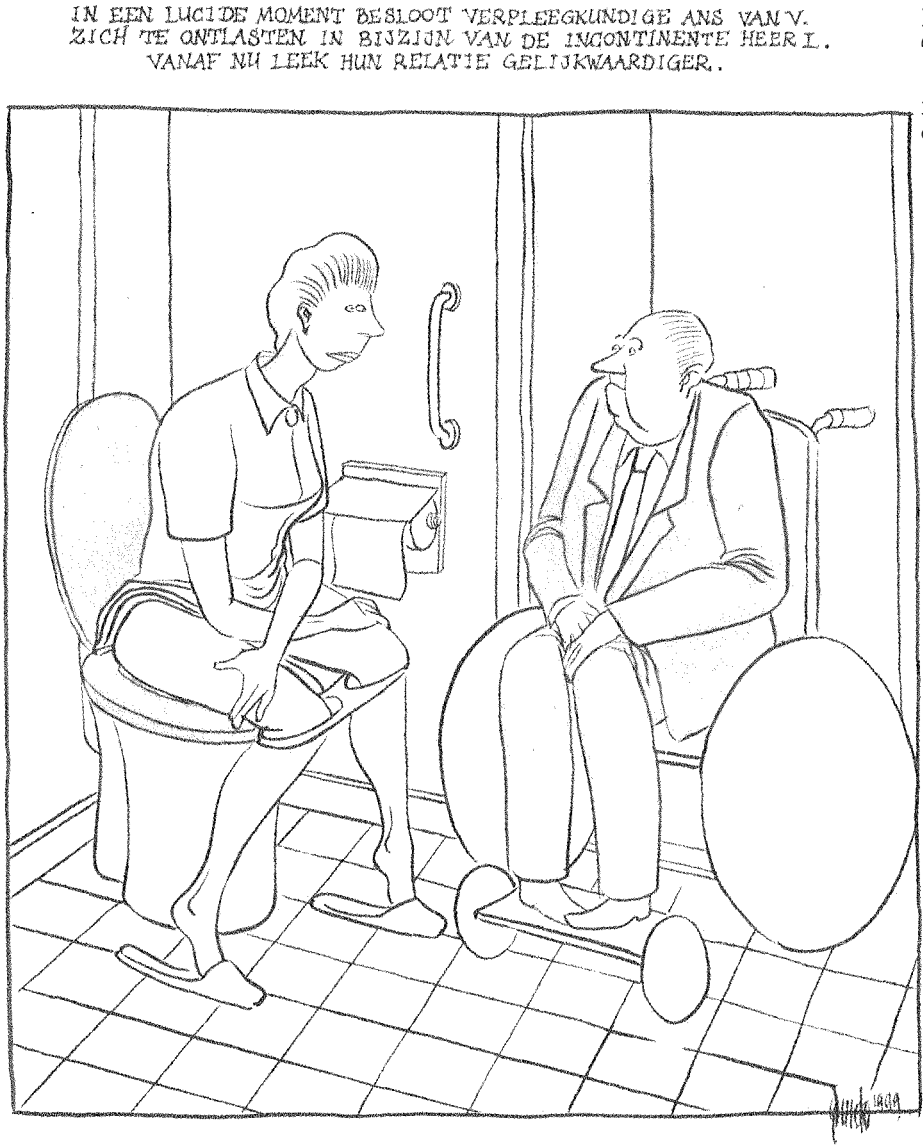
ASSISTENTIE Niet alleen voor patiënten, ook voor de verzorgers en verpleegkundige is de stoelgang vaak een onprettige ervaring. Velen beschouwen

Studiedag

Op 15 oktober a.s. wordt in Amsterdam een studiedag over poep, cultuur en welbevinden gehouden voor mensen die actief zijn in de preventieve gezondheidszorg, 'public health', 'sanitation', verpleegkunde en ouderenzorg. Thema's die aan de orde komen zijn: de antropologische visie op menselijke ontlasting; hygiëne, publieke gezondheid en ontwikkelingsproblematiek; problemen rond poep in verplegings- en ziekenhuizen; de cultuur van zindelijkheidstraining en 'poep' in taal en literatuur.
Plaats: Universiteit van Amsterdam (ƒ 75,-).
Voor meer informatie: Universiteit van Amsterdam, Medische Antropologie, mevr. G. Landry, tel. 020-5252670

Themanummer

Het tijdschrift Medische Antropologie heeft een lijvig themanummer uitgebracht, waarin de relatie tussen poepen en welbevinden wordt onderzocht vanuit een sociaal en cultureel perspectief. De bijdragen handelen onder meer over de al dan niet 'natuurlijke' afkeer van poep, het begrip 'vuil', poep en publieke gezondheid, poep en de zorg voor ouderen en poep in taal en politiek. De auteurs schrijven over hun eigen maatschappij en over andere culturen, in Europa, Afrika en Azië.
Te bestellen bij Uitgeverij 't Spinhuis, tel. 020-5252711



Guido van Driel

assistentie bij de toiletgang van zieken als het minst aantrekkelijke deel van hun werk. Meer aandacht voor deze taak zou daarom niet alleen de stress van de zieken verminderen, maar ook die van de verpleegkundigen.

Poep neemt een nog veel grotere plaats in in het dagritme van verzorgings- en verpleeghuizen. Van der Plaats (1984), die over toiletgang in Nederlandse verpleeghuizen heeft geschreven, laat zien hoe problemen rond toiletgang bij ouderen angst en onrust te weeg brengen en bij de verzorgers irritatie en agressie. Het verlies van zelfstandigheid en de emotionele verwarring die dit veroorzaakt, wordt het meest intens ervaren in de afhankelijkheid van anderen bij de gang naar het toilet. Zowel verzorgers als verzorgenden kunnen de stress en het decorumverlies van deze ontwikkeling ondervinden (cf. Van Dongen, 1999, Van der Geest 1999).

WELBEVINDEN De geregeldheid van de stoelgang representeert de geregeldheid van iemands leven in algemene zin. 'Goed poepen' symboliseert controle. Kinderen wordt geleerd zo snel mogelijk zindelijk te worden; zindelijk-zijn is mens-zijn. In veel culturen, waaronder ook de Nederlandse, kan men spreken van een preoccupatie met zindelijkheidstraining bij ouders met kleine kinderen. Niet zindelijk-zijn is een van de ernstigste bedreigingen van iemands sociale en psychische positie. Wie niet zindelijk is, is of nog geen volwaardig mens, of is dat niet meer. Het geen controle meer hebben over de ontlasting is een aanslag op iemands algehele gevoel van welbevinden. Het impliceert de pijnlijkste vorm van onzelfstandigheid. Zelf-controle en privacy moeten prijsgegeven worden; men wordt afhankelijk in het meest intieme en meest noodzakelijke van het dagelijkse functioneren. Die afhankelijkheid, meldde een dwarslaesiepatiënt in een televisie-interview, is veel erger dan bijvoorbeeld het niet meer kunnen lopen.

BREEKPUNT Voor verzorgers in de thuissituatie kan het incontinent-worden van de zieke of afhankelijke persoon het 'breekpunt' worden, het moment waarop zij denken hun taak van verzorger niet meer aan te kunnen. Of het een breekpunt is, hangt niet alleen af van de fysieke krachten van de verzorger maar ook van de relatie tussen verzorger en verzorgde. Naarmate er meer afstand tussen beide bestaat, stijgt de viesheidsgraad van de ontlasting en wordt de belasting zwaarder. ◀

NOOT

1 Sjaak van der Geest is verbonden aan de faculteit Medische Antropologie van de Universiteit van Amsterdam

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Sjaak van der Geest

Poep, cultuur en welbevinden

Studiedag over antropologie en defecatie

Als antropologen zich interesseren voor het gewone leven, waarom hebben zij dan zo weinig onderzoek gedaan naar een van de meest aardse feiten van het menselijk bestaan: de dagelijkse gang naar het toilet? En als zij zich interesseren voor culturele concepties van vuil, waarom hebben



zij dan zo weinig aandacht besteed aan het ultieme vuil: menselijke ontlasting?
De verbazing over dit verzuim wordt nog groter als men bedenkt hoezeer antropologen zelf tijdens veldwerk in den vreemde gepreoccupeerd worden door het toilet. Hoe en waar hij zijn behoefte kan doen blijkt voor menig veldwerker een punt van grote zorg. Als er een toilet is, wijkt dat meestal sterk af van wat hij thuis gewend is. Vervelender dan dit fysieke ongemak is het gebrek aan privacy dat men geniet. De antropoloog die echt wil participeren, ontkomt niet aan dit publieke karakter van toiletbezoek, of dat nu in een latrine, in de *bush* of op het strand is. Als de antropoloog daarbij nog aan diarree lijdt - geen zeldzaamheid in een omgeving waar voedsel en hygiëne erg verschillen van wat hij thuis gewend is - krijgt hij het wel erg zwaar te verduren. 'De symfonie van het darmkanaal overstemt vaak dagen, en soms wekenlang de rest van de aantekeningen in het dagboek...', schrijft Van der Veer in zijn essay 'De hurkende mens' in *Hollands Maandblad* uit 1988, maar die obsessie met spijsvertering en stoelgang dringt volgens hem zelden door tot de etnografie.

Poep is vuil, maar, zoals Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* heeft opgemerkt, slechts in relatieve zin. Hoe meer poep de orde verstoort, hoe viezer het is. Ook als woord of begrip is 'poep' *out of place*; het is een anomalie waarmee mensen krachtige uitspraken kunnen doen over goed en slecht, mooi en lelijk, gezond en ziek, eigen en vreemd. Moppen in de kindertijd - en in sommige gevallen lang daarna - ontlenen hun grappigheid aan thema's van poep en pies. En in de politiek kan men zijn tegenstanders in diskrediet brengen door letterlijk of figuurlijk met stront te gooien. Ook in een wetenschappelijk betoog past het woord 'poep' niet. Het doet wenkbrauwen fronsen en werkt op de lachspieren. Het woord deelt het lot van de substantie waar het naar verwijst; het hoort niet 'in gezelschap'. Ondanks zijn alledaagsheid is poepen ongeveer het meest verborgene van alle menselijke activiteiten. Je doet het alleen, achter een gesloten deur. Om die reden heeft de dagelijkse gang naar het toilet een unieke relatie met de 'cultuur' waartoe men behoort. Enerzijds vormt de zindelijkheidstraining een van de belangrijkste elementen in de vroege socialisatie van het kind, anderzijds kan ieder kind zich aan de culturele codes van schoon en vuil onttrekken zodra het zijn behoefte alleen begint te doen. In de eenzaamheid van het toilet ontwikkelt iedere mens zijn persoonlijke cultuur waar de buitenwereld geen weet van heeft.
Dat antropologen zich nauwelijks in deze cultuur-paradox verdiept hebben is tegelijkertijd begrijpelijk (gezien hun eigen culturele houding tegenover ontlasting) en onbegrijpelijk (als we de centrale rol van vuil in de organisatie van culturen in ogenschouw nemen). Poepen gaat voor dansen, maar de antropoloog met zijn liefde voor rituelen vindt het dansen belangrijker.

Studiedag 15 oktober

Het tijdschrift *Medische Antropologie* heeft een lijvig themanummer uitgebracht waarin de relatie tussen poepen en welbevinden wordt onderzocht vanuit een sociaal en cultureel perspectief. De bijdragen handelen onder meer over de al dan niet 'natuurlijke' afkeer van poep, het begrip 'vuil', poep en publieke gezondheid, poep en de zorg voor ouderen, en poep in taal en politiek. De auteurs schrijven over hun eigen maatschappij én over andere culturen, in Europa, Afrika en Azië. Op 15 oktober a.s. wordt in Amsterdam een studiedag aan dit thema gewijd.



U kunt zich tot 15 september opgeven voor de studiedag door *f* 75,- over te maken op giro 4443339 t.n.v. Medische Antropologie, Amsterdam, onder vermelding van 'studiedag' en uw postadres. Deelnemers krijgen het programma van de dag plus het 300 pagina tellende themanummer 'Poep, cultuur en welbevinden' thuisgestuurd.
Meer informatie: Fax 020-5253010, t.n.v. Gabrielle Landry, Medische Antropologie; E-mail: vandergeest@pscw.uva.nl o.v.v. 'studiedag'.

[Unpublished]

ONTLASTING, CULTUUR EN GEZONDHEID

Sjaak van der Geest

In ziekenhuizen en verzorgingscentra veroorzaakt ontlasting een zware *be*-lasting, voor de patiënten/bewoners, maar ook voor de verpleegkundigen en verzorgers. In zijn proefschrift van 1991 meldde Van der Bruggen dat veel patiënten die voor geheel andere aandoeningen zijn opgenomen in het ziekenhuis ook nog problemen krijgen met hun ontlasting. Uit zijn onderzoek bleek dat 41% van de patiënten zich zorgen maken over hun stoelgang. De ongemakkelijke houding en het gebrek aan privacy zijn de voornaamste oorzaken. Mensen zijn niet gewend hun behoefte te doen in het bijzijn van een verpleegkundige terwijl medepatiënten achter het gordijn elk geluidje kunnen horen en elk geurtje kunnen opsnuiven.

De bezorgdheid om de stoelgang leidt tot allerlei complicaties. Patiënten liggen 'ongemakkelijk', zelfs verkrampt, in hun bed en ontwikkelen constipatie (of juist diarree), wat niet bevorderlijk is voor het genezingsproces van de kwaal waar ze eigenlijk voor gekomen waren. Sommigen trachtten pijnlijke stoelgangsituaties te vermijden door stiekem zelf naar het toilet te gaan, wat niet zelden toch ongelukken leidt, soms fataal. Statistieken over toiletongelukken in ziekenhuizen zijn mij helaas niet bekend. Ik vermoed dat het aantal alarmerend is.

Verpleegkundigen, dokters en anderen

Ook voor verpleegkundigen vormt de ontlasting een belasting. Poep- en plasproblemen van patiënten worden door hen als de minst aantrekkelijke kanten van hun beroep gezien. Gezien de boven geschetste problemen zouden zij bij de verzorging van hun patiënten eigenlijk extra aandacht aan de stoelgang moeten wijden, maar dit gebeurt lang niet altijd. Het onderwerp 'poep' wordt - zoals gebruikelijk in onze maatschappij - collectief verdrongen. Men is slordig met de observatie van geconstipeerde patiënten en is onvoldoende bereid effectieve maatregelen te nemen om de patiënt uit dit lijden te verlossen. 'Poepzusters' en 'poepbroeders', dat wil zeggen verpleegkundigen die bereid en bekwaam zijn patiënten bij hun moeilijke stoelgang te helpen, zijn zeldzaam. In de hedendaagse beroepsopleiding wordt er nauwelijks of geen aandacht aan besteed, zoals ook Van der Bruggen heeft opgemerkt.

Dokters, de derde partij in het ziekenhuis, onttrekken zich sowieso aan deze onaangename complicaties van hun patiënten en bezoekende familieleden doen hetzelfde. Zij haasten zich de zuster te roepen als zich een probleem voordoet en trekken zich beschaafd terug als de verpleegkundige de patiënt verzorgt. Ontlasting wordt wel in schone plastic potjes bij laboratoria afgeleverd voor diagnostisch onderzoek, maar in zijn 'natuurlijke gedaante' wekt diezelfde ontlasting voornamelijk weerzin op. Alle partijen keren hun gezicht liever een andere kant op.

Incontinentie

Ook in huizen van verzorging speelt ontlasting een - min of meer verborgen - hoofdrol. Verzorgers zijn een groot deel van de dag bezig met 'vuil-ruimen'. Ruim de helft van bewoners van deze instellingen lijdt aan ongewild urineverlies en een onbekend percentage bovendien aan lichte of ernstige incontinentie. Verzorgers hebben de grootste moeite de

bewoners er altijd netjes uit te laten zien. Er is immers geen grotere aanslag op respectabiliteit dan onzindelijkheid.

In discussies over euthanasie wordt incontinentie vaak genoemd als een beslissende fase waarin voor de zieke (en diens omgeving!) het lijden ondraaglijk wordt. Geen controle meer hebben over eigen ontlasting wordt algemeen beschouwd als een van de pijnlijkste vormen van 'onttakeling'.

Volksgezondheid

In tegenstelling tot hondenpoep en varkens- en koeienmest is de ontlasting van mensen in onze maatschappij geen publiek probleem meer. De technische voorzieningen om ontlasting geruisloos en reukloos te laten verdwijnen zijn bijna perfect. Dat is niet altijd zo geweest. Ruim een eeuw geleden bestond er in ons land nog een 'kwestie der faecaliën', waarvoor men allerlei oplossingen trachtte te bedenken om de volksgezondheid en het algemeen welbevinden te bevorderen (Daru 1999).

In veel ontwikkelingslanden, vooral in de arme wijken van de grote steden, vormen de gebrekkige toiletvoorzieningen nog steeds een bedreiging voor de volksgezondheid (zie bijv. Muller 1997). Verbeteringen van de openbare hygiëne gaan tergend langzaam omdat ze duur zijn en omdat het onderwerp 'poep' - net als in onze ziekenhuizen - verdrongen wordt. Politici, die in hun eigen huis een goed functionerend water closet hebben, kunnen zich permitteren ogen en neus te sluiten voor de abominabele toestanden in sloppenwijken waar menselijke uitwerpselen in open containers worden gedeponeerd, op straat liggen of in open riolen drijven, vaak enkele meters verwijderd van de plek waar kinderen spelen en vrouwen onverpakte etenswaren verkopen.

De Wereldgezondheidsorganisatie lanceerde in 1980 het 'Water en Sanitatie Decennium' met als een van de doelstellingen dat iedereen in 1990 over een deugdelijk toilet zou beschikken. Ironisch genoeg heeft de campagne wel een spectaculaire groei in aantal toiletten opgeleverd, vooral op het platteland, maar niet altijd geleid tot meer *gebruik* van die toiletten. Hoe en waar men zijn behoefte doet, blijkt onderhevig te zijn aan culturele smaak en regels.

Cultuur

Wat mensen 'vuil' vinden en hoe zij met vuil omgaan zit inderdaad diep verankerd in hun cultuur (cf., Medische Antropologie 1999). De Britse antropologe Mary Douglas heeft vuil "matter out of place" genoemd, wanorde, maar *wat* wanorde is, kan per cultuur, zelfs per sociale situatie verschillen. In onze cultuur wordt orde/wanorde sterk verbonden met ervaringen van publiek versus privé, individu versus anderen. Ontlasting is zo ongeveer het meest intieme en persoonlijke dat denkbaar is. Een confrontatie met de ontlasting van een ander is daarom wanorde, een 'ongewenste intimiteit', dus *vuil*. Die wanorde, dat vuil, wordt gewoonlijk ernstiger naarmate de ander meer 'ander' is, naarmate men minder van diens intimiteit gediend is.

In zieken- en verzorgingshuizen tracht men die dominantie van privacy voorzichtig te vervangen door een cultuur waarin het 'in orde' is dat een ander in aanraking komt met de ontlasting van iemand die hij/zij verder nauwelijks kent. Dat lukt soms, dankzij een gepaste professionele houding (en techniek) van de verpleegkundige of verzorger, maar vaak lukt het ook niet. Zowel patiënten als verplegenden hebben soms grote moeite hun criteria ten aanzien van vuil op te schorten.

Ook in gezondheidszorgprojecten in landen met andere opvattingen ten aanzien van vuil, individu en gemeenschap ontstaan soms grote problemen. Maatregelen om de openbare hygiëne te verbeteren slaan niet aan omdat de betrokkenen andere ideeën hebben over vuil en hygiëne. Meer kennis over culturele variaties in de perceptie en ervaring van vuil is daarom dringend gewenst, zowel in 'verre landen' als in onze eigen instellingen voor gezondheid en verzorging.

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Poep: grote onbekende in de preventieve gezondheidszorg

Sjaak van der Geest

Niemand zal het ontkennen: poep is van levensbelang, maar eigenlijk weten we er maar heel weinig van. In alle ziekenhuizen van de wereld wordt poep onderzocht op de aanwezigheid van ziektekiemen maar we tasten in het duister over de herkomst van deze fecaliën. Wat mensen denken en doen omtrent hun ontlasting is een gesloten deur, even gesloten als het moderne toilet. Desondanks zijn onze toiletgewoontes van groot belang voor de preventieve gezondheidszorg. Een beschouwing.

Het is algemeen bekend dat mensen grote waarde hechten aan een goede en regelmatige stoelgang. In alle tijden en culturen hebben mensen hun fecaliën onderzocht om hun gezondheid te peilen. Hippocrates gaf zijn leerlingen al de opdracht de uitwerpselen van hun patiënten te inspecteren. Een oude oom van mij, die dit jaar op 103-jarige leeftijd is overleden, verzekerde mij dat er niets met mijn gezondheid mis was zolang 'mijn drol nog goed was'.

In het huis waar ik tijdens mijn onderzoek in Ghana verbleef, waren moeders er voortdurend op geattendeerd dat hun kindje dagelijks poepte. Als dat niet gebeurde gaven ze het kind een zelfgemaakt klysma. Ook de grotere kinderen en volwassenen hielden hun stoelgang scherp in de gaten. Iedere dag, liefst vroeg in de ochtend, moest het gebeuren. Vaak ging het gesprek dan ook over 'constipatie', een ziekte waar ik weinig last van had. Als ik mijn Ghanese vrienden vertelde dat ik eigenlijk nooit aandacht besteedde aan de regelmatigheid van mijn stoelgang, waren ze verbaasd. En dat ik nog nooit in mijn leven een klysma had gehad, klonk hun zelfs ongelooflijk in de oren. Voor hen was het van groot belang dat de darmen hun lading vuil dagelijks loosden. Als het vuil immers te lang in het lichaam bleef, zou het gaan gisten en broeien en allerlei ziektes kunnen veroorzaken. De hitte en het vuil zouden in de bloedsomloop terecht kunnen komen en dan werd het pas echt gevaarlijk.

Toiletten zijn gevaarlijke plekken die men beter kan mijden

Ondoordachte latrinecampagne

In preventieve gezondheidszorgprojecten wordt eveneens veel aandacht besteed aan menselijke ontlasting. Deze keer is het echter op de eerste plaats het vuil *buiten* het lichaam dat als gevaar wordt gezien: als bron van besmetting. In 1980 lanceerde de Wereldgezondheidsorganisatie het Water en Collectieve Hygiëne Decennium met als een van de doelstellingen dat in het jaar 1990 iedereen in de wereld toegang zou hebben tot een adequaat toilet. Het gevolg was een spectaculaire toename in de bouw van latrines, vooral op het platteland, maar over het daadwerkelijk gebruik van deze voorzieningen is men nogal somber gestemd. Zelden is er op zo grote schaal campagne gevoerd met zo weinig kennis van zaken.

Er bestaan talloze rapporten over succesvolle latrinebouwprojecten die eindigen met de constatering dat slechts een klein gedeelte van de bevolking van de latrines gebruik maakt. De Kameroenese antropoloog Ndonko (1993) beschrijft dat in het dorp waar hij onderzoek deed de bewoners de gewoonte hadden hun behoefte op het strand te doen. Op bevel van de autoriteiten moest men echter latrines gaan bouwen en dat gebeurde dan ook want er stonden sancties op overtreding van dit bevel.

Poep is vuil dat weg moet

Slechts een minderheid gebruikt de latrines echter; wie ziek is of wie 's nachts 'moet' neemt zijn toevlucht tot het bouwsel achter het huis, maar in normale gevallen geeft men de voorkeur aan de traditionele methode. Hun gedrag is begrijpelijk. De latrines, aldus Ndonko, betekenen een terugkeer van de fecaliën binnen het domestieke domein, terwijl men ze juist 'kwijt' wil. Poep is vuil dat weg moet. Het bouwen van een latrine op het erf botst met dat idee: men creëert een vieze plaats op de plek waar men dagelijks verblijft, waar men slaapt en eten kookt en waar kinderen spelen. De open plek op het strand met een natuurlijke frisse lucht en de zee als onuitputtelijke stortbak, ver van het woonhuis, is aantrekkelijker

en veiliger.
Toiletten zijn gevaarlijke plekken die men beter kan mijden. Ze trekken kwade geesten aan die van natte en vieze lokaties houden. Een ander gevaar schuilt in de magisch metonymische connectie tussen een persoon en zijn fecaliën. Wie toegang heeft tot iemands fecaliën, heeft indirect ook toegang tot die persoon en kan hem kwaad berokkenen door iets met de fecaliën te doen.

Verwijderen van vuil is poging omgeving te beheersen

Het is daarom veiliger niet zijn behoefte te doen op een vaste en herkenbare plaats.

Matter out of place
Het bovenstaande voorbeeld maakt duidelijk waarom mensen soms zo weinig bereid zijn hun gedrag te veranderen als het gaat om faeces en vuil. De antropologe Mary Douglas (1966) heeft er in haar beroemde boek *Purity and danger* op gewezen dat alle culturen met problemen van gevaar worstelen en daar hun oplossingen voor gevonden hebben. Vuil speelt in de perceptie van gevaar een grote rol. Vuil, luidt haar beroemde uitspraak, is *matter out of place,* een verstoring van de orde, en moet derhalve 'tot de orde gebracht worden'. Het verwijderen van vuil is niet een louter negatieve gebeurtenis maar een positieve handeling waarmee mensen hun omgeving trachten te beheersen, onheil trachten te voorkomen. Het is dan ook niet verwonderlijk dat gevoelens van afkeer en angst ten aanzien van vuil, die tot het wezen van elke cultuur behoren, zo 'vast' liggen en dat mensen hun gewoontes op dit gebied niet zo maar veranderen.

Ook voor antropologen is poep privé
Maar als ideeën en gedragingen rond poep zo'n centrale plaats innemen in een cultuur, waarom hebben antropologen er dan zo weinig over geschreven? Het antwoord kan heel kort zijn: omdat het vies is. De afkeer van menselijk vuil maakt ook deel uit van de cultuur van antropologen.
De ironie is dat veel antropologen tijdens hun veldwerk geobsedeerd worden door hun stoelgang. Vaak hebben ze last van diarree, vaak zijn de toiletvoorzieningen in hun ogen primitief en weerzinwekkend en vaak missen ze de veilige privacy die ze thuis op hun toilet gewend zijn. Toch dringt hun bekommernis om poep nauwelijks door in hun geschriften. Waarom?
Ten eerste, poep is privé, daar schrijf je niet over; poep hoort niet thuis in een wetenschappelijke studie. Over (eigen) poep schrijven is exhibitionistisch en getuigt van slechte smaak. Maar als de eigen poep intiem en privé is, is die van anderen het ook. Het is niet netjes anderen letterlijk - of via interviews - te volgen tot bij hun meest verborgen gedragingen en dat aan de grote klok te hangen. Om diezelfde reden hebben antropologen ook weinig over seks geschreven. Niet netjes.
Een tweede verklaring is dat de stoelgang van de antropoloog zijn falen in

Poepcultuur moeilijk te veranderen

de participerende observatie aan het licht zou brengen. Velthoen (1997) die onderzoek gedaan heeft bij straatkinderen in Kenia, ging heel ver in haar methodes van veldwerk. Zij zwierf met de kinderen door de stad, snoof lijm en at zelfs het voedsel dat de kinderen in afvalbakken vonden. Haar behoefte heeft ze echter nooit als een straatkind gedaan, bekende ze toen ik er naar vroeg.

De schaamte voorbij
Het taboe dat op poep ligt, speelt ons parten. Preventieve gezondheidsprojecten mislukken omdat initiatiefnemers weinig weten en begrijpen van hoe de mensen omgaan met vuil en menselijk afval. Toch verandert er wel iets. Water- en hygiëneprojecten beginnen zich meer te verdiepen in de cultuur van purity and danger. Op het Antropologisch-Sociologisch Centrum van de Universiteit van Amsterdam is op 11 december een symposium gehouden over *Poep, cultuur en welbevinden* (zie: Van der Geest 1998). Er werd wat lacherig over gedaan. Het woord alleen al, 'poep', dat past niet in academische kringen, maar het is wel van levensbelang. Zolang we niet meer weten van de 'poepende mens', blijft het tobben met de preventieve gezondheidszorg. ■

Sjaak van der Geest is hoogleraar Medische Antropologie aan het Antropologisch-Sociologisch Centrum van de Universiteit van Amsterdam

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Héctor Perla Jr.

SANDINO, AUGUSTUS CESAR

SEE *Sandinistas.*

SANITATION

Sanitation (from the Latin *sanitas*, meaning health) refers to the maintenance and delivery of clean, hygienic conditions that help prevent disease through services such as drinking water supply, garbage collection, and safe disposal of human waste. Sanitation is the focal point of public health policy, but in the experience of local communities much more than health is at stake in "sanitation."

GLOBAL STATISTICS

World Health Organization (WHO) reports show that in 2004, 5.3 billion people (83% of the world population) had access to clean water sources (in 1990 that percentage was 78). Of the 1.1 billion people without access to clean drinking water, 84 percent live in rural areas. The situation is particularly critical in sub-Saharan Africa, where 44 percent of the population remains without clean drinking water, and in Eastern and Southern Asia.

Similar statistics apply to the coverage of "basic sanitation" (improved toilet facilities). According to the same 2004 WHO report, only 59 percent of the world population had access to a hygienic toilet in 2004. It is again sub-Saharan Africa (38 percent) and Eastern Asia (45 percent) that have the highest populations without basic sanitation.

Unsanitary conditions are the main cause of ill health and premature death in poor societies. WHO statistics of 2004 report that 1.8 million people die every year from diarrheal diseases (including cholera), 90 percent of whom are children under five. Eighty-eight percent of diarrheal disease is attributed to poor sanitation. Malaria, another sanitation related disease, kills 1.3 million people each year; again, 90 percent of these deaths are children under five. Other diseases that originate in poor sanitary conditions include schistosomiasis (a parasitic infection), intestinal helminthes (ascariasis, trichuriasis, hookworm), and hepatitis-A. Although the health consequences of sanitation are overwhelming, people often have reasons to pursue—or refuse—better sanitation.

EVOLUTIONIST VIEWS: SURVIVAL INSTINCT

Social scientists have developed various theories to interpret or explain human concern about avoiding dirt and promoting hygiene. Evolutionist thinkers believe that there is medical wisdom in the human fear of dirty things. Dirty objects and activities pose a danger, so it is wise to avoid them. Disgust of dirt is a survival strategy (usually a non-conscious one). A 2001 study by Valerie Curtis and Adam Biran list five disgust elicitors derived from research in India, Burkina Faso, The Netherlands, Britain, and an international airport. The five elicitors are: (1) body excretions and body parts; (2) certain animals; (3) decay and spoiled food; (4) certain categories of "other people;" and (5) violations of morality. Bodily excretions were mentioned most frequently as causing disgust and among them, feces topped the list, but vomit, sweat, spittle, blood, pus, and sexual fluids were also regarded with aversion. Animals that were mentioned most often included pigs, dogs, rats, snakes, worms, cockroaches, maggots, lice, and flies. People that were found disgusting were those with signs of sickness, dirt, or deformity, and strangers with whom one was forced to come into close contact, for example in crowded places. People who behaved immorally also evoked aversion.

Curtis and Biran's hypothesis is that humans have evolved behavioral defenses against disease and that "disgust is one of the mechanisms crafted by natural selection to keep our distance from contagion" (Curtis and Biran 2001, p. 22). The researchers found support for their hypothesis by checking the routes of transmission for a selection of common infectious diseases. In all of them, one or more elicitors of disgust were mentioned as playing an important role in transmission. Feces were named as the source of more than twenty infectious diseases. Breath, saliva, lice, rats, and sexual organs were also important sources or transmitters of infection. All of these score high for human disgust.

William Ian Miller's 1997 study of disgust is difficult to place in any disciplinary tradition. His own expertise mainly lies in literature and history but his study also draws on psychologists, moral philosophers, and political and social theorists. Trying to decipher the origin and working of emotion, Miller derives most inspiration from psychology.

The disgust Miller discusses applies to many phenomena and activities, such as defecation, sex, food, and drink. He distinguishes two types of disgust. The first, which is clearly Freudian, prevents the activation of unconscious desire. It defends against pollution, denies access to objects and acts that would block the psychic development of the human person. The evolutionist perspective of disgust as a survival instinct returns here at the level of the human psyche. The second type of disgust is "disgust of surfeit," it punishes after having indulged in a "disgusting" activity. The two types complement each other. In the aversion of things perceived as dangerous because of their power "to contaminate, infect, or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion" it is first of all the unconscious reaction to psychic dangers that is at work (Miller 1997, p. 2).

CIVILIZATION PROCESS

Most authors writing on hygiene and sanitation from a sociological point of view refer to Norbert Elias's study on the civilization process. Elias studied etiquette books, letters, and other documents in France and England from the eleventh century onward and describes how the authors of those guides for proper conduct gradually became more particular about body functions, body parts, and body products.

He talks about a general process of civilization, which implies a "privatization" or "intimization" of human behavior. More and more, public activities became shameful and were confined to the private world. The human body was a focal point. The body itself had to be well covered and activities such as sex, sleep, urination, and defecation became embarrassing when carried out in front of other people. Modern hygiene facilities are regarded as expressions of the civilizing process.

CULTURAL SYMBOLICS AND RELATIONAL CONCERNS

The symbolic anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her classic *Purity and Danger*, turns away from evolutionist and "medical materialist" (a term used by American psychologist and philosopher William James, meaning reducing ritual to its supposed positive medical effect) explanations of hygiene and presents dirt as "matter out of place," a definition that became famous for its beautiful simplicity and provocation. Shoes on the table (Douglas's example) are dirty; under the table they are clean. Saliva safely caught in a handkerchief is hygienic, but when it falls in a plate it turns disgusting. Her claim that absolute dirt does not exist opened new windows in the study of hygiene as a cultural phenomenon. Dirt is defined by its context. It is disorder and carries an invitation or rather an obligation to restore order: "Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience" (Douglas 1970, p. 15). Hygiene, in short, is a basic cultural act: it distinguishes dirt from what is clean and thus, creates cultural order. Enculturation of small children starts with teaching them what is clean and what is not clean. Hygiene is the essence of culture. *What* is dirty is of less importance. Crucial is *that* dirt exists. Without the concept of dirt people could not formulate the norms and values of culture.

RELATIONAL CONCERNS

What makes an object abject and threatening? Douglas suggested: its out-of-place condition. Others claimed it depends on the matter itself. Too little attention has, however, been given to the identity of the person who is directly associated with something dirty, to the social life of the dirty matter. The answer to the question "whose?" determines the experience of disgust much more than has been suggested by Douglas and other authors who wrote about the cultural meaning of dirt. By adding a sociological dimension to dirt, Douglas's theory of matter out of place becomes more true to life and effective as an interpretative tool.

The humanist Erasmus's dictum that one's own shit has a pleasant smell (*Suus cinque crepitus bene olet*) is a humorous exaggeration, but it is not exaggerating to say that people usually are not disturbed by the smell (and sight) of their own feces. Objects, substances, and acts become dirtier as the person behind them is less close or less liked. Animals that produce dirt are also placed in categories of less and more disturbing. Animals that are "part of the family" are experienced as cleaner than those who belong to another family. And so on. Acts and gestures from a loved person that are cherished as dear and intimate (bodily contact, sex) turn into horrifying violence when another person performs them. Good or bad, clean or dirty, in this case, depends entirely on the actor. The "matter" remains the same. The urge for "hygienic action" also depends a great deal on such relational concerns. Washing hands after toilet use or before eating, for example, is as much a social as a healthful act.

SANITATION POLICY

Hygiene, in the medical sense, is a core value in modern societies. Objects, activities, and people are judged by their medical qualities. Food, houses, streets, markets, working places, holiday camps, public transport, and visitors should be clean and not pose a danger to health. Dirty things and people are rejected and rejected things and people are called dirty.

Anthropologists and historians argue, however, that people do not always make that explicit link between

health and dirt. After studying the hygienic ideas and practices by mothers in Burkina Faso, Curtis concluded that their cleanliness and dirt avoidance were primarily a matter of "etiquette and social acceptability rather than to avoid illness" (Curtis 1998, p. 110). In a 2005 study, conducted in Bénin, Jenkins and Curtis observed that modern toilets were popular because they were seen as a sign of social prestige and success.

Michel Foucault argues that in the modern state, medicine is a major instrument of control by societal and political institutions. His concept of "Bio-power" suggests that the state can reward or punish its citizens by providing or withholding health. Sanitation, preventive heath care, implies the imposition of a regime. Sanitary policy legitimizes the state's interference in households and private lives of people and thus helps to establish more effective disciplinary power. Bio-power—and sanitation in particular—constitutes the link between macro and micro (Foucault 1990; Gastaldo 1997).

Sanitation policies have been most successful when they also appealed to other values in people's lives, such as social decency, respect, comfort, and religion. Cultural ignorance and lack of respect for local knowledge and practices of hygiene are major problems in sanitation projects by both foreign organizations and local governments in low-income societies. Tiokou Ndonko's 1993 anthropological study in Cameroon for example, analyzed cultural and religious resistance against the government's sanitation policy. Hygiene, seemingly a purely medical concern, lies at the heart of culture and is both a means of political control and resistance.

SEE ALSO *Civilization; Cultural Relativism; Disease; Freud, Sigmund; Health in Developing Countries; James, William; Public Health; Taboos; Toilets*

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Sjaak van der Geest

SANSKRITIZATION

The term *Sanskritization* was first coined by the Indian sociologist Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1916–1999) in his Oxford University PhD thesis, which was eventually published as *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (1952). His research demonstrated that, contrary to the British colonial view, the caste system was not static and pan-Indian, but local, dynamic, and fluid. He captured the dynamics of this stratification system in his theory of Sanskritization. Sanskrit is the canonical language of the Hindu scriptures, including principally the *Upanishads*, and thus Sanskritization is the process by which lower castes attempt to emulate the culture of higher castes. More precisely, this social process involves the adoption by a "low" caste or other group of the customs, rituals, and beliefs of a "high" or "twice-born" caste. One specific example is the adoption of a vegetarian diet, which is not typical of low-caste practice. These social changes are normally followed by a claim to a more elevated position within the hierarchy of castes.

The theory is in fact more complex, because of the difficulties of translation of the notion of "caste," which corresponds to what is locally known as *jati* or *kulam.* Whereas *varna* refers to the four main castes (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra), *jati* refers to the many smaller groups or subcastes by which the Indian system is internally and locally divided. A caste is characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific lifestyle. Although social classes are open, caste in principle is not. Whereas social mobility in class society involves the movement of individuals, in a caste system it is an entire community (typically a *jati*) that moves up or down the system.

This social dynamic is also associated with a contrast between what anthropologists have called the "great" and

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF FAECES

System in the Dirt

Sjaak van der Geest

The anxiety and discomfort felt about excrement, combined with their attraction and fascination, represent a crucial anthropological paradox: the curious cultural taming of what appears to us as wild and uncontrolled. Like violence, cruelty, sex, abdominal desires and disobedient bodies, dirt seems to escape from the order that culture imposes; seems to... but does not.[1] We should not underestimate the disciplinary power that culture produces.

The dirt of human excrement is a useful topic to demonstrate that cultural ambiguity. Faeces are indeed an intriguing *matière à penser*, which, however, has been amazingly neglected by anthropologists. Elsewhere I have attempted to explain that negligence (van der Geest 2007). One reason, I believe, is that anthropologists in the field have been unable to rid themselves of their cultural codes of propriety. Home-based discomfort and rules of etiquette have prevented them from entering the dark world of defecation. Artists are less inhibited by the cultural codes of their own society and may, therefore, be better 'anthropologists' (that is: 'de-familiarizers') than professional anthropologists (see Verrips n.d.; Menninghaus 2003:25-49).[2]

The concept of dirt offers people the opportunity to order their life. The old functionalistic view that order is the heart of culture has never been abandoned, however loudly the structural-functionalist tradition may have been criticized. The classification of dirt shows how that order is constituted and where the boundaries between good and bad, right and wrong, inside and outside lie. Mary Douglas's concept of 'matter out of place' has been most influential here. Excretions of the body comprise the most strongly felt 'matter out of place' and therefore the most informative pointers of cultural boundaries.

The purpose of this essay is to add a social, or even sociological, dimension to Douglas's concept of (out of) 'place.' The social situation, the relatedness of people who are involved with dirt, is a stronger predictor of disgust than other types of places discussed in Douglas's work. Faeces are an excellent example with which to make this clear.[3]

MARY DOUGLAS'S MATTER OUT OF PLACE

Anthropological studies have something in common with poems. We love a poem just because of one line and forget the rest. In the same way we may cherish a book for just a few pages. Mary Douglas's classic *Purity and Danger* (1970) is a good example. Much of it may never be remembered, but her view on dirt as matter out of place, her six-page introduction, has become extremely dear to me because of its beautiful simplicity and its provocation.[4] Her statement that absolute dirt does not exist opened new windows on culture. Dirt is defined by its context. It is disorder and carries an invitation or rather an obligation to restore order:

> Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created (ibid.:15).

Red wine in a glass is fine; on a dress it becomes dirt. Shoes on the floor (Douglas's own example) are in order, but not on the table. Kissing one's child is a beautiful gesture, kissing a stranger in the train will cause trouble. What about faeces, however? How useful is Douglas's perspective for our understanding of defecation and faeces and their 'dys-appearance' (Leder 1990) from the eye (and ear and nose) of others? Are faeces ever *not* out place? Can they be clean and orderly? Is shit not always dirty, by itself, by its nature, wherever it is: in a lavatory, in the sewer, in a nappy, in the street, on a sandwich? The examples indicate that there are degrees of dirtiness. Faeces in the pipes of the sewerage system are just dirty, but on a sandwich that I am supposed to eat they become unspeakably disgusting.[5]



FIGURE 1 A night soil collector in Ghana.

The problem, however, lies with the faeces in the sewers. Are they not in the right place and therefore 'clean'?

A Dutch plumber studying anthropology told me that shit in the sewer did not worry him. Dealing with it in that place had become normal practice to him, but a turd in the lavatory bowl would disgust him. A night soil collector I met in Ghana had no problem scooping the faeces of his customers into his own bucket with his bare hands. Nurses – or should I say: good nurses – help defecating patients without feelings of disgust (Lawler

1991; van Dongen 2001). Each profession develops its own subculture with specific standards of order and disorder.[6] Can faeces ever be clean, however?

The faeces I carry with me in my body are in the right place (as long as they do not stay there for too long) and do not worry me. They may become dirty if someone starts to draw special attention to their presence and tries to discredit the human body as 'a sack of shit.'[7] By doing so, the faeces are as it were removed from their orderly place and placed before our eyes by the mere fact of talking about them. The same is true for faeces in the lavatory. They do not disgust us (as long as they are our own). We deal with the situation daily and do not feel stressed during the activity of defecation. However, bringing them up in conversation – or writing, as I am now doing – makes them dirty because we feel that they should not be discussed in public. Shit is an intimate product. We part with it in private and there it should remain. By talking and writing about it, it becomes a matter out of place; it disturbs the order of proper behaviour.

That is the reason why people in Cameroon told Ndonko (1993:209) that they would never say that so and so is in the toilet or that they are going there. Similar things have been said about countless other cultures.[8] Faeces out of sight, out of conversation and out of mind are clean. Contamination does not only work physically, it also takes place in metaphoric and metonymic ways. That is why a wall that bears the text 'Do not urinate here' is as dirty as a wall against which people have actually pissed. A Ghanaian proverb warns: 'Shit stinks and if you talk about it, the smell clings to you.'[9] The German expression that shit in writing does not stink is only true in a banal sense.

In order to assess the dirtiness of faeces we do have to pay attention to its in- or out-of-place character. Questions such as 'what,' 'where,' 'whose,' and 'how it is present' are relevant. I have already – though briefly – referred to the question 'Where.' 'Whose,' as we know, can make a lot of difference: my own or someone else's? My child's or my neighbour's? Does it come from a human being or from an animal? From what kind of animal? Experiences of disgust may vary enormously, depending on the answers to the above questions. 'How it is present' refers to whether faeces are present physically or only in the text we read, the conversation we have, the film we watch.

SUBSTANCE AND PLACE

It would be a mistake to disregard the qualities of the substance itself: colour, texture, moisture, and smell. Faeces do seem to have a 'natural' dirtiness. The fact that they are almost universally regarded as disgusting supports this view. Still, we need to keep in mind that 'natural' reactions in the strict sense of the term do not exist in human societies. Children acquire culture by being taught the dirtiness of their faeces. Their initial attraction to faeces suggests that 'natural aversion' is doubtful. The working of the senses is largely formatted by cultural lessons.

Several authors have tried to resist Douglas's relativist view and have argued that faeces on the floor are really dirty but a broken golden bracelet on the same floor can hardly be called dirt although it clearly is out of place. It may be true that 'dirt' is not the term we are likely to use in such a case. However, the reaction will be very similar: restoring the order. 'Disgust' may also not be the exact emotion when the bracelet is discovered on the floor, but, rather anger and sadness. Duerr (1988:240) provides the example of a bare-breasted woman (*oben ohne*) in a church service. Certainly out of place (at least in Germany) but dirty? I suspect that in this case some observers may indeed use the word 'dirty.' As Douglas, Miller, Elias and many others have argued, qualifications of physical dirt spread out over nearly all fields of human culture (religion, politics, economy, morality) and become metaphoric short-hands to express disapproval of almost any 'wrong' phenomenon, including a lightly dressed lady in a church.

Douglas's *passe-partout* does not give us an explanation for how and why the exact organization of order differs from culture to culture. If her theory explains that belching during a meal is out of place in the Netherlands but not in Alaska (as the story goes), it cannot account for the fact that the first order is different from the second. She does not explain why spitting is accepted in the streets of Beijing but not in Berlin (except for on football fields), nor why toilet paper is in place in the lavatories of Vienna and not in those of Kolkata. 'Each culture has its own special risks and problems' (Douglas 1970:145); it is the task of the anthropologist to describe them and make them intelligible and sensible ('acceptable to the senses'). Douglas does not give 'ultimate' explanations.

SOCIALIZING DOUGLAS'S DIRT

What makes an object abject? Douglas suggested: its out-of-place condition. I have tried to sketch some nuances of that out-of-place experience. The strength of the disapproval towards a matter out of place, as we saw, depends on the substance of the matter itself (although nothing is dirty by itself), the place where the object is or the activity takes place, the manner in which its presence is communicated and the identity of the actor who is directly associated with the matter or activity. I will now focus on this last aspect: what is or has been the social life of the dirty matter? The answer to the question 'whose?' determines the experience of disgust much more than has been suggested by Douglas and all other authors who have written about the cultural meaning of defecation and faeces. By adding a sociological dimension I hope to make Douglas's theory of matter out of place more true to life and more effective as an interpretative tool.

Rozin and Fallon (1987:37) distinguish between primary and secondary disgust. Primary disgust, they argue, refers to the reaction that an object or activity causes by itself. Faeces, of course, are the favourite example. Secondary disgust originates on the basis of relatedness to a person, a place, an experience, and so on. My objection, however, is that primary disgust in a pure sense does not exist. All human feelings take place in a context and derive meaning from that context. It seems to me that the most important context of faeces and defecation is the person or agent who produced the dirt.

I will now examine a number of possible agents that can be held responsible for the out-of-place presence of faeces or for a disturbing act of defecation. My main tool of interpretation will be introspection and social imagination. Other options are hardly available; serious anthropological research on this topic is rare. Occasionally I will add supportive (or contradictory) evidence from sociological and psychological texts and from scarce ethnographic observations.[10]

Me

The first distinction made with regard to the social identity of faeces and defecation is me versus others. It is unlikely that anyone will disagree that people are usually not disgusted by their own faeces.[11] Where people clean

themselves with water, they in fact touch their own faeces, without repulsion, apparently (see Epelboin 1998:399).[12] Anxiety may rise if others are able to hear, smell or see one's defecation or faeces, but in that case the emotional reaction is triggered by anticipating the reaction of the others. Erasmus's dictum that one's own shit has a pleasant smell (*Suus cinque crepitus bene olet*) is a humorous exaggeration, but it is no exaggeration to say that people are not usually disturbed by the smell (and sight) of their own faeces. Only if something goes wrong, technically or socially, may defecation become an embarrassing or disgusting experience for an individual.

Known Others

The next question is: who is the other? Following the list of potential others in decreasing degrees of closeness, the first we should consider is a baby. A mother will experience little or no aversion when dealing with the faeces of her baby. The baby is still felt as part of herself and cleaning the baby is almost the same as cleaning herself. The father is likely to be less close to the baby and may in that case slightly dislike the task of handling dirty nappies.[13] When the child grows, it will slowly move away from this intimate connection with its parents, it will learn to go to the lavatory by itself and its faeces will become gradually dirtier to its parents.

Mothers in Cameroon told Ndonko (1993:111) that the *cacas* of their babies did not smell and were not at all repulsive to them. Ghanaian mothers said the same and emphasized that children's faeces are much less offensive than those of adults (Kaye 1962:89-90). I remember that during my fieldwork I was once conversing with a mother who was preparing food while she had her child on her lap. At a certain moment the child urinated in the food. She laughed and made a small joke and continued the cooking. Even my presence did not seem to worry her. Later on, someone told me that such an event might bring fortune to the consumer of the food. The observation made by many ethnographers from all parts of the world that small children are allowed to defecate near the house points to the same interpretation (Aufenanger 1959; Curtis 1998; Gil *et al*. 2004; Gunawan 2005).

There is still another aspect to children, which influences the easy tolerance of their defecatory practice. We may call it 'innocence': they are not

yet fully grown human beings with an outspoken identity and a biography. As their hands are not yet dirty in a metaphoric sense, their faeces are not yet dirty either. The transgression by a child of the prescribed boundaries of intimacy and distance does not disturb. It is not felt as an intrusion of one's private space. The child, in a sense, does not yet count as a real human person.[14]

From the child I move to lovers and partners. Fortes (cited in Loudon 1977:162) writes that among the Tallensi in Northern Ghana, the trust between husband and wife renders bodily excretions innocuous. Only if such a trust does not exist can such substances be dangerous. Duerr (1988:228) quotes some studies from Papua New Guinea where the logic of trust works the other way around. When a man sees a woman defecating the two should have sex together. After sex there is no shame any longer as they have been intimate together. Rozin and Fallon (1987:32) speak of 'positive contamination' between people who love one another. Intimate objects, body parts and body products of one person have a special attraction for the other. Nothing is dirty in the eye of the lover. That is why the following example by Curtis (1998:13) is problematic: 'lipstick on a girl's lip may make the boyfriend want to kiss them, lipstick on a cup will ensure that he does not drink from it.' He *will* if it is the lipstick of his girlfriend. The same applies to the proverbial hair in the soup. No sweeter spice than the hair of a lover.

We should not say that love purifies what is dirty, as Miller (1997:132-42) does, or that it suspends the rules of disgust. Love does not suspend the rules of disgust; disgust follows the rules of love. Looking at the relationship we call love from the perspective of Douglas's matter-out-of-place reasoning, we must conclude that intimate body products between lovers are always in place and that the issue of dirt or disgust does not (should not…) arise. The rules of disgust are more social than physical.

I mentioned the attitude of parents towards their children and their high tolerance of their children's faeces and other body products. The attitude of children towards their parents is more complicated. Codes of respect and shame may be particularly strong between parents and (grown-up) children. Rules of avoidance and certain taboos keep the delicate relationship intact, as the founding fathers of structural functionalism argued more than half a century ago. Issues such as nakedness and

defecation may be particularly embarrassing and painful between parents and children, not because there is no intimacy between them, but because the intimacy is of a special type and excludes any references to sexual and bodily matters.

Similar observations, but stronger, can be made about the relationship between parents and children-in-law. The building of private lavatories in the compounds of houses causes painful and embarrassing situations for that reason. Susan Whyte (personal communication) told me how difficult it is/was for a woman in Eastern Uganda to use the same lavatory as her father-in-law. Before, she could wander off, pretending that she was just going somewhere, and defecate privately in the bush.[15] Now she had to go straight to the lavatory, for everyone to see, and – most horribly – where her father-in-law had relieved himself not so long ago. Onyango-Ouma (1996:49) made the same observation for in-laws in Luo society, Kenya.

Discomfort and embarrassment arise also between parents and children in my own society, the Netherlands, with regard to this issue. When parents grow older and become dependent they may need help from their children and other relatives, mainly daughters and daughters-in-law, but they often indicate that they would prefer to receive bodily care from a professional outsider rather than from their own children. Such feelings of embarrassment may be mutual.

Gender boundaries are particularly strong outside marriage and lover relationships. Most ethnographic notes that I collected on lavatorial behaviour stipulated strict separation between men and women. Transgressing that boundary during defecation was in most cases a serious breach of social norms with grave consequences (Malinowski 1929; Moore 1978; Ndonko 1993). Age boundaries may fall in the same category. Older people in Ghana felt uneasy about the presence of young children in the public toilet they were using (van der Geest 2002).

The same applies to class differences or more generally differences in social status. Faeces are indeed a social issue. In the same way that 'ladies' and 'gents' are separated, teachers and students, doctors and patients, and higher and lower status personnel use different places to defecate. Dirt lends itself to a distinction between social classes. Miller (1997:235-54) devotes his last chapter to Orwell's sensory uneasiness with the ideals of communism, as expressed in his *The Road to Wigan Pier*:

> [The] real secret of class distinctions in the West ... is summed up in four frightful words, which people nowadays are chary of uttering, but which were bandied about quite freely in my childhood. These words were: *The lower classes smell* (cited in Miller 1997:240).

Physical dirt becomes social dirt, physical contamination social contamination, and hygiene a social necessity.

Logically, defecatory matters between friends are usually relaxed. Several authors write that friends may accompany each other to a place for defecation, also in societies with strict privacy rules. A Ghanaian proverb states: 'People go to the toilet with their age mates.'[16] In Dutch there is a similar saying, which, however, only refers to urinating: '*Hollandse jongens pissen nooit alleen*' ('Dutch boys never piss alone'). Lea (2001:92-93) recounts a beautiful example that illustrates the different feelings about excretion between friends and outsiders. One day she entered the women's lavatory at her workplace. A close friend of hers just came out of the lavatory and told her to wait a few minutes, indicating she had defecated and the smell was still there. Lea laughed and went in anyway to pee. The smell was not pleasant but did not bother her much because it was her friend's. As she was washing her hands, another colleague entered and she suddenly felt uneasy that the other might think it was her smell. However, their relationship was not good enough to make any comment. Suddenly, she found the friend's smell disgusting because the other person would associate it with her: 'I felt that the smell of someone else's shit had been attached to me and had damaged my identity.' The example is recognizable for everybody using common lavatories at work. It illustrates how shifts in social situations will change meanings and feelings concerning faeces, moving them in and out of place or somewhere in between.

Unknown Others

Being confronted with faecal matters of people one knows but with whom one is not close is more repulsive than when they are complete strangers. Complete strangers have no identity. Entering one another's intimate space is a coincidence, perhaps an accident, which does not leave any traces on our relationship. We do not know each other and we will probably never meet

again. The anonymous character of the meeting is reassuring. However, when I am confronted with intimate body products of a person I know and with whom I do not want any intimacy, the encounter is far more uncomfortable and disgusting. I will be more upset because that moment of undesired intimacy will linger on. That person may develop certain unpleasant ideas about me and even talk about it to others who also know me. I feel that my identity has been damaged (Goffman's definition of stigma) and my intimate space has been invaded.

There is also anonymity if we do not see the person whose defecatory traces we smell, see or hear. We feel disgust but the emotion is less threatening because the actor remains out of sight. It is easier to take the matter off our mind because there is no face attached to the faeces. The intrusion is superficial.

Anonymity does indeed make it easier to live with the intimacies of others. We practice mental hygiene to keep order in our lives and to prevent ourselves from being overwhelmed by fear, embarrassment and disgust. We do not think of the person who prepared the food that we eat in a restaurant; we do not think of where the fly has been before it touches our food nor where the hand has been that shakes ours; we do not think about the person who used the lavatory before us. 'Thinking away' is a common technique we use when we are unwillingly too closely confronted with the presence of others, as frequently happens in crowded trams and buses. We close off our social being and treat the body that is pressed against us as an object. It is the only choice we have as our normal cultural proxemics have been rendered useless (Hall 1959; Verrips and Verrips 1990).

Animals

Let me now, for a moment, move to the faeces of animals. Rozin and Fallon (1987:28-29, 38) propose that almost all disgust derives from animals and their products. How wrong they are. It is *other people* and their intimate body products, which cause the strongest emotions of disgust (and the opposite of disgust). Over the past ten years I have asked a large number of people how they would react if one day they were to find a turd at their doorstep, and whether it would make a difference if the turd were from an animal or from a human being. Everybody agreed that they would be far more disgusted if it

were from a person. It is in a sense normal that dogs and some other animals defecate in the street; you cannot blame them. A human being, however: that would be really dirty. I then asked if it would be different if that person were somebody they knew, for example their neighbour, or an unknown passer-by. Once again there was near-unanimity, confirming what we discussed earlier: faeces from their neighbour would be more disgusting.

Animals are somewhat like children. They have no clear identity and they have no bad intentions. If they deposit their excreta in my private territory, it is hardly an intrusion into my life. Animals do not intrude. However, when I suspect the owner of the dog to be behind the dog's behaviour my discomfort and disgust will grow. The owner is intruding through his dog. The neighbour's dog's shit found at my door is metonymically my neighbour's shit.

Many of those with whom I discussed the varying degrees of disgust caused by faeces of humans and animals volunteered further distinctions between animals. One was a physical distinction: the faeces of cows and horses are less offensive than those of cats and dogs because the former are herbivores and the latter omnivores. The smell and sight of faeces of cows and horses is not really offensive and they are popular as manure. Much more could be said about this, but to be brief: I suspect that there is more than physics in our reaction to the excreta of various animals. Animals play roles in human relationships and it would be strange if those social roles did not affect our appreciation of animal excreta.[17]

It is obvious, for example, that the excreta of one's own dog (which, in a city like Amsterdam, one has to remove from the street several times a day) are felt to be less dirty than those of someone else's dog. The elegance of horses and the innocence and anonymity of cows with their beautiful eyes[18] may also play a role. Moreover, cows do not usually defecate in the street. We find their cowpats on the land where they are in place. They are part of the landscape, almost ornaments. However, if they defecate in the street their cowpats do indeed turn into dirt.

SOCIAL LOGIC

Taking the example of ultimate dirt, faeces, I have tried to add a social dimension to Douglas's concept of 'matter out of place.' The logic of rela-

tionships enlightens us on the experience of disgust towards dirty substances like human and animal excrement. However, experiences of disgust also reveal the 'substance' of social relationships such as closeness and distance, inclusion and exclusion, affection and dislike, trust and fear. In his novel *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* José Saramago let one of his characters pose the rhetorical question: 'If we can live so comfortably with our own uncleanliness, why do we reject so fanatically the uncleanliness of others?' (Saramago 1996:55; my translation from the Dutch version, SvdG). This essay has tried to answer that question, in almost tautological terms: social logic reigns over our senses.

Implicitly I have also commented on Verrips's idea of the 'Wild in the West.' The untamed monsters of dirt, perversion and violence that we meet in the heart of civilization are less harmful than they appear. In the same way that shit is rendered innocuous by social strategies, the wildness of the West is kept at bay by simple manoeuvring. The wildness is a temporary escape from the boredom of an over-organized civilization rather than a true alternative for life. Horrors, cruelty and filth have always fascinated people in safe, peaceful circumstances but living dangerously is mostly done in vicarious ways. The respectable twentieth-century monogamous housewife reading *Madame de Bovary* sought compensation in a dreary life by letting Emma live passionately and immorally on her behalf.

Finally – and most interestingly – the pleasures and horrors of our senses are orchestrated by our social network. The quality of relationships translates itself in intense sensations of clean and dirty, pleasurable and disgusting. Douglas's view that nothing is dirty by itself has brought us to the insight that the experience of dirt as a metonymic representation of the other betrays the character of our relationship with that other person.

NOTES

1 Verrips (1993) has coined these disorderly phenomena appearing in the heart of the Western civilization 'Wild West.' For many years this Wild West anthropologist has been supplying me with poems, pictorial illustrations, quotes from novels and philosophical and anthropological publications, paper clippings and news items related to defecation. He always signed his memos and emails with 'Vieze man II' ('Dirty man II'), implying that I was

number one. This essay on the social life of faeces is my gift back to him. Much of what he gave me has been digested as it were and reworked into this text. His constant stream of colourful data on human (and other) defecation was not a marginal, somewhat aberrational interest on his part but touched the heart of his anthropological work, as I will argue in this tribute to him.

2 Sulzer, an eighteenth-century German art historian, wrote: 'Some of our judges of art have made it a basic maxim of the fine arts that nothing disgusting should be represented in an artwork. However, a closer consideration of the matter shows this prohibition to be not only ungrounded, but also trespassed by the greatest masters of art' (cited in Menninghaus 2003:46).

3 Faeces lend themselves to more theoretical experiments, for example: investigating the work of our senses. Verrips's (2002, 2007) ideas about *aisthesis* and the master role of touch in that all-body experience could be beautifully demonstrated by taking shit as an aisthetic object. Readers will run away in disgust when they realize that their seeing is touching (and tasting). An aisthetic perspective on human faeces, however, deserves its own article and must therefore wait for another occasion, one that will definitely come.

4 In a personal message (2/12/2003) Mary Douglas 'confessed' to me that she took the idea of 'matter out of place' from a book of quotations. She probably referred to the following quotation from John Chipman Gray's collection: 'Dirt is only matter out of place; and what is a blot on the escutcheon of the Common Law may be a jewel in the crown of the Social Republic' (source unknown).

5 A popular children's programme on Dutch television in the 1970s and 1980s 'Ome Willem' always ended with a song containing the line '*Lus je ook een broodje poep?*' (Would you like a poo sandwich?) It was the moment at which the children always loudly expressed their disgust.

6 Robert Musil (2002:325) in his *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* makes a remark about a young nurse who feels comfortable with human faeces in a porcelain bowl in the hospital, but is horrified when she sees the same substance in the street.

7 The example is taken from Miller (1997:52, 269). This view of the body has been popular among certain moralists from ancient times to today. Miller quotes a quote that Alexander the Great asked the philosopher Dionysius three questions: What was I, what am I, and what will I be? The answer: 'Vile scum, a sack of shit, food for worms' (ibid.:269).

8 A Filipina colleague wrote to me about a European visitor who was shocked when she called the mayor of a certain town and was told that the mayor could not answer the phone because he was in the toilet.

9 *Ebin bɔn na wuse ho a, na ɛbɔn wura wo.*

10 Four examples of systematic (not anecdotal) ethnographic research on defecation come to my mind: Epelboin (1982) based on his fieldwork in Senegal; Ndonko (1993) about two rural communities in Cameroon; Jenkins (1999) on lavatories in Benin and Lea (2001) who interviewed people in the United Kingdom about their defecation practices.

11 However, significant cultural variations may exist, for example depending on the type of lavatory being used in a certain society. It is likely that the traditional Dutch water closet with a plateau that provides a clear sight of one's faeces has led to a much stronger attachment to one's own excrement than a pit latrine in Ghana, which does not allow this.

12 A Ghanaian proverb also draws attention to this: 'Shit is repulsive to you, yet you put your hand in it' (*Ebin yɛ wo tane, nanso wo nsa damu*).

13 The fact that 'emancipated' fathers protest against this observation confirms the social significance of faeces. It should further be observed that disposable diapers diminish the direct contact with a child's faeces and will probably lead to more 'faecal' distance between parents and children. A somewhat related development diminishing parent-child intimacy is the near disappearance of co-sleeping of parents and children in 'Western' society, a development that some of my Ghanaian friends find hard to understand.

14 I am aware that this seems to contradict the views of proponents of an anthropology of children who emphasize that children are not incomplete adults, but complete children with their own identity and culture. My point is that adults *see* children as not fully responsible – innocent – beings.

15 See Epelboin (1982:520): 'On ne déclare donc pas ouvertement que l'on va deféquer, si ce n'est en plaisantant avec de camarades…'

16 *Duaso wɔkɔ no tipɛn so.*

17 Conversely, several animals are fond of human excrements. There are countless stories about dogs and pigs that serve as sanitary agents in various societies. During my fieldwork in Southern Cameroon I had to protect my little daughter against the eager and impatient pigs while she was defecating in the bush. Among the Turkana people in Kenya mothers let dogs lick the buttocks of their babies after defecation (personal communication, Francis Iris Mario).

18 I find the poet Homer on my side who describes the beautiful goddess Hera as 'cow-eyed.'

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Ten geleide: Poep, cultuur en welbevinden

Sjaak van der Geest & Els van Dongen

Dat poep er wel degelijk toe doet, maakt de groeiende belangstelling voor het onderwerp vanuit het oogpunt van de antropologie, sociologie, geschiedenis en gezondheidswetenschappen duidelijk. Ndonko's proefschrift (1993) is een uitstekend voorbeeld van de ideeën en praktijken rond poep, in dit geval in Cameroun. Lea's MSc thesis (1993) evenzeer. Beide zijn antropologische studies naar de 'cultuur van het poepen'. Ook binnen de gezondheidswetenschappen en de zorg groeit de belangstelling voor het fecaal domein. In het proefschrift van Ligthart (1988) vindt men historisch, psychologisch en medisch materiaal over endocresis, een moeilijk vertaalbaar begrip, dat misschien 'broekpoepen' het dichtst benadert. Van der Bruggen (1991) beschrijft hoe poep voor patiënten een 'beklemmende zaak' wordt. Poep 'matters' in een cultuur; er wordt mee 'gewerkt'. Of tegen gewerkt.

In dit themanummer over de sociale en culturele betekenissen van menselijke ontlasting dwalen drie belangrijke auteurs rond die opduiken in de diverse bijdragen. Het zijn Mary Douglas, Norbert Elias en Ian Miller.

Douglas is zonder twijfel de meest geciteerde auteur in dit nummer. Haar visie op 'vuil', zoals ze die in 1966 in haar *Purity and Danger* uiteenzette, is voor velen een bron van inspiratie geweest bij hun onderzoek naar de betekenis van vuil in de menselijke cultuur. Sommigen hebben zich door die visie, "dirt is matter out of place", laten leiden, anderen hebben zich er tegen afgezet. Het begrip is van vele kanten bediscussieerd en bekritiseerd. Maar het heeft bewezen nog steeds een grote analytische kracht te bezitten voor een aantal auteurs in dit nummer.

'Absoluut vuil' bestaat niet, betoogde Douglas in haar boek. Vuil bestaat 'in the eye of the beholder'. Vuil is wanorde ("Dirt offends against order"), maar *wat* orde en wanorde is, verschilt per cultuur, per sociale situatie, zelfs van persoon tot persoon.

Douglas' relativering van vuil wordt op de proef gesteld als we over menselijke fecaliën komen te spreken. Is poep niet in alle omstandigheden, en in de ogen van iedereen, vuil? Bestaat er een cultuur, een situatie, waarin men geen afkeer heeft van poep? "Is poep niet gewoon vies van zichzelf", schreef een van ons eerder (Van der Geest 19991: 140), "waar het zich ook bevindt: in een luier, in een wc-pot, in het riool, of op een boterham?"

Er is toen op gewezen dat deze voorbeelden reeds suggereren dat er sprake is van gradaties van vies-zijn. Poep in het riool is in orde, daar hoort poep thuis. In de wc-pot is poep ook geen probleem, zolang wij het tenminste hebben over onze eigen ontlas-

ting. Dezelfde persoon die ontspannen zijn eigen uitwerpselen bekijkt alvorens ze weg te spoelen, wordt vervuld van walging als hij bij het betreden van een toilet de drol van een vorige bezoeker ziet liggen. "Het gemeenste wat het netvlies kan raken", schreef Hofland. Maar voor een buitenlandse gast die niet gewend is aan de klassieke Nederlandse wc-pot met zijn plateautje, is de aanblik van zijn eigen ontlasting waarschijnlijk als een onprettige ervaring.

Wat de poep in luiers betreft, iedereen die ooit luiers verschoond heeft, weet dat de poep van zijn eigen kind minder vies lijkt dan de poep van een ander kind en dat de poep in de luier van een volwassene weer viezer 'aanvoelt' dan van een kind. Maar dat hoeft ook weer niet altijd zo te zijn. Mensen hebben 'technieken' om poep minder vies te maken. Een van ons schreef eerder dat infantilisering, het tot kind maken van een oudere, ook het meer positieve effect kan hebben dat de handen van verpleegkundigen minder vuil lijken na het schoonmaken, omdat als we onze eigen kinderen schoonmaken het niet lijkt of een ander onze handen heeft gebruikt, zoals Wolkers dat in *De Kus* zegt (Van Dongen 1997).

Hoe kan Douglas' concept van 'matter out of place' deze verschillende ervaringen verklaren? Waarom is de poep die ik opruim van mijn kind minder 'out of place' dan de poep van een onbekende oude man in een verpleeghuis? En waarom heeft de verzorgster in het verpleeghuis er weer minder moeite mee dan de toevallige bezoeker die ermee geconfronteerd wordt?

Allen hebben een andere soort van orde omdat zij in een andere relatie staan tot de persoon van wie het vuil afkomstig is. Een van de belangrijkste orde-brengende principes is de afbakening van intimiteit. Mensen wensen niet geconfronteerd te worden met de intimiteit van anderen, of het nu om gevoelens, informatie of fysieke ervaringen gaat. Afgrenzingen van het persoonlijke tussen mensen zijn daarom 'in orde' en grensoverschrijdingen op dit terrein worden als uiterst onplezierig en bedreigend ervaren. Anderen ongevraagd intieme zaken opdringen is exhibitionistisch en wekt ergernis, afkeer en angst op.

Voor wie intiem zijn met elkaar bevestigt het uitwisselen van persoonlijke geheimen die relatie en hetzelfde geldt voor het aanraken van elkaars lichaam, en van de afscheidingen van dat lichaam. In die relatie kan 'poep' – of een equivalent – zelfs een teder woord worden.

Maar waar niet een dergelijke relatie bestaat, is de ongevraagde confrontatie met iemands intimiteit een verschrikking en wekt afkeer. Daarom is verkrachting een van de meest traumatische ervaringen die iemand kan overkomen.

Miller (1997) wijst er terecht op dat lichaamsafscheidingen universeel als het meest intense, meest weerzinwekkende vuil wordt beschouwd. Douglas' visie op vuil helpt dat te verklaren: niet omdat lichaamsafscheidingen van nature 'vuil' zijn maar omdat zij 'intieme producten' zijn, substanties die afkomstig zijn van de verborgen holten en lichaamsopeningen van vreemde lichamen. Op het moment dat deze substanties uit de begrenzing van de intimiteit van de ander breken, worden zij vuil. Het speeksel dat X in zijn mond heeft (het schoonste van het schoonste anders zou hij het niet in zijn mond willen hebben), wordt weerzinwekkend vuil als het terecht komt op het lichaam van Y.

‘Ongewenste intimiteit’ is het ultieme vuil terwijl gewenste intimiteit het hoogste geluk en genot oplevert. Materieel gezien is er geen verschil, sociaal gezien zijn zij elkaars tegengestelde.

De verpleegkundige of verzorger die het vuil van een patiënt opruimt, bevindt zich tussen deze twee uitersten. Hij/zij heeft voor dit werk gekozen en ontwikkelt een professionele houding om met dit soort vuil om te gaan. De verzorging van mensen is tot zijn/haar orde gaan behoren. In dat opzicht kan men de confrontatie met het intieme van de ander niet meer ongewenst noemen, althans niet in de strikte betekenis van het woord.

Maar ook in de intimiteit zijn weer verschillende ervaringen van vuil. Op het moment dat ‘vuil’ van iemand met wie men intiem is weerzinwekkend wordt, is er wellicht iets aan de hand met de relatie. Vuil is dus ten nauwste verbonden met passies, met intense emoties.

Vanuit Douglas’ gezichtspunt kan men het beschavingsproces dat Elias beschrijft zien als een voortschrijdende tendens om anderen niet lastig te vallen met zijn intieme gevoelens, activiteiten, lichaamsdelen en lichaamsafscheidingen. In een maatschappij waarin de menselijke individualiteit steeds meer nadruk krijgt, dienen de regels voor het respecteren van dat individuele territorium steeds weer aangescherpt te worden. Het perspectief op het lichaam zoals dat door Scheper-Hughes en Lock (1987) is ontwikkeld kan dan de wijzen laten zien waarop het lichaam als individueel, sociaal en politiek lichaam wordt gecontroleerd.

Niet alle poep is vuil. Uit studies van andere samenlevingen dan die waarin individualiteit zo benadrukt wordt, is poep opgenomen in de kosmologie van regeneratie en beweging die worden gedragen door mensen- en dierenlichamen. Poep, mest en andere excrementen verbinden dan het lichaam met de wereld. Het uitgangspunt van de fenomenologie en de praxeologie is dat het lichaam steeds tot stand wordt gebracht door dat lichaam en de manier waarop het in de wereld is.

Een ander belangrijk thema is dat van ‘met vuil gooien’. Poep is kennelijk bij uitstek geschikt om een ander te besmeuren in sociaal opzicht, om een rangorde tot stand te brengen en de goeden van de kwaden te scheiden. Krijgt in de ene samenleving de kunstenaar die met poep werkt een prijs, in het andere land wordt zo’n kunstenaar verguisd en het middelpunt van een politiek conflict. Mensen die met poep ‘werken’ hebben doorgaans een lagere status dan anderen.

Poep heeft een enorme kracht; men kan met de metafoor van poep politiek bedrijven, men kan er grappen mee maken, poep is nauw verbonden met controle, met de levensstroom in een cultuur, met passies en emoties, met welzijn en gezondheid, met intimiteit en afstand... Poep is, kan men stellen, uiterst ambigu. Het is de ambiguïteit, de anomalie, de ambivalentie die in dit themanummer in de verschillende bijdragen tot uitdrukking wordt gebracht.

In de bijdragen aan dit nummer komen diverse thema’s rond poep, cultuur en welbevinden aan bod die direct gerelateerd zijn aan de theorieën van Douglas, Elias, Miller, Scheper-Hughes en Lock, en anderen.

Rachel Lea gaat uit van de premisse dat, hoewel excretie in bepaalde omstandigheden, zoals ziekte en ouderdom, voor speciale problemen zorgt, excretie een zaak van controle voor iedereen is. Zij laat zien dat dit op individueel en op sociaal niveau het geval is.

Hoezeer poep verbonden is met welzijn en ziekte, ook in het verleden, blijkt uit de bijdrage van Myriam Daru. Zij beschrijft hoe in de negentiende eeuw 'de kwestie der fecaliën' een voortdurende bron van zorg was voor gezondheidshervormers. De auteur laat op een treffende manier zien welke rol water speelde in Nederland en Engeland in het 'onzichtbaar' en reukloos maken van poep. Zij laat ook zien dat een eenvoudige causale relatie van ziektes als cholera en verontreiniging door faeces een beperkte waarde heeft.

Poep kan taboe zijn, maar het onderwerp duikt toch steeds weer op in een samenleving. Mensen vinden altijd manieren om erover te praten, grappen over te maken, verhalen over te vertellen, en dergelijke. Dan blijkt weer hoe krachtig 'poep' is. "Power is located in dirt" schrijft Leach (1976: 71). Deze gedachte komt op als men de vrolijke bijdrage van Michael Elias leest. Hij laat zien hoe aantrekkelijk poep is in bepaalde soorten van conversatie. Poep (en aanverwanten) is een 'krachtterm', een woord dat de grap, het verhaal, de verwensing, het raadsel iets extra's geeft. Door hun poep zijn alle mensen gelijk net als in de dood.

Men kan iemand een poepje laten ruiken, maar dat gaat niet zomaar. Fenneke Reysoo beschrijft hoe het laten van een wind omgeven is door sociale regels en morele codes. Een wind laten lucht soms enorm op, maar dat kan ook leiden naar de dood. Soms echter wordt er om gelachen, maar altijd wordt de windenlater op zijn plaats gezet.

Poep heeft zijn eigen betekenis in sociale relaties. Als de laatste niet in orde zijn, wordt poep iets vies. Zo is ook de verbinding met de moraliteit gelegd. In haar bijdrage laat Els van Dongen zien hoe relaties van verpleegkundigen en ouderen in een psychiatrisch ziekenhuis verbonden zijn met poep. Haar stuk gaat in op de emoties die een rol spelen in die relaties. Omgaan met poep kan zelfs de status van mensen mede bepalen.

Een van de effectiefste manieren om te ontsnappen aan 'ongewenste intimiteiten' van anderen als daar in fysieke zin niet meer aan te ontkomen is, is deze te negeren. Frantzen en Post schrijven dat beleidsmakers in Kumasi (Ghana) hun ogen sluiten voor de deplorabele toestand van de openbare toiletten. Voor hen is dat niet zo moeilijk aangezien zij zelf niet van deze gelegenheden gebruik hoeven te maken; zij hebben thuis aantrekkelijker faciliteiten. Voor degenen die echter wel aangewezen zijn op het openbare toilet is er de mogelijkheid zich mentaal af te keren van de situatie en de medegebruikers.

Soms is het niet mogelijk dat anderen de ogen sluiten van iemands ontlasting. In zijn bijdrage over ouderen in Ghana laat Sjaak van der Geest zien hoe problemen met toiletgang van ouderen leiden tot gevoelens als ongemakkelijkheid, schaamte en het idee minder gerespecteerd te worden. Tegelijkertijd benadrukken de mensen dat afhankelijkheid niets is om zich over te schamen als men oud is. Hier roept poep dubbele gevoelens op: afkeer en tederheid.

In hun onderzoek naar gebruik van menselijke mest in Mali beschrijven Timmer, Visker en Budelman hoe men de ogen kan sluiten voor andermans ontlasting. Het idee

om menselijke uitwerpselen, zeker als dat verse zijn, te gebruiken in de verbouwing van voedsel is misschien niet bespreekbaar bij degenen die dat voedsel consumeren, maar de facto gebeurt dit wel op grote schaal. De boeren hebben geen moeite met menselijke mest (het levert geld op), de consumenten weten niet wat er met hun voedsel gebeurt en de overheid knijpt een oogje dicht. Geen vuiltje aan de lucht.

Het is niet altijd zo dat poep vuil of smerig is. Excrementen kunnen ook deel uitmaken van de levensstroom in een samenleving, zeker als het dierlijke poep is. In zijn bijdrage laat Steven van Wolputte zien hoe poep een herstellende en zuiverende kracht heeft in de OvaHimaba-samenleving in Noord West Namibië.

Valerie Curtis, Nicole Voncken en Shyamoli Singh vragen zich af hoe het komt dat excrementen zo'n grote kracht hebben. Zij ontdekten een universele walging voor faeces en andere zaken. Zij presenteren een evolutionistische visie, waarin walging voor bijvoorbeeld poep als een sterke emotie wordt opgevat die de basis is voor hygiënisch gedrag en zelfs gebruikt kan worden voor het bevorderen van zulk gedrag.

Sociale regels en symbolische betekenissen van excrementen bepalen menselijke activiteiten als ontlasten. Dat is duidelijk geworden uit de eerder genoemde studie van Ndonko. Viviane Baeke vraagt zich echter af of Ndonko's conclusie niet een gereduceerde uitleg is van het basale menselijk gedrag. In haar bijdrage laat ze met behulp van Ndonko's studie, haar eigen bevindingen van de Wuli-samenleving en notities van andere antropologen zien dat een dieper onderzoek naar regels die de plaats bepalen waar gepoept mag worden rijkere symbolische interpretaties kan geven.

Poep is een publiek symbool en als zodanig gevaarlijk. In zijn bijdrage over het Kolig-debat dat in Oostenrijk via de kranten en tot op hoog politiek niveau werd gevoerd, laat Bernhard Hadolt zien hoe men poep gebruikt om morele van amorele mensen te onderscheiden en zodoende discriminatie praktijken te legitimeren. In deze 'retoriek van de poep' raken voor- en tegenstanders van de kunstenaar Cornelius Kolig nog verder van elkaar af. Poep is zo krachtig dat het zelfs zonder materiële aanwezigheid mensen in diskrediet kan brengen en besmetten.

Het laatste artikel in dit nummer, van de hand van Patrick Meurs en vier collega's, handelt over medische antropologie en kinderen en kijkt vooruit naar het komende symposium in december (zie ook onder berichten).

Naast de gebruikelijke berichten, recensies en signalementen is in dit themanummer een cumulatieve index opgenomen van alle boeken die de afgelopen tien jaar in *Medische Antropologie* besproken of gesignaleerd zijn.

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Chapter 10

The Toilet: Dignity, Privacy and Care of Elderly People in Kwahu, Ghana

Sjaak van der Geest

In the years 1994, 1995 and 1996 I carried out anthropological fieldwork among elderly people in a rural town of Ghana, Kwahu-Tafo.[1] The aim of the research was to understand the meaning of old age in a rapidly changing society. I was particularly interested in the type of care elderly people enjoyed when they became dependent. One afternoon, my research colleague Samuel Sarkodie and I paid a visit to an elderly lady, Maame Safowa.

Maame Safowa, about 65, is blind. Her blindness started three years ago. She has had thirteen children, four of whom have died. All the children are staying outside Kwahu-Tafo except one daughter. Her husband is a farmer at the Afram Plains, about fifty kilometres away, and does not stay with her either. She lives in the same house with her husband's sister who takes care of her most of the time. Her sister-in-law must be about 70. She still goes to farm and looks very energetic. When we arrived at her house the blind lady was just taking her bath. The husband's sister told us that we should come back after some time. When we returned, Maame Safowa was waiting for us. We had asked her about her condition while the sister-in-law was taking her meal with some grandchildren in the kitchen and listened to our conversation. At times she interrupted to give an answer or to add her comments.

We (W) asked Maame Safowa (S) what her main difficulties in life were, as she had to cope with both old age and blindness. The following conversation ensued:

S: I find it difficult getting food, putting on my dress and visiting the toilet, but if the children are around, I don't have too much difficulty... If I don't receive money, it also becomes difficult to find food to eat. I don't even know when my clothes are dirty.

W: What can you do yourself?

S: I can do my own washing, I bath myself when they give me water. I can also grind pepper.

W: Does your child who lives in Kwahu-Tafo help you?

S: In the past she was helping me but now she only helps me when she likes to do so. This started when she quarrelled with me over some money somebody gave her for me. She used some of it for herself without my consent.

When the sister-in-law joined us, we asked her if she was the one who looked after the blind lady. She answered yes. We then asked her who gave her money to do so. She answered: 'I don't really know who exactly is responsible for her. When someone gives her money, or when I myself get some money or when she receives something from her children, I use it to take care of her... The husband is in his village. When he comes, he gives me money for her... She is not my relative, it is my brother who is married to her and she herself has her relatives.'

We turned again to the blind lady and asked her if her grandchildren helped her. They were very young [meaning: no they do not], she replied. Whenever her sister-in-law went to her farm, she was alone in the house with a young woman, Georgina. 'She responds to my calls.'

After our conversation we went to see that young woman (G) who lives in the same compound and sells some daily necessities from a table in front of the house. She is married to a grandson of the sister-in-law. We thought she might have additional information about the way the blind lady was treated in the house.

W: Do you also take care of Maame Safowa?

G: Yes. I do. Anytime I cook food, I give her some to eat, I take her to the toilet and if she wants something, I pick it for her. If there is nobody in the house, I take care of her. I am always in the house.

W: Can you tell us the kind of relationship that exists between Safowa and her husband's sister, who is looking after her? Is the relationship strained or is it cordial?

G: The relationship is somehow cordial but the husband's sister always complains that Safowa has many children and grandchildren and none of them is prepared to come and stay with her and look after her. So sometimes she gets annoyed when Safowa wants to send the husband's sister's grandchildren for an errand. But because Safowa is blind, she can't see when the husband's sister gets irritated and squeezes her face. Safowa has so many children, eleven, but they don't care what their mother will eat. They don't bath her, nor do they wash her clothes or cut her finger nails. All these responsibilities have been pushed on the husband's sister and those in the compound. All her children do, is to occasionally bring her money, without asking who will take care of her.

W: Do the children bring her money?

G: As for money, they give her some. Most of the children are working, some in Akosombo, others in Kumasi. But for them to come and stay and care for her is what lacks.

W: Do you know how often they bring her money?

G: As for the husband, he is not able to send enough money, sometimes, 1,400 cedis (then about 1.4 dollar) per three months. But the children do manage to send her enough money, some send as much as 5000 cedis (about 5 dollar). One of the children, who sometimes gives his mother money, is a head teacher in a nearby village.

W: Whom do they give the money to, the mother or the sister-in-law?

G: They give the money to their mother and the children sometimes give some to their aunt.

W: Does Safowa give the money to her sister-in-law to cater for her?

G: Safowa only gives money to her when the sister-in-law complains about not having money to cook or buy fish for their meals. When someone gives money to Safowa and the sister-in-law happens to see it, Safowa will also give some to her.
W: What does she use the rest of the money for?
G: The sister-in-law only cooks in the evening for Safowa, so Safowa uses the rest of the money for breakfast and lunch, by sending someone to buy food from the market for her.

A few days later we paid a second visit to Maame Safowa. We had chosen a time that the sister-in-law was not around so that she would not feel inhibited by her presence:

W: Your sister-in-law was around when we first interviewed you. We would now like to know from you whether the presence of your in-law permitted you to say what you actually wanted to tell us.
S: It is true, if she is around, there are certain things I cannot say. She knows that my children are not in Kwahu-Tafo to take care of me because of their work for the government. This has made me dependent on her, which should not have happened.

We asked her what would happen if the sister-in-law died. She replied that she did not care and then added a proverb: 'Even a madman has relatives who care for him.'

The conversations with and about Maame Safowa show the complexity of care arrangements for elderly people in an arbitrary community in rural Ghana. Children are expected to take care of their old parents but in actual life things often turn out differently. In the case of Maame Safowa, the children are largely absent and it is the people who happen to stay in the same house with her, who take the main responsibility, be it with mixed feelings. Such situations were common, as I found out during my research.

Fieldwork

The research involved interviews – conversations may be a more appropriate term – with (initially) 29 elderly people. All conversations were taped and transcribed. Some people were interviewed only once, others twice or more often. One old man was interviewed about ten times and visited daily. Apart from the interviews, I often went to greet the old people informally and had brief conversations with them. These more casual visits enabled me to make observations about the daily life of elderly people and the attitudes of other people in the same house. Most of these observations were recorded in a diary, which I kept during the six and a half months of my fieldwork.

In addition, I discussed old age with other people including opinion leaders such as teachers and church members as well as with other key informants. Focus group discussions were held with young people and groups of middle-aged men and women. In three schools in the area, students filled in a questionnaire

expressing their views on old people or completed sentences on the same issue. Some students wrote essays about the elderly or made drawings of them.

The research was entirely qualitative. I tried to arrive at a deeper understanding of what it meant to be old and dependent. That understanding was gradually acquired by the method of participant observation. I sat and conversed with elderly people and their relatives and friends. With some of them I went to farm, to church or to funerals. What resulted was an extremely diverse picture. As it turned out, some of the elderly enjoyed their old age. They lived comfortably, together with children and grandchildren, in their own house. They were well fed and had company throughout the day. Others were miserable, lonely, poor and hungry. Most of the elderly people I met, found themselves somewhere between these two extremes.

Reading through my field notes and the interview transcriptions, I tried to discover some common underlying themes in these diverse experiences of old age. In this essay I focus on care, in particular the help old people receive to visit the toilet – perhaps an unusual topic for an anthropological discussion but a fundamental element of daily well being.

The Town and its People

Kwahu-Tafo with its approximately 5000 inhabitants lies 150 km from the capital Accra. Most of the inhabitants are – at least partly – engaged in farming and trading. What they grow is mainly for their own consumption or sold on the local market. People complain that the soil has become infertile and produces only cassava and corn. Most cocoa trees in the area died during the drought of 1983.

Kwahu-Tafo has electricity (though only a minority can afford to wire their houses) and piped water (though people mostly rely on the old wells) and hosts a large number of schools and churches. There is also a clinic run by Catholic missionary sisters.

The toilet facilities in Kwahu-Tafo are rather poor. There are four public toilets, each with twelve squatting holes (six for each sex). Two of them have been closed, one for about three years and one four months ago, both due to maintenance problems. What remains are just 24 public facilities for the entire town. It means that some people have to walk about 10 minutes to reach a public toilet (to and fro twenty minutes). For the elderly, it may be even more.

In addition there are semi-public toilets in two schools, which can be used by both teachers and pupils. The number of private latrines (almost all bucket latrines) is unknown. The sanitary inspector estimates their number at sixty. Finally, there are about ten private pit latrines and ten water closets, one in the chief's house, the others in the Catholic mission and the teachers bungalows of the Technical School. Toilets, it should be noted, are only needed for defecation. For urinating, most people use their bathroom; there is no house without a bathroom.

It is impossible to say how many people are in fact using the public toilets. Estimates vary from one third to 80 per cent of the population, which in absolute figures would be 1,000 to more than 4,000. The number of people who do not use

toilets at all but are easing themselves in the 'bush' at the edge of town or on the way to their farm, is equally unknown. Some people defecate into a plastic bag and dump the bag somewhere out of sight.

If we take a conservative estimate of 40 per cent of people visiting the public toilet, it means that every day, about 2,000 people use 24 holes, almost 90 per hole per day. Taking into account that both toilets are closed from about 9 pm to 5 am, one must conclude that the holes are occupied every five minutes. On the average both public latrines would receive about 1000 per day. When I discussed this with the caretaker of one of the latrines he estimated a number of only about 200 to 300. He based his calculation on his income per day. This suggests that even less than one third of the population does in fact visit the public toilet. Where the others ease themselves is not at all clear.

Visiting a public toilet is not 'free.' The caretaker of the toilet takes 20 cedis (about one dollar cent) from each visitor. In that way the old coins that have lost nearly all their value are still useful (the same amount is charged for a bucket of water from the public tap). The caretaker of one public toilet I visited was sitting in a small kiosk and had a pile of cut newspapers in front of him. He handed each customer one sheet and received 20 cedis. If they brought their own paper, he said, they would pay only 10 cedis. Each day he had to pay 3,000 cedis to the sanitary inspector. He could keep what he earned above that amount. Funerals and other busy days were favourable for his business.[2]

My choice of Kwahu-Tafo as research site was rather arbitrary. The main reason was that I had carried out research there 21 years before and could build upon my data from that time. I also hoped to renew ties of the past.[3]

The Kwahu, who are the original inhabitants of the town, are a subgroup of the Akan, a people of about seven million who live in the southern part of the country.[4] Their language Kwahu is a dialect of Twi. It should be taken into account that the Akan are matrilineal. Most Akan will consider their marriage bond less important than their membership of the matrilineage, the *abusua*.[5] Marriage is a temporary affair whereas the *abusua* is permanent. The greater weight of the *abusua* can be detected from many phenomena in Akan society. Marital partners are unlikely to stay together in one house if their maternal homes are nearby. In that case, both partners usually prefer to live with their own folks and carry out their marital duties from separate residences. Customary wedding ceremonials have little social significance and in most cases are attended by only a handful of people. Payments and gifts are limited. Divorce is common and easy and can be initiated by the man as well as by the woman. On average, a person will experience one to two divorces in his/her lifetime.

In a sense, the interests of the conjugal family are opposed to those of *abusua*. It is felt that a woman who is totally committed to her husband, does so at the expense of the *abusua*. The *abusua* looks somewhat askance at a 'successful' marriage. 'Interference of relatives' is one of the most common reasons for divorce (cf. Bleek, 1977).

Strictly speaking, the husband is an outsider in his own nuclear family since he belongs to another *abusua* than his wife and children. Unless he is well-to-do, he is likely to remain somewhat at the margin of family affairs such as the upbringing of

the children and the maintenance of the family. These ideas partly account for the uneasy situation in which Maame Safowa found herself, as she, contrary to common practice, was completely 'at the mercy' of her in-laws.

Marriage, someone told me with a bit of cynic exaggeration, is a necessary evil. If people could have children without getting involved with a partner from another lineage, they would probably prefer not to marry. As a matter of fact, many do not and prefer to engage in less formal relationships. Many women 'stop marriage' (*gyae awadeè*) when their reproductive task has been completed. *Mabrè awadeè* (I am tired of marriage) is a common expression. It is not surprising, therefore, that marriage is considered a less secure ground in old age. Women often prefer to return to their lineage of origin when they grow older. For them the *abusua*, where their children and other relatives belong, is a place where they are more assured of good care. Out of 24 elderly people whose marital status I checked, I found that ten had divorced or lived in permanent separation, six were widowed and eight were still married.

Old Age

Officially, old age is a positive concept. The statement *manyin* (I am old) literally means 'I have grown.' It is an active form of the verb, not a passive state of being. It suggests: 'I have come to full maturity, now I am a complete human being, I have reached the full potential of the human person.' *Manyin* is not said, normally, as a complaint or an excuse or a confession, but as a proud claim, telling the other that he finds himself in front of an important person whom he should respect. One title of respect used for elderly people is *Nana* (grandparent), which is also used for the ancestors, but the most popular term which elderly people apply to themselves is *òpanyin* (elder). The *òpanyin* is honourable, civilised, kind, composed, wise. Countless proverbs and local sayings confirm this high appreciation of advanced age. The *òpanyin* represents the beautiful image of old age. He (or she) receives what is most highly regarded in Akan culture: respect. *Òpanyin* is an honorific term. An *òpanyin* can be a man or a woman, though most will think of a man when the word is used. An *òpanyin* is an ancestor 'to be'; people will remember him after his death because of his good deeds and wisdom.

Nana Agyei: 'The *òpanyin* has lived in the house much longer than you. You came to meet him. "*Òpanyin*" is a big word. He is a person who knows what is going on. He must receive respect and obedience.' I asked him what shows that a person is an *òpanyin*. He answered:

> It is mostly the wisdom you give to the young and also how you respect yourself (*wo bu wo ho*). When you respect yourself, the young will also respect you and fulfil your needs. I remember I met a young man recently who willingly gave me some money because he explained he liked me. Many young people do that to me as you did just [illegible]

There are mainly three virtues of the *òpanyin*, which grant him this respect: wisdom, self-restraint and his dedication to the family. Wisdom, knowledge, life experience and the ability to foresee what is going to happen and to give people advice are the qualities of the old man and woman. The fact that one has lived for a long time means that one has seen a lot of things and has begun to see how they are connected. Life experience, in other words, teaches how the events follow one another. The *òpanyin* is, on the basis of that understanding, able to predict the future and advise people on how to act in order to prevent trouble. *Òpanyin* Frempong: 'If you are old, you can always predict, because you have experience.' When I asked him to define an *òpanyin*, he said:

F: An *òpanyin* is someone who through his experience in life, has gained a lot of wisdom and knows what is good and what is not good.
S: What are some of the qualities of an *òpanyin* which may not be present in a young person?
F: It is wisdom. Especially the ability to think carefully about things before doing them. The young don't have those qualities they just get up and do things.

The wisdom of the elder is referred to in a large number of proverbs, one of them being: *Òpanyin nni biribi a, òwò abatwè* (If the elder has nothing, he has elbow). It means that an *òpanyin* may be very poor, he has at least wisdom.

Wisdom, the ability to foresee, implies power. An elderly person can bless (*nyira*) and curse (*nnome*). That is why they say: *Òpanyin ano sen òbòsom* (The mouth of the *òpanyin* is stronger than a god). In a discussion with some young men, one of them said:

> We think that the old have a certain blessing because of their mere age, so when you respect and honour them they will bless you. It will be forever on your life. In much the same way, when they curse you, it will also be forever. We all like blessings, so if you respect and honour them and get closer to them, they develop a love for you and they will reveal to you some of their hidden treasures.

The second virtue refers to the good manners of the *òpanyin*, which all boil down to self-restraint. He controls his emotions, he does not get angry (*òpanyin bo mfu*) and does not shout at people. The ability to check himself shows itself foremost in the way he deals with information that is given to him and in his ascetic attitude. His careful dealing with rumours is expressed in many proverbs. Nothing shows so well that one is still a child as when one cannot hold one's tongue. The *òpanyin* is indeed the opposite of a child.

The *òpanyin*'s self-restraint reveals itself also in his attitude towards food and other material pleasures. Greediness does not befit him. One proverb says: *Òpanyin mene nsono* (The elder eats his own intestines), which means that he can forgo food. If there is not enough food in the house, the *òpanyin* will give his part to the children. He has eaten enough in his life.

The third virtue is his love for the family. His gentleness and wisdom are directed first of all to the *abusua*. It is the *abusua*, which benefits from the *òpanyin*'s life experience and civilised manners. He may have travelled a lot, but at

his old age, when he reaches the stage of *òpanyin*, he will come home and spend his days with the members of the family. He will give them good advice on all kinds of problems and promote peace and unity among them. He will mediate in conflicts. 'There is nothing left for him to do than guarding the people in the house,' according to one elder. That is why they say: *Òpanyin ntu kwan* (the elder does not travel).[6]

Depending on others at that stage of one's life is not a shame or a sign of failure, but rather proof of one's importance and success in life. It is not something one considers as loss of control over one's own life; it demonstrates that one has built up social capital. As Stucki (1995) in her study of elderly people in Asante writes, an *òpanyin* is someone who has accumulated both wealth and followers (the two are not unconnected). Such successful elderly people *enjoy* their 'dependence;' it is care that their followers lavishly pour on them.

As I have argued at several occasions (van der Geest, 1997a, 1998c), that extremely positive imagery of old age is more an ideal cherished by the elderly than an idea accepted and put into practice by the community. Outward respect is generally allotted to the elderly, simply because they are old, but, at the same time, many do not enjoy the pleasure and satisfaction which the title *òpanyin* promises. For many, being old and dependent is a condition fraught with feelings of pain, defeat and disillusion. Words of respect are not always matched by deeds. Being old in itself does not guarantee constant affection and support by the younger generation. Reciprocity is the key to an honourable and comfortable old age. Only those who have been successful in accumulating enough material and social capital, may count on the realisation of the ideal of *òpanyin*. Most of the others face the ambiguity of old age: outward respect and secret neglect.

Harsh economic conditions for the young and large-scale emigration add to the problems of the elderly (Apt, 1996). Their children may find it almost impossible to provide their parents with the constant support they feel they should. How to harmonise the rule of respect for the elderly with the reality of poverty and reciprocity constitutes an awkward dilemma. The solution, as I have written elsewhere, is 'pretence': 'a public language of respect which does not only draw the attention away from embarrassing situations, but also provides some comfort: the painfulness of neglect is reduced by the fact that it is not exposed. Both young and old collaborate in this act of pretence. Managing old age is their common task' (Van der Geest, 1997a, p. 24).

Care

I expected that care activities would represent the easiest part of the research. Old age may be a complex concept giving rise to philosophical and psychological ruminations full of euphemisms and symbolic parlance. Care seemed a rather unambiguous affair, an observable fact. When the research began to take shape, however, it soon became clear that care, both as a concept and as a practice, was highly ambiguous as well.

'Care' has many shades of meaning. Its two basic constituents are emotional and practical. The latter refers to carrying out concrete activities for others who may not be able to do those by themselves. Parents take care of their children by feeding them, providing shelter, educating and training them, and so forth. Healthy people take care of sick ones and young people of old ones. Technically, care has a complementary character, one person completes another one. 'Care' also has an emotional connotation, it expresses concern, dedication, attachment. Care, according to the philosopher Mayerhoff (1971), is to help a person being himself or, in the case of a child, to help it grow and actualise itself. Depending on its context, one aspect may dominate, indeed overrule, the other. In 'health care' the term has assumed an almost entirely technical meaning. In personal relationships ('I care for you'; 'I don't care') the reverse applies. The Kwahu term closest to the English 'care' is *hwè so*, which literally means 'to look upon' or, more freely, 'to look after.' *Hwè so* conjures up both the practical aspects of caring and the accompanying sentiments of respect and affection.

Ghana has no public or private institutions for care of elderly people. Such care has traditionally been the domain of children, partners, and the *abusua*, the lineage. The conditions under which these relatives take care of their elders change rapidly however, due to a changing economy, poverty, and increased mobility, among others (cf. Apt, 1996).

The evasiveness of care as a research topic stems from the fact that people are likely to say very different things about the care they give or receive, depending on the context in which the conversation takes place and the mood of the person involved. Embarrassment over the little care they receive from their children may induce elderly people to conceal the painful truth of their disappointment and to praise their children for their love and good help in front of the researcher. One does not wash one's dirty linen in the street, as the proverb goes in many languages including Twi: *Yènsi yèn ntoma go wò abònten.* But the opposite may also occur. When an old person is in a bitter mood, he may be rather inclined to make his plight known and publicly criticise his relatives for their negligence. The likelihood of such a reaction will further increase if the old person expects help from the one he is talking to (and a foreign anthropologist definitely falls into that category).

The relatives and those who are supposed to provide care are also likely to produce contradictory accounts. They too may prefer to hide their embarrassment about failing to provide proper care for the elderly, or they may opt to openly show their poverty and lack of means and their inability to provide care, hoping for help from the one listening. It may even lead to contradicting claims and complaints within one and the same interview. And finally, frustrations about the limited care by fellow relatives may incite some, rightly or wrongly, to accuse their family members of negligence, as we saw in the case of Maame Safowa.

Concrete activities of care given to elderly people include provision of food, bathing, washing clothes, help to visit the toilet, nursing when they fall sick, and countless chores such as sweeping and running errands. Other activities which are carried out in support of the elderly are: keeping them company and sending them money or consumables for their upkeep. Finally, organising a fitting funeral is the most decisive form of care which the *abusua* is supposed to provide for its elderly

members.[7] This article will focus on the least known of all these care activities: help in using the toilet.

The Toilet

There are several plausible explanations for the fact that so little is known about how elderly people – and people in general – make use of toilet facilities. The most important one is probably that the toilet is literally something which has been removed out of sight because it is dirty. The anthropological treatment of the toilet and – to be more precise – human defecation reflects that cultural taboo. Toilets and defecation practices do not appear on the pages of ethnographic accounts. Mary Douglas's famous dictum that 'dirt is matter out of place' also proves its right in anthropological handicraft. Consciously or not, anthropologists almost universally avoid the topic.

At the same time, however, the topic is crucial in any discussion on care and well being among elderly people. First of all – and obviously – having easy access to a toilet constitutes a sine qua non for well being. One cannot feel at ease, if one cannot comfortably ease oneself. A second factor emphasising its relevance lies in the term 'comfortably.' Comfort for the elderly is closely linked to feelings of being respected. Honour and respect are in jeopardy, when the old person's intimate world is invaded, as may happen in awkward toilet situations.

The toilet presented itself to me as a researcher when I listened to the stories of the elderly about their daily worries. The scarcity of private toilets seemed to me a problem, in particular for elderly inhabitants of the place. Firstly, because they had to go quite a distance to reach the toilet while several of them walked with difficulty having problems holding their bowels. A second reason, why the public toilet could turn into a stressful experience for the elderly, was the lack of privacy in the toilet. Visitors to the public toilet had to squat in one common room, with only minor divisions between each other. That lack of privacy, I thought, would clash with the social position of the elderly.

Kaye (1962, pp. 93-94) reported some years ago that adults tried to avoid going to the toilet at the same time as children. 'for fear they will see their genital organs and subsequently refer to them abusively.' Everywhere, even where toilets provide more privacy, there is a tendency to refer different categories of people to different toilets: men apart from women, higher staff apart from low personnel in an organisation, teachers apart from pupils. I expected that the presence of young people in the same toilet room as the elderly would cause the latter to feel uncomfortable and threatened in their status.

One day I raised the issue with some friends. The discussion which ensued lasted the whole afternoon and covered topics such as dirt and cleanliness, respect and privacy, and the phenomenon of public toilets (cf. Van der Geest, 1998b). That discussion increased my awareness of the shame and unease surrounding the use of toilets for elderly people but it also made me more cautious about my own cultural

The Daily Toilet

For people in Kwāhu-Tafo a daily visit to the toilet is both requirement and proof of good health, but the emphasis lies with the former. Faeces are dirt that gathers in the belly and should be removed as soon as possible. Dirt that is not rid in time, starts to ferment and causes heat, which seeks its way out of the body. Many health problems are seen as the result of this heat: fever, head ache, stomach ache, ulcers, boils, piles, skin rashes, and excessive phlegm, to mention only a few. To miss the toilet for one day is usually regarded as a danger to one's health and is referred to as constipation (*ayamtim*). Laxatives and self-employed enemas are commonly resorted to in order to combat this 'constipation.' Osei (1978, pp. 43-44), a Ghanaian medical sociologist, calls the Akan aetiology an 'abdominal theory of health and illness':

> The ability of the body to resist a disease agent allegedly depends on the proper functioning of the abdominal organs, especially the stomach; for *òyareè biara firi yafunu mu* ['every illness originates from inside the abdomen'] ...

He continues:

> ... the Akan desire and care for regular free bowels is virtually a ritual. That is why the enema syringe could be found in every Akan household and rectal suppositories of all types are the commonest medicines known and prescribed even by laymen.

'Free the bowels first,' is the motto of one of his informants, because with clean bowels one does not fall sick and does not need medicine.

A regular visit to the toilet also guarantees a healthy appetite; room has been made for new food. One of the elderly people used the following proverb to make his point: *Wo poma na wo to a, na egye* (If you load your gun well, it gives a loud bang). The proverb, as I understand it, emphasises the healthy alternation between eating and defecation.

It is not only necessary to go to the toilet every day, it is also advisable to do so early in the morning. When I asked a woman for the reason she answered: 'Before you put in new food, it is better to take the old one out.' Another person remarked that someone who does not go to the toilet in the morning, should consider himself a sick person (*Sè wonkò tiafi anòpa a, woka ayarefoò ho*). That rule seems to be taken less strictly by the elderly however. Several of them start the day at a later and more relaxed time, avoiding the 'rush hour' at the public toilet, but they too support the idea that one should first empty one's bowels before putting in new food. One old man: 'I feel bad (*mayè basaa*) when I don't go in the morning, as if I am sick.' When I asked an old lady how she had started the day, she replied: 'I went to toilet before I had my breakfast. When I have my breakfast before going to toilet, I fall sick.' 'Shit fears the sun' (*Ebin suro owia*), explained an old man, 'when you lie in your bed, you don't feel like going to the toilet, but as soon as you get up and see the sun, you are forced to go.'

During two days in 1994 we followed the activities of 16 elderly people from hour to hour. Nearly all of them got up early in the morning, around five o'clock. Seven of them had visited the toilet immediately after rising, five had not. For the remaining four the information was not clear.

Toilet and Care

Elderly people try as long as possible to remain independent in their use of the toilet. Agya Mensah, an elderly blind man, has his own toilet in the compound of his house. His son has tied a 25 metre long rope from the old man's room to the toilet enabling him to find his own way to the place. Two elderly neighbours have the permission to use his toilet as well. Mercy Ofori, who is also blind and has one leg amputated, manages to find the toilet in her house and help her self.

Most elderly people I interviewed had access to a private toilet, either in their own house or in their neighbour's. I know of only two elderly women who definitely used a public toilet at some distance from their house. Some said it depended on the place where they happened to find themselves whether they would use a private or public facility.

The first 'care' in toilet use for the elderly concerns finding a suitable private toilet nearby in case one does not have one oneself. Having access to a private toilet is some kind of privilege. With a few exceptions, all private toilets are bucket latrines, which are emptied only once a week. The buckets quickly get filled up, so house owners limit the number of users drastically. Often only close relatives, sometimes just the adult ones, are permitted to use the toilet. Allowing an elderly neighbour to one's toilet is indeed a considerable favour.

Kwaku Martin, nearly blind, told me that his wife or one of the tenants helped him to the toilet, which is at about 25 metres from his room. 'They are my left hand to the toilet,' he said. I did not ask him for 'details,' but he probably meant that they helped him to clean himself after using the toilet, since it is the left hand which does the dirty work.

If someone is unable to walk, he will be given a chamber pot. The urine will be thrown away near the house while faeces will be deposited in the private toilet or taken to the public toilet at the outskirts of the town and thrown away behind the toilet on the dunghill (*sumina*). The pot will be covered by a cloth when this is done in daylight. When we discussed the meaning of respect with an elderly man, he singled out the act of collecting an old person's chamber pot as an exemplary way of showing respect.

When I asked Nana Ntiriwaa, an elderly lady, who would help her to the toilet if she could no longer walk (she still visits the public toilet) the answer was simple: my children (and grandchildren) of course, because they are my children.

One of the elderly in this research, a woman, suffered from dementia. In the night she often emptied the chamber pot over the floor of her room, driving her granddaughter to despair. Every morning she cleaned the floor of her grandmother's room with Dettol.

Maame Korkor is partly paralysed after a stroke and bed-ridden. Her daughter, a teacher, who is staying with her in the same house, takes care of her and helps her to use the bedpan. I (S) had the following discussion with the daughter (D):

D: We give her a bedpan in the bed.
S: And when she finishes does she call someone from the house?
D: Yes, when she finishes she would call me and I come and take the bedpan away.
S: Does someone clean her after she has gone to toilet?
D: She does it herself.
S: She has toilet paper?
D: Yes.
S: Can she call anybody in the compound to take it away?
D: No, not everybody.
S: Not everybody but who does she call?
D: At times when I am not in, she sends to call a neighbour who is an old friend of hers.

Other people's help while using the toilet is surrounded by ambivalent feelings. It causes unease and embarrassment. What one used to do all by oneself, now needs the presence of a second person. It disturbs the old routine and causes an infringement on one's privacy. It is unpleasant. *Òpanyin* Dei, who is blind, used a proverb to explain his uneasiness: Eating with the back of your hand does not taste as well as eating with the palm (*Sè wonsa akyi bèyè wo dè a, ènte sè wonsa yèm*). There is nothing like going to the toilet on your own. He added an example: 'Suppose, a child takes an elderly person to the toilet. It is impatient. The elderly man walks slowly and needs to rest a few times, but the child wants to go and play with his friends. It asks you to walk a bit faster...' Nana Ntiriwa who is still able to visit the public toilet without anyone's help, remarked: 'I hope that I can keep doing so till I "go".'

At the same time, elderly as well as young people reject the idea that there would be anything embarrassing in being helped to go to toilet. It is normal when one grows old. Moreover, as we heard Nana Kwaku Agyei say, such help is an ideal chance for a child to show its affection and respect. One of the elderly: 'It is unpleasant work, but it is the duty of a child to take care of the urine and faeces of the elderly parent. The one who does so, will receive more praise than the one sending money.' In his words lies the promise of blessing which the elders are able to grant to those who do well to them.

That task of caring becomes more difficult when incontinence occurs. Incontinence is generally regarded as the most painful and humiliating consequence of growing old. It was suggested a few times, but in indirect terms, that it would be better for such a person to die. In the rare stories I heard about the practice of euthanasia, it was always incontinence that had been the decisive factor. But there are also cases of incontinence where a child or partner took care of the sick elderly. One of them was Mary Adoman who helped her husband, who had been incontinent for over two years until he died. My research colleague Patrick Atuobi (P) had this short conversation with her (M):

P: How was your husband going to the toilet?
M: In a bedpan, after which I cleaned him, put on his clothes and placed him in a chair or in bed.
P: Did someone help you?
M: No, I did it alone, but sometimes my six-year-old daughter would help me.
P: Was he worried about you doing all this?
M: Yes.
P: How did you know?
M: Because sometimes he did not want to take his food to avoid going to the toilet.
P: Did he feel ashamed?
M: Not really, but he was worried because the relatives were not helping me.
P: What would have been your feelings if someone else had done it?
M: I knew my husband would have been ashamed if someone else were to do it and I also would have been disturbed. [...] Before his death he called me and thanked me for the dedication I had shown to him.

Atuobi described another case where a 60-year old woman takes care of her old father who is incontinent. The woman complained that none of her sisters was helping. That her brothers failed to assist her did not disturb her apparently. Atuobi:

> She told me how two of her sisters, who paid a visit to their father, left the room when the father suddenly eased himself in his bed while they were conversing. She was left alone to do the cleaning. The sisters expressed their surprise about the way she was able to cope with the situation. [...] One of her children brought her a box. When she opened it, it was full of disposable gloves. The child is a medical doctor. [...] The daughter's husband said he was disturbed about the plight of his wife, but there was nothing she could do because it was her duty to take care of her father. He said, the care of an incontinent person should be the responsibility of the children, especially if the parents took good care of them, but relatives also must assist.

During a conversation among some young people, one of them, a woman, said: 'I will never entrust the care of my parent to anyone. Even if I have to break stones, I will do it myself (*Sè meredwa òboò mu mpo a, mennyae maphwè m'awòfoò*).'

Interestingly, one old man remarked that the word 'incontinent' would never apply to a rich person (*ènto wo da*). 'If you have money,' he assured, 'you can buy medicines and won't get sick [incontinent]. Moreover, those with money are always surrounded [and helped] by people. They are always respected' (cf. Van der Geest, 1997b).

Dignity, Privacy and Dirt

Ambivalence dominates the reactions of both young and old people to questions about toilet use and care of the elderly. On the one hand, loss of privacy during defecation is seen as a threat to the dignity of an elderly person; on the other hand,

people argue that there is nothing wrong with it, as it is a normal consequence of growing old.

In this brief essay, three degrees of privacy infringement have been described. The first one was the old person's visit to a public toilet. Several people gave as their opinion that elderly people should not go to a public toilet. It does not befit their social status. One man of 76 said it was not good for an elderly person to use the same toilet room as younger people: 'If these children see your private parts, they don't respect you.' The moment comes, according to *Òpanyin* Dei, that an elderly person should stop going to the public toilet. A visit to the public toilet diminishes his dignity in the eyes of the young. He himself, however, is constantly compelled to use the public toilet because his sister's bucket latrine is full most of the time. Some young people suggested that it would be a good idea to build special (public) toilets for the elderly! However, others argued that there was nothing wrong with an elderly person going to a general public toilet. Patrick Atuobi wrote about his meeting with some youngsters:

> When I asked them whether their respect for older people was reduced when they met such a person in the public toilet, they denied this. All the young people expressed surprise at the question. They did not imagine why the respect for an old person should be reduced because he attended a public toilet.

Visiting a public facility has been a very old custom. People are used to it and have developed ways to respect one another's privacy in spite of close physical proximity. In the public toilet people ignore one another and no one's privacy or dignity is in danger. My expectation that an old person's respectability suffers from visiting a public toilet was partly the result of the strong emphasis on privacy in my own culture. 'Partly,' because, as we have seen, some of the people we talked to did maintain an elderly person should make use of a private toilet. In fact, most do.

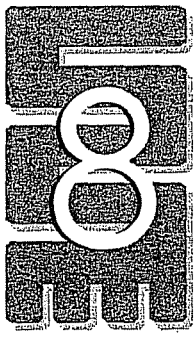
The second 'degree' of privacy infringement takes place when an elderly person is assisted during his use of a toilet or bedpan. For the one offering the help, ignoring the elderly person during defecation is not always possible. In that case, the social technique of pretending not to see should be replaced by its opposite: sharing the intimacy of the elderly person. This is only possible, according to several, if the care provider is closely attached to the elderly, through marriage, kinship or friendship. Being confronted with the old person's defecation does not lead to disgust on the side of the helper and loss of dignity on the side of the elder, if this feeling of closeness and trust exists. The faeces of the other become familiar, almost as if they belong to the helper him- or (more likely) herself.

In the case of incontinence, the presence of another person is most painful and disturbing. The situation puts the relationship between care giver and care receiver to the test. If their relationship has not matured, either between a couple or between a parent and his/her children, this condition will cause great stress and lack of respect. A man who has not 'invested' much in the relationship with his wife, during the time he was healthy and strong, will probably be deserted by her, even before he becomes totally dependent. That principle of reciprocity works also for the children. They will be reluctant to provide assistance and try to shift the task on

someone else. The one who will eventually do the job, will do so with aversion and cause feelings of shame and extreme discomfort in the elderly patient.

Dirt in absolute sense does not exist, according to Mary Douglas (1970, p. 12)

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"IT IS A TIRESOME WORK"
LOVE AND SEX IN THE LIFE OF AN ELDERLY KWAHU WOMAN
To the memory of Nana Mary Yaa Dedaa

Sjaak van der Geest[1]

Love and sex are not topics to be easily discussed in Kwahu-Tafo, the town where Nana Mary Dedaa lived most of her life and where I carried out anthropological research. Love between men and women is seldom shown in public. It is only some young people who have the courage to walk hand- in-hand with their sweetheart lover. Kissing in public is "not done". The middle-aged and elderly even seem to dissuade any kind of mutual affection. If demonstrating love is inappropriate, talking about sex is a taboo. Only "bad people" speak about it. Mill and Anarfi (2002: 334) quote people as saying that "...openly discussing sexuality in schools and other public settings would be viewed as a violation of traditional values and culture." Parents, according to the same authors, feel uncomfortable talking about the topic of sex with their children and do not give them instructions on sex. (See also Anarfi and Essah above). Here too, the taboo prevails. Sexual "education" is almost entirely the "task" of peers (Bleek 1976). Sexual desires and practices are secrets that one may share with a special friend who will not divulge them to anyone. It would be "shameful" if others were to find out about one's sexual habits. Parents also do not give their children instructions on sex. Here too, the taboo prevails.

Sex, by consequence, is not only silenced in daily life, it is also silent in research and publishing. Very little information is available on how people in Ghana view sex and what their preferences and practices are. The scarce information that exists is mostly on rules. Virtually no research has been carried out on the *experience* of sexual desire and practice.[2] That holds true for Akan society but also seems to apply far more widely in Africa as is borne out by two overviews (Standing & Kisekka 1989, Savage & Tchombe 1994). It is only in the context of HIV/AIDS that sex is now increasingly being explored, not in its own right as a source of pleasure or as an expression of an emotional relationship, but as a risk factor.[3] HIV-related sex research limits

itself mainly to some technical details and to the question of how condom use can be promoted. It does not deal with affection and sexual attraction desire.

If expressions of love and sexual attraction are kept hidden in Ghanaian society at large, how much more will this be the case for the older generation.[4] The middle-aged and elderly even seem to reject any kind of mutual affection. Indeed sexual desire and activity are widely regarded as incompatible with old age, if not morally, certainly aesthetically. Sexual intercourse between elderly people is considered embarrassing. That idea is found in scientific publications, popular writing and literary work. It seems an almost universal, super-cultural "fact" that a "normal" elderly person is not or should not be interested in sex; and should certainly not *show* his/her interest nor speak about it. The more surprising and refreshing, therefore, were the two conversations about love and sex we had with an elderly woman in Kwahu, Nana Dedaa. She spoke freely about intimate experiences in her life up to her old age. Her style could be characterised as both wise/resigned and slightly "coquettish".

The conversation with Nana Dedaa took place in the context of a much wider research project on social and cultural aspects of growing old in a rural Akan Kwahu community.[5] Topics explored included the concept of "old", the status of *opanyin*, respect and reciprocity, blessing and cursing, various types of care-giving, wisdom and *bayie* ("witchcraft"); the role of money in gaining respect, the importance of building a house and the rendering of post-mortem care in funerals.[6] Towards the end of the fieldwork, sex presented itself as a possible topic, in spite of the taboos surrounding it.

It started one day with a group discussion of about fifteen middle-aged and elderly women who were remarkably open about (their disinterest in) sex. But the break-through came in the afternoon of that same day when I visited an elder in a nearby town. The man was involved in a lively discussion with three friends. I joined the conversation and we talked about the different stages in a person's life, about funerals and various other topics. Then the discussion turned to sex. To my surprise the old men took a keen interest in the topic and seemed to enjoy it. It was indeed a break-through and several subsequent meetings with elderly people were devoted to the same issue. Strength and respect presented themselves as key concepts during those conversations.

Many elderly – and not so old – women complained of lack of strength and said they would rather not have sex anymore.[7] Men, however, rejected the women's objection to sex; women did not need strength, they said, "they only

had to lie down." It was rather the men who needed strength to "do the job".

The link with respect was ambiguous, particularly for men. An *opanyin* (elder) is someone who should be married and, therefore, is supposed to be – at least moderately – sexually active. An elderly man's sexual activity and interest should, however, be orderly and restrained. He should not behave like a young man, that is "chase women". Too much sex would be harmful to him and shorten his life (Van der Geest 2001).

The general fieldwork mainly consisted of conversations with about thirty-five elderly people plus a few relatives or household members. Some of these conversations were lengthy, others short and casual. I met frequently with some elderly people, with others, only a few times. Additional information and understanding was acquired through participant observation, short visits to the elderly and in discussions with young people about the elderly. Finally, I conducted some research in various schools in Kwahu-Tafo and its surrounding towns involving questionnaires, incomplete sentence tests and drawings of an elderly person.

There is nothing very special about Kwahu-Tafo. It is an "ordinary" rural town on the Kwahu Plateau near Nkawkaw, in the Eastern Region. Due to its altitude, (about 700 meters) it has at least for me – a more pleasant climate than most other, more lowly rural towns in the south of the country. Trading and a high degree of mobility are typical of the inhabitants of Kwahu-Tafo, as it is for all other Kwahu towns. In nearby towns such as Obo, Abetifi, Pepease, Obomeng and Bepong, one finds impressive buildings put up by successful inhabitants as proof of their achievements in life, usually trading and cocoa farming. Kwahu-Tafo is less blessed with such large and beautiful houses. The town looks impoverished. Many of the houses are dilapidated and the streets are in bad condition. The town has electricity but only a minority of the population can afford it. Piped water is available but many taps have been closed because there is no one to supervise their use and collect the small payments. Wells remain the main source of water for most people.

For people of Nana Dedaa's generation, men as well as women, a somewhat common life cycle was to grow up in Kwahu-Tafo, then to travel and trade in Accra or another commercial centre anywhere in the country and finally to return to Kwahu-Tafo to settle as a farmer (cf. Bartle 1977).

Nana Mary Dedaa says she was born in Kwahu-Tafo, on a day that somebody's sheep gave birth to a being half sheep, half man. She does not know the date. She went with her father to Kukurantumi and returned to Kwahu-

Tafo after her father's death. She then went to stay with her mother who was farming in the village of Asubone, now covered by the Volta Lake. She was betrothed to a man in Asubone and two years later, after she had begun menstruating, the man performed the customs of marriage. They had five children together. After her husband died, she married a policeman at Aboam and had five children with him as well. Their marriage ended in divorce. She married and divorced again. From her stories, we detected that she has had a lot of experience with men, apart from her three marriages.

During our conversation she was staying in Kwahu-Tafo but because her family house had collapsed she had been given a room in another house. Nana Dedaa, who had been a farmer all her life, was still very active, selling things, doing chores in the house and visiting friends and relatives, but she had stopped farming. In 1999 she paid a visit to her son in Nkawkaw where she fell sick and died. Her body was brought to Kwahu-Tafo and buried there.

First Conversation: Love

On the 26th September 1996, I paid a visit to Nana Dedaa, a lively and very open elderly lady, with Obeng Boamah, my friend, assistant and key informant. Apparently she enjoyed our interest in her life history and her views on various topics related to old age. She surprised us with her directness and her ability to talk plainly – both with humour and regret about intimate details of her life. In total, we had four long conversations with her. The first one on that day in September was mainly about love, the second one was on building a house, the third one – to be presented later – focused on sex and the last one – fittingly – dealt with death.

After a brief discussion on her life history, in which she related that she was sent to the North to a priest healer to join her husband, Obeng Boamah (OB) and I (S) asked her (MD) opinion about love (*ɔdɔ*). The following conversation ensued.

MD *It is good to love. You are staying with somebody. You love him and he also shows love for you. If you love me and I love you, we become one. If somebody hates you if you talk, it annoys him and he starts quarrelling with you. That is not good. But the one who loves, even when you offend him, does not take it seriously. When he offends you, you also don't mind, that is love. When he cooks, he gives you some food to eat. When you cook, you also give him something to eat. That is love....*

Love is being kind. When you meet your brother and he gets money, he gives you some of it. Then you know that he loves you. When I have money, I also give him some. We become one. That is love. But if you have money and you don't give me part of the amount, that is not love.

S *Ask her to explain the differences in love between wife and husband, parent and child, grandparent and grandchild.*

OB *We have different types of love. Love between husband and wife, parent and children. So we shall deal with them one after the other. What is the sort of love that exists between a mother and her child?*

MD *When I gave birth to my children, I sent them to school. Some of them did not go. It was only one of them who attended school. So he is the one who cares for me. When he gets two thousand cedis* (then about US$ 1.50), *he sends it to me. That is love. He cares for me, so I like him very much. Those I cared for, do not care for me, yet I do not hate them. I pray for them. One of them has come back home sick. I have not rejected him, I care for him, I always pray that he recovers. He even attends the Catholic Church.... If you have cared for a child, he also cares for you, the parent. That means he loves you and you also love him/her. But the one who scolds you, does not love you and you also don't love him. When this happens, the only thing you can do is to pray to God that he will change so that you become one.*

S *There is a saying that "When your mother dies, your family is finished". Why is it that a mother loves her own child more than the child of someone else?*

MD *The reason why she loves her own child most is, that it is her own blood that brought the child to life. It is God who put the seed into her womb for months. When the child is born she feeds it with her breast. So it is her blood that brings him up and so if the child grows, it is his responsibility to care for his/her mother. When he is young, it is the mother who directs the child: You should not go here or there because of these reasons. Listen to my advice. If you take my advice, all will be well with you.*

OB *It is through the blood of both the father and the mother that the child is produced. Does the father have the same love for his child as the mother?*

MD *Yes, it is through the man that a woman becomes pregnant by the grace of God. So if the man cares for the child, the child will also grow and love the father. Some of the men do not care for their children. They*

don't love their children while some do. Some men join their wives and care for their children. Some men shirk responsibilities and the burden goes to rest only on the mother. He will not take care of the child's education.

OB Does a child love his mother more than his father?

MD If the father takes good care of his child, the child will love the father but if he does not, he will love the mother most.

OB What do you know about love between men and women?

MD When you marry a woman, you become one with her. You love her, she also loves you. You see to it that she does not become hungry. There are some who marry but later become enemies. Others marry and love everything of you, even excuse me, your sex organ. He loves your clothes, your body and your sex. That is love and the two of you become free. There are some who become angry and insult you if you talk to them. You may even be surprised at being insulted that way. When you are hungry he will not give money to cook yet if you cook, he will eat. That person does not marry you with love.

OB What will a woman do to show her love for her husband?

MD She does not let the husband go hungry. Even if the man does not have money, she will cook and give him some of the food to eat. I remember one day in my life, my husband was not there. When he came, I had prepared food for him. He asked how I had managed to get money and I told him I had my own money. When my husband ran short of money, I used my own money to cook.

OB What is the difference between love today and love in the past? The way you used to love people and how people love one another nowadays?

MD During our days we showed real love. We stayed with our husbands alone but the present women leave their husbands and go after other men. This is the practice of present women. In our youthful days, we were not doing that. Our husbands could leave us for over a year yet we never followed other men. But some of these children can't abstain for a week. We really loved our husbands.

OB You told us before that when you married you were a child. In your days parents chose marriages for their children. How did men take wives their parents had picked for them? Was there real love?

MD There was love, especially for the beautiful ones. Some refused to take ugly wives. In our days, it could happen that somebody staying in Accra or Europe would request his parents to arrange a marriage for him. At

that time they used to examine certain things, for example, if there was any illness; if she had a good character and was hardworking. The man would then be invited to come and marry her. Then the father performed the customary rites. But sometimes he refused to marry the woman his parents had chosen.

OB *In the olden days, it was the parents who chose wives for their children but now it is the men and women themselves who meet and decide, take their decision. Which of these types of marriage lasts longer?*

MD *That of today does not last. Even when a man is with the wife, the woman leaves the husband and goes to visit another man. In our days, it was not like that. If the husband had anything against you, you had to stay until he sent you to your father. When you go they will ask "Did she steal your things?". When you marry, you marry. You are made to swear the oath, Kwasi Atia Mfia, which says that when the woman gets any good thing, for example, wealth, she sends it to her parents. When she runs into debt, it is the man who pays for it.*

S *What is the difference between "Medɔ wo' (I love you) and "Mepɛ wo" (I like you)?*

MD *When someone tells you he likes you that is not very good because '"I like you'" does not last. The like vanishes but when one loves someone, it lasts forever. For example, when there is dry season, the leaves are dry. It is when it rains that the weeds begin to grow. As for love, it is always there...*

OB *Who is happier, a man who has only one wife or one who has two or three wives?*

MD *In the olden days a man had several reasons for marrying more than one wife. He might get one woman who was good in washing and tidying up the house. Another woman might be very good in cooking and the other might be good in "sleeping". These were some of the reasons why some of them married many wives. Sex was very important. Some liked it very much.*

S *So a man who has married three women, can he share his love equally, among the three wives?*

MD *Please, when a man marries three women he has three tongues. Wherever he goes, he goes to tell sweet stories to make the woman believe that he loves her most. He would also go to the others and tell similar sweet stories to make them believe that he loves each of them most.*

S *So he is playing a game. What about the women?*

OB *How do the "rivals"* (co-wives, *akorafoɔ) stay?*

MD *He will not let them know.*

OB *Once he has performed the rites, would they not know that he has other wives?*

MD *Some of the men who have money may decide to marry as many wives as they want. The rich man may tell the wives who don't agree that they can leave. One of the women may detect that the man loves the other two more than her. She may decide to ask for a divorce. Another woman may stay in spite of the maltreatment because she has children with him. She will continue to endure all hardships and stay like that until death separates them.*

S *Why is it that a man can marry two wives but a woman can't marry two husbands?*

MD *That is how God made it: that a woman should get one husband. A woman can marry a second husband only after she has divorced. A man on the other hand can marry as many women as he likes.*

S *Why is it so?*

MD *It is God who made it so. When a woman visits any other man the husband has every right to divorce the woman. The man who has got money can marry four, five or even more women. If a woman visits another man and the man gets to know it, he will have to be compensated by the other man.*

OB *Is there any special reason why a man can marry as many as he likes while a woman cannot do so?*

MD *God did not create it that way. God took one rib of a man to create a woman. So man is made the head of the family. Men control women. Women do not control men. Sometimes a man can take another woman. When the woman learns of it, he compensates the woman and they continue their marriage. Some women do not accept the compensation but rather go and fight the other woman. That is not a good habit. The mother of that man did not bring him up for you alone. He has the right to marry as many as he likes. Any of the women who behaves well stays as a wife while those who cannot cope go away or divorce.*

S *In my country, men and women sometimes show their love in public. They can kiss, hold hands and embrace each other in the street. Why do you not show love in public?*

MD *Our custom does not teach us that. Your custom is different. If you hold*

the hand of somebody's wife, the husband has every right to collect compensation money from you.

OB *No, he means when you are walking about with your own wife.*

MD *That is not our custom. We feel shy to do so..*

S *Why do you feel shy? Is it a sin?*

MD *No. It is not, but your custom is different. You may see a man holding the hand of his wife but kissing the wife in public is not good. It is not good. It is shameful. God did not create us like that in this country.*

OB *If you can kiss your wife in the room why can't you kiss her in public?*

MD *It is different in the room. You may have sex in the room and during the course of it, you may do it, but not in public. It is shameful. If you are staying with your wife in the house, do you have to kiss her in public? Your custom is not good. Ours is very good. It is because we have to respect each other. It is in bars and hotels that some people may do so while drinking but you can't do it in public. So that practice is never good.*

S *What is the difference between marriage according to customary rites and mere friendship which is not officially known to the parents?*

MD *Please, there may be people who love their friends more than their wives, but friendship does not last. Marriage, on the other hand, lasts. It is your wife who usually cares for you. When you are sick, she is there. When you are dying, she is there.*

OB *We want to know whether there is more enjoyment in marriage or in friendship (mpenafa).*

MD *Really there is more enjoyment in friendship.*

OB *What makes that more enjoyable?*

MD *It is because you may not like what your wife will do you may not like but you will like whatever your lover (mpena) does. I have had lovers some years ago and really there is enjoyment in it. Your lover gives you better treatment. However, she does so with fear. She fears your wife may start a fight with her when the affair becomes known. However, if there is no quarrel then you will feel happy. There is always interesting conversation. In marriage you may not converse so nicely. The man may not have much time for the wife. Instead of appearing nicely, before going to bed, he goes to drink. But when going to visit his girl-friend, he will not drink before sleeping. He goes with clear eyes and converses a lot. Sweet conversation, but it does not last long. Eventually you have to go back to your wife.*

S *When you get a lover, you get emotional feelings. Does it remain until the end or does it diminish as years pass by?*

MD *When you love somebody you may love him to the end. You may also love somebody and getting to the middle of it, the love is lost. My first husband, for instance, I loved him and it was death that separated us. He loved me as I loved him. He used to give me a clothes every six months, during the Christmas and in the middle of the year.*

OB *Did you love him because he provided your needs?*

MD *No, not only that. I rather believe that it was the work of God. Just after he had declared his love to me, I also began to love him. God blessed it. When he died, I felt miserable.*

S *Is there any difference between the love men have for women and the love women have for men?*

MD *Yes, there is a difference. Men usually do not give their love to one woman. They visit other women. They may compare the character of the new friend with that of the old one and decide to stay with the latter. There are some women who are called "bediiwaa". They come only to consume. They come to demand whereas other women are prepared to stay even if the man is poor.*

OB *We want to know the difference between the love a man has for a woman and the love a woman has for a man.*

MD *They may love one another equally. He may have a good character and the woman also may have a good mind. Their love will be one. When they are like that, they don't divorce.*

OB *You said earlier on that men do not love one woman. They may jump from one woman to another and now you are saying their love is the same. How do you explain that?*

MD *Yes, I told you earlier on that some men marry three wives. The love of today's youth is different from what we were doing. In our time, we respected each other. A lot of these young women visit other men when the husband fails to provide them with their needs. But if that man takes proper care of them, they may remain faithful.*

OB *So are you telling us that just as the man can't stay with one woman, a woman can't stay with one man?*

MD *Yes, that is it. A pregnant woman who gets to know that the man who made her pregnant is incapable of taking care of her, may even give the baby in the womb to another man. She will drive the man away denying that he was the one who put her in the family way. Some men also detect that the*

women are not stable and they refuse to accept the pregnancy of their girlfriends. That is the character of the present generation.... Some men drive their girlfriends away when they become pregnant. The girls attempt to abort the child and meet their death.

OB *But what do you say about a man's love for a woman?*

MD *Yes, you men are very wicked. You are sometimes not honest. Today's youth have different ideas. A lot of young men put a woman in the family way and refuse to take care of her.*

S *We have heard that there is "konya"* (juju, magic) *for marriage. What do you know about that?*

MD *Yes, in our time when a woman refused to accept a love proposal, the man could use that magic. He made it in a pomade form, and rubbed it on his head and face. As soon as the woman saw the face of the man, she developed love for him. The girl disliked him perhaps, yet when he rubbed the medicine on his face, the woman developed love for him. There was another type called "sokosare". In applying that magic, the man will mention the name of the girl and press it. Wherever she might be, she will have to go to where he is. That was what some men were doing. When this happened, a woman developed extra love for the man, which could even lead to marriage.*

OB *Does the power in the juju not end abruptly?*

MD *Yes, sometimes the power was lost in the middle of the marriage so that the woman decided to leave the man.*

OB *What were some of the causes which made couples divorce?*

MD *A reason could be that the man failed to take good care of the woman, for example, if he did not give her clothes. Some women preferred going naked without a husband to having a husband and going naked anyway.*

OB *Why did some women ask for a divorce?*

MD *It might be because the women were not good. They perhaps refused to help their husbands to do their jobs. Perhaps she did not go to farm with the man or refused to wash his clothes. Those were some of the causes. Some women were lazy, some men too were lazy. They would not go to farm. Some divorced simply because they had lost their love for the other.*

OB *Are there other reasons for divorce? For example, childbirth?*

MD *Yes, that is correct. When the two do not get issues, it sometimes causes divorce. The fault could come from any of the two. They may separate and try to have children with someone else.*

If there is a constant theme in this conversation, it is the material basis of love. Beauty counts, certainly to the men, but it is material support which is decisive. Love is proved in the faithful daily provision of money and food and in the thoughtfulness of giving presents. Mill and Anarfi (2002) describe how this traditional value still holds among young people today. Young women take lovers who give them money, food, cloth and other gifts. Love relationships may shade into strategies for economic survival or take on a more commercial character (cf. Bleek 1976; Dinan 1983).

In the case of Nana Dedaa, faithfulness is indeed more a matter of continued material support than of sexual restriction. It is not the material goods in themselves, however, which show and feed love, it is their capacity to be a token of the attitude of the other, which makes them valuable. However small the support may be, it is valued in the light of the other's ability. Where the material signs of love disappear, the other partner is likely to leave unless another pressing matter – usually children – continues to bind him/her. Reciprocity is the oil of any love relationship. That also applies to the love between parents and children, as Nana Dedaa explained several times.

Children are indeed the *raison d'être* of marriage. Nana Dedaa does not say much about it, it is too obvious to mention it. But when we asked her explicitly about it, her answer was clear. Finally, she is ambivalent about extra marital love. On the one hand, she extols marital fidelity, using her own first marriage as an example. On the other hand, she acknowledges that things in marriage may become boring and that there is more excitement in a love affair.

Second Conversation: Sex

On the 4th October 1996, I invited Nana Dedaa to the house of a good friend of mine, Monica Amoako, a single woman who, after several marriages, did not hide the fact that, for her, sex was something of the past. Her frankness about sexual experience made her an ideal person to reassure the old lady in speaking freely about sex in her own life. We felt, however, that the topic was too delicate to discuss outside where others undoubtedly would come to listen to the conversation and perhaps join it, so we retreated into Monica's room. I asked most of the questions, which were sometimes repeated and clarified by Monica (Mon). These repetitions have not been recorded in the transcription. The conversation started on sex at old age but soon widened to sexual experiences throughout her life time.

S *Some people say that only the young have a desire for sex. What is your opinion?*

MD *When I was young I used to indulge in it but I have stopped.*

S *Would you not sleep with your husband now if you had one?*

MD *I would do so but not regularly. Now I don't have one but I stopped sleeping with my husband quite a long time before he died because he was weak.*

S *So if you had a husband at this age, would you show your love for to him by sleeping with him?*

MD *I would do so occasionally. If he had the strength and desire to do it regularly, I would respond. I would allow him to go to another woman. I would explain to him that whenever I had the strength for it, I would let him know.*

S *You talk about strength. Does a woman need it? I think it is rather the man who needs strength.*

MD *It is a tiresome work for a woman because the man is strong. When I was young, I was able to do it twice in a night but now I am old and don't have a man. I have been living with a dependent son for the past eight years, I could have got a man if I had wished and had sex with him at least once a week or once a month. Anyway now I am old and I can't do it any more. (Matwa mu) I have passed the stage.*

S *If you have a husband, and his sex becomes weak, can't you help him in another way to make him feel satisfied?*

MD *My husband who died was in that situation and he did not allow me to sleep in the night. He always made an attempt to do it but it was impossible. Throughout the night he could worry me till the next morning begging me to let him try again (Wo deɛ, ma menhwɛ sɛ ɛbɛyɛ dɛn a). He would be saying: "Oh let me try, oh let me try", till day break. (Wo deɛ, ma menhwɛ, wo deɛ, ma menhwɛ, saa na adeɛ akye). In fact, it was annoying.*

S *If not because he was overdoing it, wouldn't you have enjoyed it?*

MD *No. I always asked him to stop it because it was useless. He was only keeping me from sleep.*

S *What did he do?*

MD *He always wanted real sex by penetration but he couldn't because the thing was soft (Ɔpɛ sɛ ɔhwɛ sɛ ɛbɛkɔ anaa, nanso adeɛ no ayɛ mmerɛ).*

S *Wouldn't you have liked it if he had used another method, for example, using his fingers?*

MD *I have always disliked such things since I was young. I am not used to such things because I didn't practise it. I loved my first husband very much and was able to play with him but he died and after that I never played with other men in bed again. In fact, I loved my first husband. I was able to play with him before we did anything (Na yɛedi agoruɔ ansa na sɛ yɛbɛyɛ biribi a yɛayɛ). I stopped doing such things when he died.*

S *Is there nothing you can do to help a man you love but who can't sleep* [have sex] *with you?*

MD *You can play with him and have conversation until you become sleepy. Then you ask him for permission to sleep. When you play throughout the night, you get pain in your eyes the next day. My first husband didn't have that problem but the second one could not understand that he was not able to do it. If you asked him to get some medicine, he complained that I disgraced him. Because of all this I divorced him. He was jealous and suspicious about my movements and was always thinking that I had another man. I was afraid that he might do me some harm.*

S *Can a man who is impotent (ne kɔte awu) but still loves his wife, permit her to go to another man?*

MD *Some men do it but not my husband. Some men who are impotent permit their wives to go out and have pleasure with other men. All they need is that you come back, bath and sleep with them to indulge in playful acts (di agorɔw). But my husband would not permit such a thing.*

S *Does the desire for sex go down in old age and does it go down earlier in men or in women?*

MD *The desire stays longer in women than in men (ɛmaa dɛɛ yɛn ho nyoduwo ntɛm). I don't like it now but if I had a husband, it would be possible for me to do it.*

S *Has the desire in you gone due to old age or it is because you don't have a husband?*

MD *It is because of waist problems that I don't have desire for it. Do you notice how I walk ? It is due to waist problems. Otherwise I would still do it...*

S *When did you notice that your desire for men was going down?*

MD *I noticed it after the waist sickness started.*

S *How many years now ?*

MD *About ten years ago.*

S *Some people in my country claim that the desire for men in some women increases when they grow older. What do you think about it?*

MD *It has reached the sweetest point (Eyi na ahyɛi ato ɔdɛ). That is what people say. If you have a husband, you can do it, but not always. Some people like it and they do it until they are very old. Even when they are old and without a husband, they look for a man. Some old women try to look young to attract men and succeed in doing so until they die. They won't have children any more so they pretend to be young through their dress and take men just for the joy of it....*

S *If you love your man and he becomes impotent, what would you do?*

MD *I will explain to him that I love him and that his condition bothers me so we should find a solution to it. If he understands he may allow you to have another man secretly to satisfy your desire.*

S *Is it possible to like without love or to love without like?*

MD *A person may like someone and have a desire to have sex with the person because of appearance. That is not love. A person also can love someone but because of appearance may not like to have sex with that one. Anyway, some manage to maintain their love despite the ugly appearance of their partner.*

S *Some say sex in old age is good, others say it is not good. What do you think is true?*

MD *If it is possible for you to do it but you abstain from it, you may fall ill.*

S *There are some children who prevent their old fathers from marrying again after the death of their mother. Why?*

MD *It is jealousy. They feel jealous of another woman joining them in their father's house. Let me tell you something. Some time ago, I came and stayed in this town for three years while my husband was not here and a certain man proposed love to me. When I told him that I had a husband, he advised me to go back to him, or divorce him so that I could have another man. If not, I will fall sick. I was then very strong and able to work. I could look after myself and did not need the assistance of a man, financially or otherwise. So I didn't take the advice. I stayed for five years without a man and then I fell sick. I was all the time feeling dizzy and weak. It was only after I had gone to my husband, that I became better. By then I had not yet stopped menstruating. So if you are fit to sleep with a man and you abstain from it, you can fall sick (Se wonyaree na sɛ wo gyae ɔbarima nna a, ɛbɛbɔ wo yareɛ). But if your time has passed and you refuse to do it, it won't worry you too much.*

S *Is it good if an old woman marries a young man? For example if Ababio (Patrick, one of my assistants) married you?*

MD *I am older than he is so he will become old in a short time (ɔbɛyɛ akwakora ntɛm).*

S *So it is not good for a young man to marry an old lady?*

MD *No, it will make him old in a short time. What will come out of him and flow to the woman will be good for her but it will make him old in a short time.*

S *What about if a young woman marries an old man?*

MD *It is the same. The water from the old man is not good so it will make the girl old. It will make her ugly and sick.*

S *If the juice of the old man will make the girl old, why can't the juice of the young woman make the old man young?*

MD *A young woman can't bring a change in an old man. If the old man is weak he will continue to be weak.*

S *Do you think the desire in an old man who is weak will become strong when he sleeps with a young woman?*

MD *It can make him a bit strong (Ebɛtumi ayɛ no kakra).*

S *Can an old person keep the qualities which made him attractive when he was young?*

MD *You can never keep them. The skin would by all means develop wrinkles (Wo honam bɛyɛ ntwutwo-ntwutwo).... As you grow older, the beauty diminishes.*

S *Can't a person keep a kind of beauty even in old age?*

MD *Some people look beautiful to the end (Ebi wɔ hɔ a wɔnsɛe kosi se wɔbɛwu).*

Mon. *What I have observed is that farmers who do very hard work without proper nutrition and medical care grow old and are not nice-looking when they reach old age. But those who have money and are able to eat good food and have proper medical care keep some beauty in their old age.*

S *To me, it seems an old tree looks more beautiful than a young one. Am I not correct?*

MD *Some are nice but others develop humps.*

S *In what sense are some beautiful?*

MD *Some are nice but others bend and develop humps on them, which make them useless for building.*

S *Let us go back to the tree. What is more beautiful a young tree or an old tree?*

MD *A young tree is more beautiful.*

S *Can an old person look beautiful?*
MD *Yes, some old people look beautiful.*
S *What makes them look beautiful?*
MD *They keep themselves neat (Wɔdi wɔn ho ni).*
S *Is it due to money?*
MD *Yes, if I have money to buy clothes and if I bathe and wear clothes I will by all means look beautiful.*
S *A lot of things can determine beauty, even how a person talks.*
MD *It is true, during funerals, I sing playful songs which make people admire me and they come around me and we joke and laugh.*
S *What about dancing, does it show beauty?*
MD *Yes, there is beauty in dancing. When you are dancing, someone can say: "Oh, this woman is old but look how beautifully she is dancing."*

Five things struck me in this conversation. The first was Nana Dedaa's emphasis on strength as a condition for sex. Of course, love is a first condition but without strength, sex is not possible. The man's strength is mainly thought of in genital terms. Sex is indeed an overwhelmingly genital affair. If the potency disappears, sex becomes "useless", that is, impossible. She still vividly remembers her second husband's useless attempts – till daybreak – to have sex with her. It was not only he who lacked the strength, she too become tired of it and finally divorced him. The strength a woman needs for sex has a wider connotation. First of all she has to respond to the strength of her partner. More important, however, is that when she grows older she spends all of her strength on work and needs the night to rest. Sex becomes a "tiresome work". In a conversation with a group of women one of them said:

> *If you are married and your husband is someone who likes to have sex with you every day, it may weaken your body and make you lose your beauty. Because having sex is hard work. If a day's work on the farm and at home is followed by sex every night, it will not be good for the body.*

Interestingly, studies on the heavy workload of women in Ghana never mention the "tiresome work of sex."[10] Avotri and Walters (1999) remark that reproductive health problems did not figure prominently in the interviews they held with 75 women in the Volta Region, but sex is totally ignored. The authors quote several women who sum up the many tasks they have to do

from early morning to late at night when they finally go to bed. No one hints at the fact that even then they may still not find rest. The taboo reigns.

A second observation is that "strength" can become a convenient euphemism for desire. '"No strength"' (*mienni ahoɔden*) shades into '"no interest"' (*me kɔn nnɔ*). When I asked another old lady whether elderly men had more interest in sex than elderly women, she answered: "Yes, men have more strength", as if strength and interest were one and the same thing. A similar view was expressed by a man who emphasised that a woman never lacked the strength to sleep with a man "Their thing", he said and laughed, "does not spoil, it only grows old. But with a man it can spoil". So, when a woman said that she had no strength, it simply meant that she did not have the desire, he said.

A third striking conclusion from Nana Dedaa's conversation, as already mentioned, is her exclusively genital view on sex. "Playing" did not attract her, although she admitted that she did it in her youthful days. Although we did not go into details, she made it clear that she firmly disliked any other form of sex. Other conversations during our research suggested that most people, women as well as men, shared that view.

The fourth important point I want to draw attention to is Nana Dedaa's ambivalence towards sex in old age. At certain moments she seems to reject it and provides her own life as an example; at other moments she indicates she would still be interested in it, be it less frequently than before. It is her circumstances, no partner and sharing her room with a handicapped son that prevent her from having sex in her old age.

The final topic that raised my interest and which will take us back to the first, was her concept of beauty. Growing old, in her view, meant losing beauty and attractiveness. That held for people but also for trees. Wrinkles, whether on a human face or in the bark of a tree implied loss of beauty. Her definition of beautiful included smooth, young, tender, neat. Loss of beauty was usually linked to hard work. Those who grow old in years may succeed in retaining some of their beauty if they do not have to work so much. If they have money to buy good food, medicines to keep their skin smooth and fancy clothes, they will stay young. As some other conversations bore out, having only a few children and not being forced to do hard work – two prerogatives of the well-to-do – also helped to retain youthful beauty. One middle-aged woman remarked:

> *Before it can be said of a person that she is beautiful, strong or healthy, she must be a bit well off. If you have these qualities but you have no*

money to maintain them, you will soon be like an old lady. But it is different if your husband does his work, if he helps you look after the children and yourself so that the children grow up and are well off. They will be remitting you money and sending you delicious food, clothes, etc. Then you may never grow old and even if you become old, you can still maintain your beauty, and stay young and healthy because of your high standard of living.

Monica spontaneously joined in the conversation at this point. The common saying *sika yɛ abrantɛɛ* (money is a young man, that is when one has money, one looks young, handsome and strong) could be extended to *sika yɛ ababaawa* (money is a young lady).

Love and Sex in Old Age

Dedaa's account contains two trends in marital life which I found to be common during my conversations and observations with all elderly people I encountered during my fieldwork. The first, but least prominent, is the marriage which lasts a lifetime and is only dissolved by death. Nana Dedaa's first marriage represents that trend. It was a good marriage in the sense that both partners continued to support one another throughout their lives.

The second, more common, trend was that a marriage dissolves in old age as the woman does not see the "'use'" of continuing it. The reason, usually, is that she feels that her husband has little to offer her any more and that she is not bound to him because he has failed to give her substantial (material) support during his active life. Marriages survive or end on the basis of reciprocity. Where a husband has failed to invest in his relationship with his wife and children, the wife does not feel obliged to stay with him and to care for him at old age. It is more attractive to her to leave him and either return to her *abusua fie* (family house) or to stay with one of her children. Love, as we have seen, is measured in material terms. Old age is the time for drawing up accounts and taking things into one's hand. The slogan that Cattell quoted from elderly Kenyan women suits the attitude of Nana Dedaa: "Praise the Lord and say no to man" (Cattell 1992).

As far as sex in old age is concerned, Nana Dedaa's views largely conform with what has been published about this topic on Northern societies. On the one hand, they report a general decline of interest in sex among elderly people. On the other hand, they notice that sexual desires continue to be felt throughout the

life course and that their apparent reduction is as much a social and cultural as a biological matter. The phenomenon that the younger generation disapproves of continued sexual activity among the elderly and that the latter tend to comply with that disapproval, seems nearly universal. It was also found among other elderly people in Nana Dedaa's community (see Van der Geest 2001).

That ambivalence towards sex in old age, self-censorship and loss of desire ("strength") on the one hand, and continued interest on the other, showed itself in Nana Dedaa's disarming personal account.

End Notes

1 The research was carried out with the help of many people. I am particularly grateful to Monica Amoako and Anthony Obeng Boamah who accompanied me during my visits to Mary Dedaa.

2 Two earlier collections with contributions on Ghanaian women (Oppong ed.1983 &, 1987) keep silent on the topic of sexuality. An extensive bibliography on Ghanaian women (Ardayfio-Schandorf & Kwafo-Akoto 1990) with 754 annotations has only three references to "sexual behaviour". Two exceptions, studies that do contain some description and discussion of sexual practice in Ghana, are Kaye (1962) and Bleek (1976).

3 See for example: Vance (1991), Anarfi (1993), Awusabo-Asare et al. (1993), Ankomah (1998), Mill & Anarfi 2002.

4 Apt's (1996) study of elderly Ghanaians does not contain any reference to the topic of sex.

5 The research was carried out with the help of many people. Most prominent was the assistance given by my Ghanaian co-researchers Kwame Fosu, Samuel Sarkodie, Patrick Atuobi, and Anthony Obeng Boamah. Benjamin Boadu and Yaw Darko Ansah typed most of the research material. I am further indebted to Monica Amoako, Martin Asamoah, Abena Ansah, *Abusua Panyin* Daniel Osei Yeboah, Marek Dabrowski and Grzegorz Kubowicz for various kinds of help. I dedicate this essay to the memory of Mary Yaa Dedaa. May she rest in peace after all her hard work!

6 *Opanyin* ('elder') is someone past middle age who is considered wise and experienced and behaves in a civilised and exemplary way. According to Rattray (1916: 23) the term is derived from *nyin* (to grow) and *apa* (old, long-lived). For a more elaborate discussion of the concept of *opanyin*, see Stucki 1985, Van der Geest (1998b).

7 These themes are discussed in various articles (Van der Geest 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, n.d.a, n.d.b, 2001, 2002).

8 Pellow (1977: 162), who studied the lives of women in Adabraka, a suburb of Accra with a high concentration of Kwahu, suggested that many women derived little pleasure from sex in their marriage.

9 All conversations, except the very casual ones, were taped, transcribed and translated into English. Only a few were conducted in English.

10 See for example Klingshirn (1971); Bukh (1979); Fogelberg (1982); Oppong & Abu (1987); Dei (1994); Avotri & Walters (1999).

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Toilet and Sanitation in Ghana

By
Sjaak van der Geest & Nelson Obirih-Opareh



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Edited by Sjaak van der Geest and Nelson Obirih-Oparch
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INTRODUCTION

M. A. Odei & Sjaak van der Geest

Waste management is a crucial is sue in preventive health. In 1980 the WHO launched a decade, which was to lead to proper toilet facilities for everybody in the world by the year 1990. The health implications were clear, but there was insufficient understanding of the social and cultural aspects of people's habits of defecation. This publication addresses both sanitary and social aspects of toilet behaviour through three case studies in southern Ghana. The objective is to draw attention to the urgency of a new policy of sanitation and waste management based on good understanding of people's ideas and practices concerning defecation. Indeed the public health is the public wealth. This may be achieved through effective public health and environmental education accompanied by the provision of the appropriate and affordable sanitary facilities.

Health implications

Human excreta usually carry all sorts of organisms, which may cause disease on infection through contamination. These organisms or agents include viruses and bacteria commonly termed germs and parasites, which include protozoa and helminths or worms. A number of these agents or infections depend for their persistence on passing from the excreta of one person to the mouth of another. Auto or self-infection occurs among a few like the seat-worm. There are also a few of them e.g. hookworm and schistosomes which gain entry into the body by directly penetrating through the exposed skin on contact.

There are many obvious and also unsuspecting conditions, behavioural and environmental, which enhance the transmission processes, and these are readily encountered in endemic populations particularly developing countries. In these places one observes the indiscriminate disposal of human excreta in the immediate surroundings and environment. Where some efforts have been made to dispose of them, these may not have been proper or adequately effective. Yet all these infections are likely to decrease in the population or community with the implementation of measures to properly collect the excreta and dispose of them or treat them. The proper management of liquid waste should therefore greatly enhance public health. In this regard it is necessary to appreciate certain factors which have bearing on excretal transmission and the agents involved.

The viruses and bacteria and some protozoan germs in human waste require no period of latency and are immediately infective. Moreover only a tiny dose of infection of the germ is enough to cause illness in the affected person since the germs multiply rap-

idly on entry into the human system. The requirements for the safe collection and disposal of such waste must therefore be very stringent, far more so than for the other agents, the worms.

Most of the helminths or worms require a period of latency to be infective and therefore would not be immediately infective on evacuation. Some may even require intermediate hosts. The requirement for the collection and disposal of excreta containing such disease agents are less stringent than those for the germs discussed above. Moreover they often require repeated doses of infection to elicit the disease conditions.

With the above in mind, the management of liquid or human waste to ensure safe and healthy environment requires careful and deliberate appreciation of the factors necessary to avoid and eliminate contact with the agents of disease. The merits and short comings of all the management practices in use should be carefully assessed and implemented with all the necessary hygienic conditions which may otherwise undermine the efforts of the management practices adopted; pit-latrines, bucket-latrines, KVIPs, septage systems, treatment of liquid waste on collection and the subsequent use of composts developed from them having ensured the destruction of all pathogens during the treatment process.

The aim of all these provisions and measures in liquid waste management must be to isolate the population from their excreta and disease infection agents and thus ensure sound public health in the communities.

Thus there is the absolute need to prevent indiscriminate defecation in the immediate surroundings of human habitation, settlements, labour camp sites and refugee centres. If the provision of pit-latrine is the affordable solution, this must be done. In that case the area must be hygienically maintained, preventing access by flies, which may spread faecal matter containing the germs i.e. viruses, bacteria and protozoan parasites. The surroundings must be dry to prevent infection by hookworms. The selected sites for pit-latrines must take cognisance of underground water systems and wells to avoid contamination through seepage. If it is bucket-type latrines that are appropriate or affordable, these must take into consideration the health implication of the removers and carriers. The final deposition sites must also consider the environmental implication of such dumping as in the case of pit-latrines, and also possible contact with surface water bodies.

The management systems that involve final treatment should take relevant aspects of the above into consideration in addition to the quality and safeness of the effluent to be discharged into natural drains or streams. In addition, the safeness of compost derived from the treatment and its use in food production must be borne in mind.

Social aspects

Practices concerning dirt are firmly embedded in social and cultural traditions. Perception and tolerance of dirt vary between and within cultures and so do concepts of privacy and shame.

A remarkable phenomenon in Ghana's management of liquid waste is the 'popularity' of public toilets. The majority of the population (exact figures are hard to come by[1]) have no private toilets and do not seem particularly worried about the lack of such a facility. Apparently, for many people building or renting a house, a toilet is not a priority. Some seem to prefer *not* to have the toilet on the premises. In Accra, as Obirih-Opareh mentions in his contribution, existing toilets may even be transformed into rooms or stores forcing the inhabitants to resort to public places of convenience.

Such preferences and practices run counter to recommendations by the WHO and other international agencies which stipulate that each household should have its own facility. Assuming that public facilities are kept less clean than private ones, one may expect that the former carry greater health risks for their occupants than the latter.

The impression exists that Ghana is quite unique in its wide-spread use of public toilets (cf., Van der Geest 1999). This publication investigates why this may be the case. It further explores the social, cultural and economic factors leading to hazardous dealing with human waste. Concepts of cleanliness and attitudes to towards bodily excretions usually are the most entrenched in human cultures. Attempts to influence people's management of waste should therefore start from a clear understanding of such cultural and social practices. Up to now, however, such understanding hardly exists in any documentary form.

Research and policy

Defecation is not a topic which is freely discussed in ministerial offices or university lecture rooms. It rather is surrounded and obscured by feelings of embarrassment and disgust and is hidden from public debate. 'Shit' is not a proper topic for academic discourses or policy statements. In spite of their keen theoretical interest in the concept of pollution, social researchers have overwhelmingly neglected defecation in the research efforts.[2]

Similarly, policy-makers have turned a blind eye on the problems of toilet and sanitation, apparently because of their utterly unpleasant character. Post, in his contribution, makes the ironic comment that policy-makers – as well as most researchers – can afford to neglect the dreadful state of many toilets in the community because they themselves do not have to rely on them. They have more comfortable places to relieve themselves.

The three papers in this publication are an attempt to reverse this tendency

[1] Figures for Accra, provided by Stephen et al. 1994 and Konadu-Agyemang 1998, are difficult to interpret. The former, for example, report that in 1990, 30% of the population resorted to public toilets, 20% had their own private toilet and 50% 'shared' a toilet with others in the house. It seems, therefore, that the majority use semi-public toilets, but exact descriptions of such 'semi-public' facilities are lacking.

[2] An exception is Ndonko's study of social and cultural aspects of defecation in two Cameroonian societies. Flavier T. Ndonko is an anthropologist from Cameroon (Ndonko 1993).

of avoidance and to draw attention to the importance and urgency of the matter. The paper on Accra, by Nelson Obirih-Opareh, is based on research on 'Decentralisation and waste management in the Accra Metropolitan Area", funded by the Netherlands-Israel Development Research Programme (NIRP). The Kumasi paper, by Johan Post, results from a co-operative project of the Kumasi Town and Country Planning Department, the Department of Planning of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, and the Institutes of Planning and Demography and Development Research of the University of Amsterdam. The paper on the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo, by Sjaak van der Geest, is derived from his anthropological study of old age and care, financed by the Sociology and Anthropology Department of the University of Amsterdam. All four authors of this publication take part in the NIRP research project on Decentralisation and waste management.

Notes

1. Some of the ideas discussed in this chapter were published in an earlier article (Van der Geest 1998).

2. We thank Johan Post and the participants of a 'round table' on liquid waste management at STEPRI/CSIR for their constructive comments. This chapter is a first exploration of an important but neglected domain of human thought and behaviour. We are aware that more anthropological fieldwork (participant observation) needs to be done to reach an understanding of the 'paradoxes discussed here.

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TOILETS, PRIVACY AND PERCEPTIONS OF DIRT IN KWAHU-TAFO

Sjaak van der Geest

During my stay in the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo, in the Eastern Region, I came across a peculiar paradox in people's way of dealing with waste. On the one hand, they were extremely concerned with cleanliness and removing dirt from their bodies, on the other hand, the way they actually got rid of human waste was so inefficient, that they were continuously confronted with what they most detested: filth, in particular, faeces.

That paradox was particularly striking in the public character of toilet behaviour. The apparent absence of concern about the lack of privacy in their toilets is puzzling. If people are so horrified about dirt, especially human faeces, one would expect them to be very particular about safeguarding their privacy during a visit to the toilet.

That puzzle is directly related to the conception of 'dirt'. Dirt, according to the famous anthropologist Mary Douglas, is "matter out of place". But we should keep in mind that it is always in the eyes of people that something is either in or out of place. The experience of dirtiness is inherently social. Other people's body excretions, with which we are confronted are endlessly more 'dirty' to us than our own because they are relatively more 'out of place'. Most people have no problem managing their own faeces but are disgusted by the idea of having to handle other people's. They may be willing to take care of the excreta of close relatives, for example small children, but not of 'strangers'. Faeces are intimate substances which should remain 'in place', i.e. in the intimacy of the person who produces them. Being confronted with other people' excreta is an extreme case of seeing - and smelling - matters out of place. That is probably the reason that in most - but not all - cultures defecation is done in private. It saves members an extremely dirty experience. The strong emphasis on the different use of the right and the left hand shows the same concern about dirt.

Why do people give so little priority to having their own toilet in the house and seem to prefer to daily visit the public toilet, sometimes at a considerable distance from where they live? There may be economic reasons. To build a toilet costs money which could be saved by using a public facility. But economics alone cannot explain the situation. Why, after all, does everybody in Kwahu-Tafo have his/her own private bathroom but not a private toilet? Is a simple toilet really so expensive? There must be other reasons.

They are historical and cultural and they are linked to the town's residential pattern.

Dirt and cleanliness

If there is anything dirty in Mary Douglas' sense of the term, it is human faeces. In my own culture, in the Netherlands, their place is in a 'no man's land', a territory unseen and untouched by human beings. Human faeces are hygienically handled by technical devices which make them disappear almost immediately, first under water, then underground. They leave no trace, not even their smell.

Only the faeces of small children are an exception. They are allowed to stay a bit longer above the ground and even pass through human hands, mostly those of their mothers, although cleverly designed diapers make it more and more possible to avoid contact with children's faeces as well. In general, one could say, however, that the faeces of children, are less 'dirty' than those of older people.

The faeces of sick and elderly people who have become incontinent or cannot visit the toilet, are more problematic. They require professional treatment. The fact that we need a special category of workers, nurses, to deal with that type of faeces confirms that they are really dirty. By assigning a profession to remove them, we make sure that they remain far from everyday life. They are restricted as much as possible to certain places and handled by 'specialists'. The system seems to work.

It does not work in Kwahu-Tafo and I assume in most other places in Ghana. Poor sewage and a defective toilet system in particular, one could argue, are caused by poverty and lack of development. Nevertheless, there is also reason for surprise. That they have not developed a more efficient and a more private system of getting rid of faeces is puzzling if one takes into account their concern about dirt.

Dirt is a key concept in the Akan perception of the human being. Dirt is something unwanted, something one should get rid of. Ideas about dirt and cleanliness pervade the entire culture. There are several terms which refer to dirt. *Efi* is dirt which, according to some, comes from outside and attaches to the body, to clothes, to objects, or to a house. It has a temporary character. A man coming from his farm is dirty (*ne ho ayè fi* or *ne ho wò fi*) because of the work he has been doing. It is not his habit to be dirty. A child playing in the mud is dirty, as is a yard which has not been swept.

Atantaneè (lit. nasty or hateful things) is dirt which is more detestable. Most people use the term for dirt coming from inside the body: vomit, phlegm, menstruation blood, urine, or faeces. When a latrine is dirty with human faeces, people say: *Èhò yè tan.*

As in most languages, terms of 'dirt' assume much wider meanings. They are metaphorically applied to social, moral and aesthetic phenomena. Dirty = ugly = unattractive = nasty = bad = uncivilised = shameful = not respected.

Conversely, cleanliness (*ahoteè*) is the pre-eminent metaphor to express

positive appreciation. Clean = beautiful = attractive = good = civilised = respectable. The most common term referring to being clean is *te*, which means 'to be open' or 'to be clear'. *Èhò te* must be understood to mean that the place is clear, free from unwanted things, dirt. *Ne ho te* is a compliment saying that the person is beautiful, attractive. In Ghanaian English, the expression 'she is neat' is almost synonymous with 'she is pretty', with the connotation that she is also beautiful in a moral sense, 'pure'.

In summary, bodily cleanliness stands for physical and moral attractiveness, whereas dirt symbolises physical and moral decay. Dirt, or rather the abhorrence of it, plays a central role in people's world view. To say that someone is dirty, is almost a rejection of the whole person. Cleanliness of the body (the skin, the orifices, the teeth, the nails) and cleanliness with regard to housekeeping, clothing, or one's children, constitutes a basic condition for a person's attractiveness. Physical beauty and sexual attraction are commonly explained in terms of cleanliness.

Sanitation in Kwahu-Tafo

There are four public toilets, each with twelve squatting holes (six for each sex), in Kwahu-Tafo. Two of them have been closed, one for about three years and one four months ago, both due to maintenance problems. It means just 24 public facilities for the entire town. (While I was writing these lines, I heard that one of the remaining toilets had been closed as well, because it was full. Twelve toilets for 5,000 people...). It also means that some people have to walk about 10 minutes to reach a public toilet (to and fro twenty minutes).

In addition there are semi-public toilets in two schools, which can be used by both teachers and pupils. The number of private latrines (almost all bucket latrines) is unknown. The sanitary inspector estimates their number at sixty. Finally, there are about ten private pit latrines and ten water closets, one in the chief's house, the others in the Catholic mission and the teachers bungalows of the Technical School.

In and around public toilets

It is impossible to say how many people are in fact using the public toilets. Estimates vary from one third to eighty percent of the population, which in absolute figures would be 1,000 to more than 4,000. Unknown is also the number of people who don't use toilets at all but are easing themselves in the 'bush' at the edge of town or on the way to their farm. Some people defecate into a plastic bag and dump the bag somewhere out of sight.

The combination of plastic and human faeces is no doubt the most appalling form of pollution taking place in Ghana. Apparently some people view the plastic bag as a handy portable and disposable, private toilet. It seems an attractive compromise: one can defecate at home and yet one is not stuck with the unpleasant presence of a permanent toilet in the home.

If we take a conservative estimate of forty percent of people visiting the

public toilet, it means that every day, about 2,000 people use 24 holes, almost ninety per hole per day. Taking into account that both toilets are closed from about 9 pm to 5 am, one can conclude that the holes are occupied every five minutes. On the average both public latrines would receive about one thousand visitors per day. When I discussed this with the caretaker of one of the latrines he estimated a number of only about two to three hundred. He based his calculation on his income per day. Whatever the exact number, it is not surprising that there are queues early in the morning as most people prefer to ease themselves before they start the day.

For elderly people the way to the public toilet seems particularly painful. It may be far and the conditions do not befit their status of respected elder. Most elders therefore use a private latrine, either in their own house or in that of a kind neighbour. They are also likely to avoid the morning rush hour if they have to go to the public toilet (cf., Van der Geest 2000).

Visiting a public toilet is not 'free'. The caretaker of the toilet (who is also responsible for cleaning the place) takes twenty cedis (about one dollar cent) from each visitor. In that way the old coins, which have lost nearly all their value, are still useful (the same amount is charged for a bucket of water from the public tap). The caretaker of one public toilet I visited was sitting in a small kiosk and had a pile of cut newspapers in front of him. He handed each customer one sheet and received twenty cedis. If they brought their own paper, he said, they would pay only ten cedis. Each day he had to pay 3,000 cedis to the sanitary inspector. He could keep what he earned above that amount. Funerals and other busy days were golden times for him.

The place was relatively clean but the immediate surroundings had become a dumping place of all kinds of dirt. First there was the official *sumina* of the town, about 50 meters away from the toilet. But right behind the toilet another '*sumina*' had come into existence: inhabitants of the town emptied their chamber pots there, the labourers who cleaned the KVIP put its contents there, and - worst of all - many people brought their faeces in plastic bags and deposited them at the same spot. They did this in the night when no one could see them.

Bucket latrines

The sanitary and cultural conditions surrounding the private bucket toilet also deserve our attention, although no-one has ever conducted a systematic survey of them. In 1994 the buckets were emptied every week for 800 cedis a month. That sometimes buckets overflowed may be due to the fact that the owner failed to pay his monthly dues or that the work force could not cope with their task. The buckets are emptied in the night by a man who is referred to as *Kruni*[1], although he originates from the North. *Krufoò* earn 50,000 cedis, per month, according to the sanitary inspector. I suspect that they get some extra rewards from the different houses they serve.

No native of the town would ever think of performing this kind of dirty and poorly paid work Neither would they be willing to do this work if it were well paid. ("Even if they paid me ten times as much"). The work is extremely unpleasant. The *Kruni* carries a container on his head in which he empties the bucket. He has a broom to clean the bucket and a lantern to find his way. The bucket is behind a small door on the outside of the house. He has to carry the container for a long distance to a dumping place on the outskirts of the town.

The *Krufoò* are literally 'people of the night'. They are the personification of the Akan horror of shit and have to make themselves and their load invisible. Just opposite the window of the room where I was staying was the bucket of the neighbour. Once a week I woke up when the *Kruni* came to empty the bucket, not because of the noise he made - he moved as silently as a mouse - but because of the stench drifting into my room.

It is unlikely that there will be any *Krufoò* in the near future. Those who are doing the work are getting old and no one wants the job anymore. Their children attend school and have other ambitions. In Kwahu-Tafo there was only one *Kruni* who could hardly cope with the work. He was getting old and there was no successor.

Why?

I asked one of my research colleagues why people in Kwahu-Tafo use such primitive and defective methods to get rid of their faeces. Why are there hardly any pit latrines in the town? Why, I asked further, did they give such a low priority to toilet facilities while they were so extremely concerned about dirt and abhorred faeces?

It was poverty in the first place, he answered. People can't afford to build good toilets. I objected that even poor people build a simple and efficient pit latrine next to their house. There were also technical problems, he added. In some places, when you dig a hole, water will enter. In other places rocks prevent you from digging a hole. It still did not answer my question of course. Why did so many people give the highest priority to getting rid of bodily waste and the lowest priority to doing it efficiently and cleanly? The 'hygienic puzzle' remained.

My explanation is that people detest human dirt so much that they don't even tolerate it near their house. The fact that they had to pass through dirty places and faeces in public toilets was a consequence which they simply put out of their mind. They don't greet anybody on their way to the place, they pretend that nobody sees them. They go silently and forget about it: a mental solution for a very physical problem. In the light of Douglas' theory, the seemingly insouciant public style of defecation in is puzzling. But visitors to the public toilet seem to have other - mental - solutions to preserve their privacy in a crowded toilet.

People try to remove dirt from their midst by placing it outside the world where they live. Traditionally, toilets are situated at the outskirts of the town and the filthiness of the place is tolerated because it *is* at the outskirts. Go-

ing to that place is of course a moment of discomfort but the advantage is that one can again leave the place and return to the world of cleanliness. By building a toilet in the house, one would continuously have human faeces in one's direct vicinity. By not building a toilet in the house - which would in a sense liberate one from being confronted with other people's dirt - one keeps dirt at bay. Building your private toilet at some distance from your house, in your garden, is often impossible due to the rather crowded situation in the towns. Moving your toilet ten metres away would take it into the house of your neighbour. The toilet therefore is in or near the bush, out of sight; it is the backstage where one goes silently. People try to remove that ultimate dirt out of their houses, out of their towns, and out of their heads. They try to ignore it. That's how they cope with it, almost by pretending it does not exist.

Human faeces are considered dirty when they are found in our midst, but when they can be removed out of sight we don't seem to be worried anymore. This idea invites for the dumping of waste, both liquid and solid, at the outskirts of the town. We should realise, however, and we will soon discover, that the outskirts are also part of the town and can no longer be ignored. Often they are also the entrance to the town and most importantly the place we visit daily to answer to nature's call. By making the toilet and its surroundings clean, going to the toilet could become a happier experience, which, in my view, it should be. After all, it is a place where we are relieved of a burden, where we, as we say, *ease* ourselves. Literally a place to relax.

What to do?

What should be our advice to policy-makers? There are at least two sides to the sanitary condition in Kwahu-Tafo and, for that matter, most other rural towns in the country, which deserve our attention. There is the question of discomfort and the problem of health risks.

Waste management is a crucial issue in preventive health. In 1980 the WHO launched a decade which was to lead to proper toilet facilities for everybody in the world by the year 1990. That campaign has hardly been noticed in Ghana but if it had been implemented, it would probably not have changed much in people's defecation behaviour. The health implications of poor sanitation are clear, but there is insufficient understanding of the social and cultural aspects of people's habits of defecation. This brief article has drawn attention to the social and cultural context of toilet behaviour. The situation in Kwahu-Tafo suggests that many people are likely to prefer using public toilets but that they would favour cleaner toilets. Proper management of the toilets and their immediate surroundings would greatly improve health conditions in the town.

Talking about comfort, undoubtedly, most people would like to have a water closet in their own house but few will be able to afford the costs. As long as the technical and financial possibilities for private toilets remain limited, we may expect that a large number of people will continue to frequent the public toilet. Local governments, with the assistance of private entrepreneurs, should take measures to improve the conditions in and around the public toilet to allow the visitors to ease themselves at ease. At the same time, the construction of simple, affordable, clean private toilets, with septic tanks, should be encouraged. For many, it would turn a daily unpleasant and threatening experience into an enjoyable and safe start of the day.

Notes

Some of the ideas discussed in this chapter were published in an earlier article (van der Geest 1998). I thank Johan Post and the participants of a 'round table discussion' on liquid waste management at STEPRI/CSIR for their constructive comments. This chapter is a first exploration of an important but neglected domain of human thought and behaviour. I am aware that more anthropological fieldwork (participant observation) needs to be done to reach an understanding of the 'paradoxesdiscussed here.

1. A *Kruni* was originally someone from Liberia.

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PUBLIC OR PRIVATE?
A POLICY DILEMMA OF LIQUID WASTE MANAGEMENT IN ACCRA

Nelson Obirih-Opareh

Introduction

Rapid urbanisation and the unplanned nature of estate development of many cities and towns in Ghana have brought severe problems to their development. One of such problems is the lack and poor management of places of convenience. Many homes in Accra do not have their own toilet. Toilets and bathrooms in houses in the central business areas have sometimes been converted into rooms and stores forcing residents of such homes to rely on public toilets. According to the metropolitan authority, public toilets are meant for visitors to the city and not for residents. The opposite is the rule however. Public toilets have become permanent features for many residents in Accra as places to ease themselves. Accra faces sanitation problems. These are manifested in unsanitary conditions in and around most of the public toilets, poor and dilapidated infrastructure for liquid waste management, inadequate funding for maintenance, and deficient management of existing toilet facilities. There is also the problem of indiscriminate defecation in open spaces, into water bodies and drains, irregular collection of liquid waste from septic and other storage tanks, as well as from pan latrines, and limited connections of houses to the central sewage system.

Policy dilemma

Policy makers of the Accra Metropolitan Area (AMA) responsible for liquid waste management face a dilemma: should they promote and improve public toilet facilities in the city or should they encourage and assist inhabitants to have their own toilet in the house? Using the World Bank Urban IV Project loan facility for sanitation improvement, the local authority has embarked upon joint projects with landlords to expand the number of houses with private toilet. On the other hand, the AMA is expanding and maintaining public toilets to run on commercial basis. It has also invited private firms and individuals to build and operate toilets. The nature of facilities for the public toilets, some of which have bathrooms attached, do not lend credence to the idea that these facilities are for visitors. The question therefore is: what is the policy of the local authority with regard to public toilets? Should the communal toilet system be maintained? To what extent does the provision of more and better public toilets undermine the policy that requires every house to have its own toilet facility? Since the introduction of user-

fees, public toilets have become a lucrative source of income. As a result, operators of commercially run toilets will not be very enthusiastic about the discontinuation of public toilets.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to: (i) identify the causes of the problems of liquid waste management in Accra and the measures put in place to address them, (ii) highlight the changes brought about as a result of the decentralisation and privatisation policies in liquid waste management, and (iii) assess the effectiveness of the institutional arrangements that have evolved as a result of the changes with a view to suggesting possible ways to improve the situation.

Historical background

With a few exceptions (e.g. Tema and Akosombo) all towns and cities in Ghana grew from small traditional village set-ups, characterised by unplanned nature of housing development, and where communal solutions were found to common problems. One such communal solution was the public toilet. As the villages grew, these communal ways of solving problems persisted. Most cities and big towns in Ghana could be described as big 'overgrown' villages. The magnitude of liquid waste problems in cities like Accra with large population is far bigger than that of the villages and small towns, where communal toilets are built at the outskirts of the town or village to make up for the lack of toilet facilities in the individual homes. Why, in spite of the inconvenience of not having a toilet in the house, do a large number of people not have access to a private toilet, and rely on public toilets? Several reasons account for this.

According some residents, the crux of the matter is economic. The initial cost of building a decent toilet is very high for the poor. He prefers daily visits to the public toilet where he spends little sums as user-fees to paying large sums of money to build and maintain his own toilet. Besides, in areas where there is no central sewage system, the periodic removal of waste from the toilet is also expensive. Another possible explanation is technical. Most urban centres face severe water shortage. Without water, a modern private toilet using a flush system cannot operate. The free use of public toilets also discouraged the building of private toilets. In the olden days, all public toilets were used free of charge whilst people with private toilets had to pay various charges. This was a disincentive to poor landlords to construct their own private toilet. Until the mid-1980s when user-fees were introduced for public toilets, a visit to a public toilet was free of charge.

One simple type of household toilet before the advent of Kumasi Ventilated Improved Pit (KVIP) in most of the towns and cities was the pan latrine toilet. A nightsoil collector empties the buckets periodically - twice or thrice a week - into his container and carries it on his head to central cesspool storage containers. This system had proved unsuitable because of its environmental and health hazards. Carrying such buckets on the head is increasingly being regarded as disgusting and inhuman. Besides overcrowding, poor housing planning with small spaces in between houses, particularly in the poor and deprived areas, meant that one's pan latrine would be at the entrance of another person's house. A worse case scenario would be where the pan latrine is right in front of the window or bedroom of a neighbour. The central sewage system is limited to only a small area (i.e. Accra Central, Ministries, and parts of Dansoman) and there has not been any appreciable increase in its coverage since the 1970s. The cost (and difficulties) in getting rid of the waste when the storage tanks get full is a big bother to many households. A visitor to a public toilet does not bother himself about how the waste is removed. His only concern is the cleanliness of the facility.

Measures to address the problems

By the early 1980s, liquid waste management in the urban areas was in a poor state. In Accra, the situation was compounded by the long strike action of conservancy labourers. The communities mobilised people to clean toilets and their environs. In the absence of funds to maintain the system, residents agreed to pay user-fees to visit public toilets. This provided a reliable source of funds for maintenance of the public toilets. Since then, many changes have taken place in the liquid waste management sector, particularly after the introduction of the district assembly concept and decentralisation policy into local government administration in 1988. Some of the policies the metropolitan authority tried over the years to solve the liquid waste problem proved successful whilst others failed. For instance, bye-law requiring every house to have its own toilet was neither enforced nor complied with. The old toilet systems (the bucket-removal type - popularly called 'pantrines'), whose management was fully privatised, is still in existence though they should have been phased out long time ago by converting them to KVIP using a loan facility[3] under the World Bank Urban IV Project for sanitation improvement.

Public toilets have become major sources of revenue to the local authority and its operators, since the introduction of user-fees in the mid 1980s.In 1992, the AMA decentralised liquid waste management to the sub-metropolitan assemblies whilst retaining supervisory and monitoring roles.

The high profit margin in liquid waste management led the local authority to resist private participation. By the 1990s, the pressure on existing public toilets was too high for AMA alone to cope with. It reluctantly allowed private participation into its 'gold-mine'. In 1997, some level of privatisation was allowed in liquid waste management. This afforded the private sector opportunities to partici-

[3] This facility enabled the AMA to assist landlords to put up their own toilet facilities of KVIP or WCs in a cost-sharing arrangement. In this arrangement, the AMA provides the plan, the materials, and the personnel to build the toilet, whilst the landlord bears part of the cost. The landlord provides an initial part payment of the cost of construction and pays the remaining sum by monthly instalments over a period of three years or so depending on the size of the loan.

pate more formally in liquid waste management. Until then, the AMA had a monopoly in the management of public toilets, which was considered as a 'gold-mine'. Some public toilets were leased or contracted out to private agencies and individuals to operate on commercial basis, whilst retaining ownership. These agencies and individuals pay some specified amount to the AMA as operational fee, etc. Since then, there has been considerable improvement in terms of numbers and quality of service of public toilets. The surroundings of most of them have also improved.

Toilet facilities in the Accra Metropolitan Area

The existing toilet facilities in Accra, both private and public, include pan (or bucket) latrines, pit latrines, septic tank latrines, KVIPs, and WCs with or without connection to the central sewage system. There are two types of ownership of public toilets, namely (i) those built by the local authority, and (ii) those built by private firms and individuals for commercial purposes. The types and numbers of publicly built toilet facilities available in the sub-metropolitan assemblies of AMA are as follows: Ashiedu Keteke - 26, Ablekuma - 40, Osu Klottey - 19, Okaikoi - 11, Ayawaso - 28, and Kpeshie - 34. Privately built public toilets are few in number. The public toilet facilities are inadequate compared to the size of the population without toilet facilities in their houses. Long queues could be observed during early morning and evening rush hours. According to residents, some people defecate at empty spaces because of (i) costs of a visit to a public toilet, (ii) lack of toilets in the vicinity, (iii) long distances of public toilets from their houses, and (iv) the untidiness of the toilet facilities. In October 2000, user-fees ranged from ¢70.00 to ¢150.00 per visit, depending upon the facility. The AMA determines the user-fees.

The existing infrastructure of the Accra central sewage system is inadequate. In 2000, there were less than 1,000 units connected to the central sewage system (GW&SC 2000). In most places, the infrastructure for waste management is either non-existent or in a deplorable state. According to officials of the (WMD) there are about 18 sewage systems and sewage treatment plants in Accra, but none is functioning properly. The system, which was built for Central Accra in the early 1970s, is in a deplorable state. There are few connections and scarcely any water for flushing.

Availability of toilet facility, and method of removal and disposal are indications of level of development. A survey of toilet facilities in Accra by the AMA in 1992 shows that

40% of the population have access to private toilets discharging into septic tanks or cesspools;

25% use public toilets for a fee per visit.

20% still use (private) pan latrines; where a fee is charged per visit.

5% have access to (private) KVIPs; and

10% of the population have no access to any toilet facility, thus defecate

in open spaces.

The critical shortage of toilet facilities in Accra is obvious from these figures.

Cesspit service

The AMA and private firms carry out cesspit service with suction trucks. In addition to these, other organisations such as the Volta River Authority, the security services (the Army, the Police, the Prisons, and the Fire Service), University of Ghana, Ghana Civil Aviation Authority, etc. run their own suction trucks to empty cesspits of staff bungalows. These organisations discharge at treatment plants of the Waste Management Department (WMD).

Pan latrine service

Night-soil collectors empty the pan latrines during the night. Liquid waste collection from pan latrines has been fully privatised since December 1987. The Waste Management Department provides surface and underground storage facilities and collection vehicles to empty the tanks. New pan latrine is not allowed. Houses with pan latrine are to convert to KVIPs, WCs or use available public toilets.

KVIP latrines

Most of the initial KVIPs installed in several locations in the city as public and private toilets were pre-financed through a revolving fund of the German Technical Co-operation (GTZ) as support for the phasing out of pan latrines. The major phase in the conversion of pan latrines to KVIP began in late 1987 with the establishment of the Urban Sanitation Improvement Team (USIT) in the Waste Management Department. This unit comprises representatives of the Metropolitan Medical Officer of Health and the Metropolitan Engineer to facilitate approval of building permits for conversion of pan latrines to KVIP latrines. It was then envisaged that the promotion of the project would be maintained and additional funds secured to enlarge the revolving fund for the project. The KVIPs were supposed to be built in areas with porous soil so that the liquid could be absorbed by the soil, leaving the scum to be scooped out for use as manure for gardening and agriculture. Unfortunately however, the soil in Accra is clayish and as a result cannot absorb the liquid from the toilet as expected. The toilet is therefore always wet and needs dislodgement by suction pumps.

Public septic tank latrines

Most of the public toilets in the city have septic tanks. They are normally found in areas without a central sewage system. The tanks have to be emptied periodically by suction trucks.

Liquid waste treatment sites

The liquid waste from septic storage tanks, together with the waste from the central sewage system, is collected at three treatment plants: Achimota (with a capacity of 55,000 metric

[4] The number of public toilets in Accra has increased considerable following the privatisation policy which allowed private firms and individuals to build and operate their own public toilets for commercial purposes.

tonnes), Teshie (10,000 metric tonnes), and Korle Gonno (33,000 metric tonnes). However, these treatment plants find themselves in various degrees of disrepair and are not functioning properly.

Central sewage

The central sewage system is provided, controlled, maintained and owned by the Ghana Water and Sewage Corporation (GW&SC). Sewage infrastructure requires tremendous level of capital outlay. Areas with toilet facilities connected to the central sewage line include Accra Central, Tudu, Central Lorry Park, the Ministries, Osu and Dansoman. Dansoman has its own central sewage system, which is not connected to the rest. The Dansoman sewage system was constructed during the Dansoman Housing Project by the Acheampong government. This line is connected to a treatment plant, which flows to the sea.

Houses with toilet facilities connected to the central sewage system pay connection fees to the GW&SC. This includes registration fees and monthly charges. Owners of toilet facilities without connections to the central sewage, pay various types of fees for removal of their liquid waste. Houses with toilets that use septic storage tanks engage service providers periodically to remove the waste and pay various fees depending on the type and capacity of the facility.

Institutional arrangement for liquid waste management

Institutional arrangement in this paper is defined as a fixed pattern of relationships - usually laid down in regulations or contracts, but sometimes based on a non-written understanding - between two or more actors with respect to the collection and disposal of liquid waste. This results in an economic activity that has some sort of physical manifestation such as building, equipment, and vehicles. There are three identifiable groups of actors in liquid waste management: service providers, consumers, and policy makers. The institutional arrangements for liquid waste management are far more complex than solid waste management. Three levels of liquid waste management could be distinguished: provision of toilet facilities, management of toilet facilities, and removal of toilet liquid waste.

Provision and management of toilet facilities

There are three main types of providers of toilet facilities in the AMA. These are: (i) publicly provided toilet facilities, i.e. built and owned by AMA (WMD), (ii) privately built household toilets (for private use only), and (iii) privately built commercial public or communal toilets. Toilets provided at offices of public and private organisations are excluded from the study.

From a technical perspective, toilet facilities could be grouped into four types: (i) water closet (WC) with sewage connection; (ii) WC without connection but with underground septic storage tank; (iii) KVIP with underground septic storage tank; and (iv) Pan latrine. Public toilets provided by AMA, private firms and individuals are

similar to the ones provided by households. The difference is the number of seats available. Pan latrines do not occur in the public domain.

Following the privatisation of some aspects of liquid waste management in 1997, private firms are now permitted to participate in the provision of toilet facilities on commercial purposes. Two forms of facility provision are identifiable. First, build, owned and operate (BOO) system in which the private firms or individuals build their own public toilets and operate for commercial purposes. Second, build, operate and transfer (BOT) system in which the firm or individual build a public toilet, operate it on a commercial basis and transfer it to the local authority. Normally, toilets under the BOT system are built on sanitary sites belonging to the AMA. The AMA leases the land to the entrepreneur for a period of about 20 - 25 years. It is anticipated that, the latter would be able to re-coop the investment during that period. These measures are aimed at providing more toilet facilities to the people and improving the infrastructure and the management of liquid waste in the city.

Four major categories of liquid waste management could be distinguished: (i) publicly owned toilets operated by the AMA (WMD) itself, (ii) publicly owned toilets operated by private agencies on lease or contract basis, (iii) privately owned household toilets managed privately for household use, and (iv) privately owned communal toilets operated on a commercial basis.

Removal and transportation of waste

The type of toilet facility determines the way the waste is removed and transported to disposal sites. Liquid waste from toilet facilities with sewage connections is transported automatically from the toilet facility to disposal point through the sewage. Nightsoil collectors empty pan latrines and carry the waste to central collection points (cesspools). The big containers are normally lifted at night and emptied at treatment plants or approved disposal sites.

Toilets with septic storage tanks are emptied by suction service providers: WMD, private agencies or in the case of La by a community based organisation (La Mansaamoo Kpee). Quasi-public organisations such as SSNIT, University of Ghana (Legon), and the security services (the Army, the Police, the Prisons, and the Fire Service) - have their own liquid waste collection and transportation services.

Each type of household facility has its specific arrangement for removal.Institutional arrangements for collection and removal of liquid waste in the metropolitan area are as follows: (i) cesspit emptier service for private households water carriage latrine system, (ii) public toilets dislodgement for septic tank latrines, KVIPs, and WCs, (iii) surface container for pan latrines, and (iv) central sewage system.

Frequency

The frequency of removal of the waste is directly linked to the type of facility and its capacity. Pan latrines are emptied twice or thrice a week to

central cesspit surface container, which in turn is removed everyday in the night hence the name 'night-soil'. However, irregular collection of waste is the rule rather than the exception. Toilet facilities without connection to the central sewage system (WCs, KVIPs, and septic tank latrines) require service providers to empty their tanks when full. A survey carried by this writer in 1999 and 2000 shows that the frequency of waste removal for those with septic storage tank facilities range from six months to three years or more, depending upon the type and capacity of storage facility and the number of people using the facility. Normally, household toilets take a longer period to fill-up than public ones.

Mode of payment

There are different modes of payment in the liquid waste management sector. Owners of toilet facilities with sewage connection pay registration and monthly charges to the GW&SC. Owners of all other categories of toilets without connection to the central sewage system pay fees to other service providers. The service providers include the AMA, AMA's accredited agents, non-AMA's accredited agents, and a community-based organisation (La Mansamoloo Kpee). Quasi-public organisations such as Cocobod, SSNIT, and University of Ghana, which provide their own services, pay discharge fees to the AMA. The Security Services - the Army, Police, Prisons, and Fire Service - which also have their own service trucks do not pay any fees for the discharge of waste. All categories of public/communal toilets with or without connections to the central sewage system pay registration and licence fees to the AMA to operate as commercial entity in the metropolitan area. Owners or managers of all non-sewage public or communal toilet facilities pay fees for dislodgement to service providers. Operators of toilets owned and operated by the AMA pay all revenues to the AMA. Operators of privately managed AMA toilet facilities pay dislodgement fees to service providers including the AMA.

The owners of communal toilets charge user-fee per visit. Income generated from the user-fees is used for their maintenance and operation. The fees are subject to approval by the AMA. In most cases, however, particularly in the private-private arrangements, the rates are fixed by service providers without the involvement of AMA, but within approved range. The fee may differ from one type of facility to the other. For example, the fee for WCs differs from that of septic tank latrine or KVIPs. WCs with sewage connection attract higher rates than those with frequent water shortage. Factors such as cleanliness of the environment, provision of toilet rolls, etc. affect the price of the service. Most people settle for modest services with affordable prices even though all the service consumers prefer WCs with a sewage connection.

Stakeholders perception of the functioning of the institutional arrangements

There are three identifiable actors or stakeholders in liquid waste management: service providers, service consumers and policy-makers.

Service providers: There are three main types of service providers, namely (i) providers of toilet facilities, (ii) managers of toilet facilities, and (iii) those who remove and transport liquid waste (i.e. night-soil collectors and suction truck operators). Each of these has its interests depending on how much it gains from the service. Though the housing code requires every household to have its own toilet, discontinuation of operation of public toilets is unlikely to occur in the near future. This is due to three main reasons. First, many households do not want to provide their own KVIPs or WCs. Second, there are segments of the population who are homeless and may therefore have no access to any other form of toilet facility besides the communal type. Third, the operation of public toilets is a lucrative business to both the operators and the local authority because it has high demand for its services and it is cost-effective.

Service consumers: Rich households prefer WCs connected to central sewage to spare them the inconvenience and agony of searching for service providers to empty their septic storage tank whenever they are full. Besides, when the toilet is being removed or dislodged, it leaves terrible stench in the area for a long period of time. Irregular collection of waste from pan latrines is very prevalent. Flies are always abundant in the place. Many residents think pan latrines have outlived their usefulness in the city. and are nuisance, particularly to immediate neighbours. If toilet facilities are not emptied regularly, they pose health hazards and become breeding grounds for vectors of disease.

Houses with septic storage tanks want provision of more suction trucks to prevent long queues for them. Users of public toilets on the other hand want cleaner and more pleasant toilets at affordable prices. The households prefer WCs connected to sewage. In its absence, they want efficient and affordable suction truck services. Pan latrine owners want efficient services from night-soil operators.

Policy-makers: Policy-makers prefer central sewage facilities for the entire metropolitan area. However, this seems impossible in the present economic situation. Poverty also prevents most households to have their own toilet. For them, the public toilet remains the only choice. Policy-makers also acknowledge the propensity for increased demand for public toilets as more and more houses spring up without their own toilet facilities. Besides, the growing number of homeless people will further increase the reliance on public toilets. Policy-makers think that its twin policy that requires every house to have its own toilet facility, whilst at the same time improves public toilets and increases their number and accessibility through private sector participation would go a long way to mitigate the problem.

The most feasible, achievable and efficient system

Though the most efficient system of the liquid waste management is the water closet (WC) connected to central sewage system, majority of people do not have access to this facility. Only a limited number of WCs are connected to the central sewage system. For areas without a sewage system, WCs with septic storage tank provide the next best alternative. Irregular water supply in some areas affects their operation, however. For poor and deprived areas, the KVIP is the best alternative since it does not require water to function. However, the initial cost of building a KVIP and its maintenance, including the periodic removal of waste put it beyond the reach of many households. In view of this, policy-makers have embarked upon measures to increase and improve public toilets for the large portion of the population, whilst at the same time, encouraging the expansion of household private toilets.

According to some people, the real problem of management of public toilets in the past was not centralisation per se, but insufficient money to run them efficiently. In the absence of cost-recovery and inadequate government funding the result was poor maintenance. The problem has reduced through the introduction of user-fees since the 1980s, decentralisation of the waste management system since 1992, and privatisation of some aspects of liquid waste management some years later. Public toilets are operated either by contracting out or franchising. The invitation of private firms and individuals to build and operate public toilets on commercial basis has greatly helped liquid waste management. As long as the economic situation of the majority of the people remains very poor, public toilets will remain an essential feature of liquid waste management in Accra.

Conclusion

As public or communal toilets are becoming a permanent feature of the Ghanaian society, steps must be taken to ensure that more and decent public toilets with neat and pleasant surroundings are provided to take care of those without access to private toilets. As the operation of public toilets becomes more lucrative, the desire for profit must not override sanitary requirements. The local authority and service providers must take steps to overcome the country's poor maintenance culture, which is worse in the waste management sector. Leasing or contracting out the management of government owned public toilets and private sector participation have indeed led to improvement of public toilets. Besides bringing in additional resource and private sector managerial thinking, privatisation has led to competition in the management of public toilets and provision of suction truck service. These will improve even further if the revenues so generated are used for their maintenance.

Since the AMA's policy of 'one house, one toilet' is not realistic for the time being as far as the poorest segment of the population is concerned, the local government in partnership with the private sector should embark on a thorough improvement of public toilet facilities. 'Improvement' includes among others: cleaner, sanitary conditions, better management, easy access and privacy. Privatisation and contracting-out, as described in this paper, if executed in a 'humane' and reasonable manner can help to achieve this objective. Where financial resources allow for it, a policy of encouraging toilets in private houses should be pursued. It is to be expected that the coverage of a private home-based toilet system will gradually increase. The AMA should facilitate that process.

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MANAGING LIQUID WASTE: THE CASE OF PUBLIC TOILETS IN KUMASI

Johan Post

Introduction

The Kumasi authorities are some what ambiguous when it comes to their view on public toilets. While these facilities provide people that are deprived of household latrines with a place to ease themselves and ensures that human excreta are contained and conveyed off-site properly, at the same time their almost proverbial dirtiness is a thorn in the flesh of many officials. From the point of view of public health public toilets are considered both a burden and a boon. However, in the course of time the balance has tipped to the more negative side.

Development of public sanitary facilities in Kumasi dates back to 1923 when the Kumasi Public Health Board introduced the pan or bucket latrine system. Earlier on residents used pit latrines, which were normally situated at the outskirts of the community at such distances that bad smell and flies around the pit could not trouble the houses in the community. However, rising population densities in urban areas made the use of this rudimentary system increasingly problematic. Besides, the British colonisers found it necessary that houses and offices were equipped with their own sanitary facilities (Gordon 1997). The buckets were emptied two or three times a week by government employed conservancy labourers and the contents was disposed of well outside town in order not to endanger public health. This innovation marked the start of public sector delivery of sanitary services to the city's inhabitants.

In the 1930s the first public pan latrines were introduced in Kumasi. Although legislation was passed in 1939 requiring every domestic dwelling to be provided with a latrine, public facilities have remained very important ever since. Currently nearly 40% of the Kumasi households rely on about 290 public toilets at 200 sanitary sites around the city (KMA, 1995: 5). Public latrines using the traditional pan system still constitute 15% of the total. In the course of time, however, technologies have been improved. In the 1940s the aqua privy - locally known as 'bomber' because of their tendency to accumulate methane that occasionally explodes (Whittington e.a. 1993: 736) - was introduced[1]. The majority of public latrines (64%) is of this type. Another 20% is equipped with the KVIP technology, while the remaining 1 % uses the WC-septic tank system (KMA 1995: 5)[2].

The public toilets used to be owned and operated by the municipal government. However, in the course of the 1980s the neo-liberal praise of market-led development and the idea of roll-

ing-back the state made themselves felt in Ghana. The concept of privatisation - in the case of public services more accurately called public-private partnership - became a centrepiece in the country's reform policies. Partly on the insistence of (international) donor agencies the government decided to change its role from 'direct provision' (also called 'production') of services (the act of physically producing and delivering a service) to 'indirect provision' (the business of ensuring that a service is available). This change was also carried out in the domain of public toilet management.

In the following analysis an attempt will be made to assess the appreciation of public toilets by their users. Subsequently, prevailing views on the part of local government officials on the role and design of public toilet facilities are described and discussed. Finally, the vicissitudes of public-private arrangements in the management of these facilities are disclosed. The argument draws on research conducted by Ankie Frantzen in Kumasi in 1997 (Frantzen 1998; Frantzen and Post 1999)[3].

Satisfaction of users

Currently public toilets in Kumasi are rather poorly managed. According to the users, services have become worse since the Assembly Members took over control early 1997. In fact, only ten percent out of the total of 70 respondents is 'very satisfied' with the facility they use, while 47 percent is reasonably satisfied and the remaining 43 percent is not satisfied at all.

There is a clear relationship between satisfaction rates and the type of facility patronised. The users of the seven sites examined during the research disliked the bucket latrine the most (66% of the users had a negative opinion about this type). The most popular type is the WC; 68% of the users appreciated this type, especially while they are convenient. This corresponds to the prevailing view on what constitutes a good toilet, e.g. the most sophisticated and western-like type. However, in actual fact the closet and the floors require frequent cleaning because they become dirty very fast. Therefore, public toilets with WCs, similar to all the other systems, score low on the assessment criteria 'cleanliness'.

An outstanding feature of the satisfaction-research was the small number of complaints about the lack of privacy. Only 9 percent of the users interviewed was dissatisfied about this issue. 57 percent of the users classified privacy as 'good', while 34 percent thinks privacy is 'acceptable'. In contrast with the village people investigated by Van der Geest (Van der Geest 1998:6), who ignore each other during toilet visits and avoid communications on their way there, users in Kumasi do have conservation's during toilet visits (personal communication by Joop Valentin, a Dutch priest working in Kumasi)[4].

Users of public toilets mention a great number of problems which contribute to their dissatisfaction. Apart from grievances about dirtiness, pollution of the surroundings, stench and

the lack of amenities (water, soap and towels), users also complain about the obsolete structures, the limited number of cubicles, the inadequacy of water supply, the small size of the dispensed toilet paper, the misbehaviour of other users, the absence of a nightguard and finally the high cost of use compared to the level of services. The user charge of a public toilet in Kumasi at the time of the study (1997) was 30 cedis a time (1.5 dollarcent). Children and the elderly pay less or nothing at all. If a public toilet facility is equipped with WCs the fee rises to 50 cedis per visit. For this amount the user gets half a sheet of newspaper which is thrown in a basket after use. In neighbourhoods primarily inhabited by Muslims, a bottle of water replaces the toilet paper.

The managers of the public toilets use the revenues to maintain the building, to keep the toilets clean and to pay for the employees. Also the septic tanks, compartments or buckets have to be emptied regularly. In reality desludging is often postponed until the moment that tanks and buckets start overflowing. This is another reason why 55 percent of the users think that they do not receive enough services for their toilet fees. It is hardly surprising that there are frequent arguments between the users and the money collectors. Users do not want to pay for dirty toilets. On the other hand approximately 40 percent of the visitors is willing to pay more for clean toilets. The maximum amount people are willing to pay is about 80 cedis a visit. However, there appears to be no sound reason to adjust the fees upward considering the fact that examples exist where profitable management is linked to adequate servicing. Furthermore, public toilets mostly serve lower income groups for which a rise in the toilet fees could be a serious problem which might incite them to go and relieve themselves in the bush.

Governmental view on sanitation

Since the end of the eighties various actions have been taken in Kumasi to improve public toilet facilities. In 1989 UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), ODA (the British Overseas Development Association), and the KMA launched a pilot project called the Kumasi Sanitation Project (KSP) that included the transfer of public latrine management in the city's Central Business District to the private sector. It marked the start of a new way of thinking about urban sanitation that culminated in the design of the Strategic Sanitation Plan (SSP) for Kumasi. In the plan the idea of having a uniform technology all over the city was abandoned and replaced by a more a flexible approach with the choice of technology being based on considerations of technical feasibility, costs, and user perception. It also introduced the concept of public-private partnerships as a leading principle in sanitary service delivery (see below). A major stake of the SSP was to promote the use of private toilets (at the expense of public facilities) and to arrange for safe storage and professional disposal of human excreta.

Until quite recently there has been

an unmistakable reluctance on the part of the local government to face up to the problem of dirty toilet facilities. For many years the KMA turned a blind eye to the alarming death rate among the labourers collecting the buckets and depositing their contents into tanks at various sanitary sites. Due to inadequate design, lack of maintenance and very intensive use of pan latrines in urban situations, the toilet facilities are extremely dirty and a real threat to public health. However, the problem was banned from collective conscience and made less visible by having conservancy workers do their job at night. The authorities only started to confront this huge problem after a television documentary showed the disgusting practices to a broader public (personal communication by Chris de Veer). In the SSP the ban on the use of pan latrines now figures number one on the list of minimum service standards.

It is probably due to external interference that the local government in Kumasi (and elsewhere in Ghana for that matter) came to reconsider the problem of inadequate sanitation that was previously glossed over and trivialised. Donor insistence has undoubtedly contributed to sanitation policies becoming more systematic and coherent. Nevertheless, some of the policy choices are more telling on the attitudes of planners and decision-makers then on the usefulness and desirability of toilet facilities from the point of view of the users. To a certain extent one can say that officials and external experts agreed with each other on certain basic assumptions. Thus, the goal was to have a toilet facility in every house, based on the idea that such a facility would be cleaner, more convenient, and would offer more privacy to its users. As a consequence the building of new public toilets was only approved at public places like markets, light industrial areas and transport terminals. Existing public toilet facilities in poorer neighbourhoods, though not banned, were supposed to be phased out and did not receive any public money for maintenance. After some time it turned out that these goals were set too high, amongst others because the government was not able to raise enough money to subsidise the construction of private facilities in the houses (matching resident contributions). Furthermore, investment in houses is not very attractive for several reasons including tight rent control and collective ownership situations (Tipple and Willis 1989; Korboe 1992). The reins were loosened a little. The KMA declared its intention to promote improved operation and maintenance of neighbourhood public facilities and to seek finance to rehabilitate them. (KMA 1995: 9). In actual fact the authorities even went a step further by allowing the construction of new public toilets in low-income residential areas (c.f. the establishment in 1998 of a new facility in the Atonsu neighbourhood for which costs were shared between the KMA, the residents and the Dutch municipality of Almere). However, the design of these facilities was 'upgraded' as planners required the use of water flushing toilets rather than

simple latrine slabs despite the fact that the latter are much cheaper, less vulnerable and easier to clean.

The above mentioned choices undeniable reflect Western ideas on appropriate defecation. This takes place in privacy (almost secretly), comfortably sitting and should not leave any visible or smellable traces. The Ghanaian political and governmental elite has largely adopted these ideas and unthinkingly pushes its beliefs on the entire population. However, although many ordinary people adhere to the same sanitary ideals, they are living in a world in which they cannot conceal their visit to the public toilet and have to accept dirtiness and inconvenience. They simply ''think away" the problem (c.f. Van der Geest 1998: 10). Of course, that discrepancy between ideal and reality hardly exists for those who, due to their privileged position in society, do not need to patronise public facilities. This also helps to explain why officials have been so half-hearted in dealing with the deterioration of public toilets. Other reasons are presented in the section below.

Experiences with public-private partnerships

The third question under discussion concerns the experiences with public-private partnerships in the provision and management of public toilet facilities. For many years cleaning and maintenance of the facilities was carried out under responsibility of the local government. However, the overall deterioration of public servicing in the course of the 1980s, due to adjustment related budgetary cutbacks and staff retrenchment, also affected conditions at many of the latrines. Therefore, responsibility for their management was assumed by grassroots political organisations, the so-called Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs). These committees appointed public latrine managers who in turn hired ticket attendants and cleaners (Whittington et al 1993: 736). They also introduced user charges to pay for the costs of operation and maintenance of the facility. In fact, this turned out to be the first step towards privatisation of sanitary services.

The involvement of CDRs in the management of public toilets brought about some improvements. However, the CDRs were severely politicised and unrepresentative organs, and therefore, could not count on generous support by the population. They were accused, for example, of improperly using the toilet fees. Anyway, after a promising start the quality of services decreased again making the situation fit for intervention (Mensah 1996: 30). In 1989 the KSP was launched involving a specific effort to improve public toilet management. Five contractors were selected to run the public latrines in the city's CBD. Throughout the duration of the project, the performance of the new managers was monitored by the KMA in terms of cleanliness, maintenance of equipment, and timely payment of taxes. The public-private partnership was a mix between a franchise and a lease approach, because the KMA wanted operation, minor maintenance and daily management to

be franchised, but to remain proprietor of the fixed assets in order to justify taxation – monthly payment of a 20 percent surtax on the gross revenues - as a kind of return on their previous investments. Despite some problems with the cleanliness of sites the KMA, incited by its sponsors, decided to renew the contracts. In 1994 similar arrangements were established for the management of all the other public toilets in Kumasi. Through competitive bidding 44, mostly small, contractors were selected based on a critical assessment of their ability to perform the service and on the feasibility of their business plans (Mensah 1996: 31). Most of these contractors worked with managers that were made responsible for day-to-day operation of the facility.

According to the present users the public toilets were cleaner and better kept during the period of privatised management (1994-1996) than nowadays. Since January I 1997 public toilet management is in the hands of the Assembly Members of the KMA. This is due to a political manoeuvre at the expense of toilet visitors. In order to win votes for his re-instalment the current chief executive of Kumasi discontinued private contracts and handed management of public toilets over to the Assembly Members. However, most of the new managers irresponsibly economised on cleaning and maintenance in order to increase their earnings. Furthermore, they were not required, for political reasons, to pay surtax that the municipality needs to keep facilities up to the minimum. This explains why the state of the public toilets in Kumasi once again deteriorated sharply.

At first sight it seems strange that management by the Assembly Members turns out so badly. They are the elected representatives of their areas – usually a neighbourhood or part of a neighbourhood – and are expected to have an obvious interest in keeping good relationships with their constituency. However, it turns out to be very difficult for Assembly Members to fulfil the high expectations bestowed on them by their voters. Exceptions aside, it is almost impossible to meet the claims of his/her supporters considering the chronic shortage of local government means. On the contrary, being the representatives of the local administration they are expected to persuade the people to pay their taxes, while simultaneously inciting them to contribute to community development projects. Therefore, the average Assembly Members soon sees popular trust evaporate and, in response, he/she adopts an attitude of opportunism and/or indifference (Crook 1993). It is hardly surprising that only an occasional Assembly Members succeeds in getting re-elected. Keeping this in mind it is easier to understand their hardly concealed greed in the exploitation of public toilets. A subsequent question is why users do not take any action on the mismanagement of public toilet facilities by the Assembly Members. This is closely linked to the nature of the relationship between users (clients) and Assembly Members (patrons). An Assembly Member is a powerful person having crucial connections within the governmental apparatus. It is not only socially improper but also not expedient to let down on this person, not to say openly denounce of his/her conduct. In other words, the dependency relationship vis-à-vis the elected representative obstructs a purely businesslike approach.

Although Assembly Members have never really been publicly exposed the complains about the situation have meanwhile got through to the politicians. The chief executive was put under severe pressure to again transfer management to the private sector. In the course of 1998 he seemed willing to do so telling the Assembly Members that they had only themselves to blame. To the surprise of many, however, in December 1998 he once again entrusted the newly elected Assembly Members with the management of the toilets in their areas. The only difference is that the latter will now have to work under a contract with the KMA-WMD making it easier to sanction bad performance and to levy surtax. An important disadvantage of the Assembly Members acting as private contractors is the fact that these local politicians are not automatically good 'entrepreneurs'. Besides, it is by no means certain if sufficient safeguards are built-in to avoid history repeating itself.

Meanwhile opinions of the users of public toilet facilities are very clear. They want value for money - primarily meaning clean and usable facilities - and that is something that, until now, only private contractors have been able to provide. A private contractor is forced to offer quality on penalty of loosing the contract or not receiving permission to participate in new tenders. The obvious advantage of open competition in contracting out the management of public toilets is swift and effective sanctioning in the event of malpractice. However, in that case it is important that the community gets a say in performance monitoring. One should realise that the option of moving to another public toilet if services at the nearest place proof to be substandard is not realistic. Therefore, the inhabitants need to have a place where they can easily file their complaints. A good possibility, also because of its proximity, is to involve neighbourhood organisations in the control of public toilets. A local landlord association but also the newly elected unit committees can do that. They should not only inform the government about the quality of services but also discuss eventual complaints directly with the private contractor so he/she can address these immediately.

Conclusion

The analysis amply demonstrates the need to raise service standards of public toilets in Kumasi to an acceptable level. Even if it were only for reasons of public health something needs to be done about the current situation. Closing down public toilets is not an option considering the large group of people without access to private facilities and the improbability of these facilities being installed on their premises in the near future. This is especially true for low-income and

highly congested areas with poor water supply. The government assumes that most inhabitants prefer a toilet at home to the use of a public toilet for reasons of privacy. Convincing evidence did not support this assumption. Public toilets are sufficiently well shielded from the public eye to give users a feeling of privacy. The preoccupation with privacy seems to be more something of planners and decision-makers with their Westernised views than of the actual users of the toilet sites.

The extensive list of complaints on the part of the interviewees show that they favour clean and well kept (e.g. usable) toilets for an acceptable price. Both planners, decision-makers and managers of public toilet sites should take this into account. Therefore, public latrines have to be provided with equipment that is easy to clean and cheap to operate. Despite the popularity of WCs both with the government and the general public they do not really satisfy these requirements.

The local government has to face the fact that public toilet facilities will be indispensable in the city for a long time to come. It is very important that the KMA takes a clear and consequent policy-stand vis-à-vis the construction and management of these facilities. During the last two decades the situation of the public toilets appeared to be best when private contractors were responsible for the day-to-day operation of the toilet. Private operators work more efficiently and also invest more in proper maintenance in order to satisfy their clients and safeguard future exploitation. However, privatisation requires 'the guiding hand of the state' to become effective. The local government should focus on planning and project identification, procurement and contract management, performance monitoring, health and pollution control, information services, and financial management and accounting. This is a formidable task that the KMA has only recently started to take up. Unfortunately, political interference is a constant threat to public-private partnerships. This danger can only be contained if civil society is able (or enabled) to resist. In the case of the public toilet facilities greater accountability can be achieved by having the users, through their representatives, perform a supervisory function at management level. Community control has to become an integral element of public-private arrangements. Only then can public-private partnerships be expected to lead to a considerable improvement in the management of public toilet facilities.

Notes

1. Aqua Privies are essentially small septic tanks located directly underneath a squatting plate. These have a drop-pipe which extends below the liquid level in the tank to form a simple water seal. To prevent odour, fly and mosquito nuisance, the water seal has to be adjusted with each use by adding water to the tank via the drop-pipe to replace any losses. Waste is deposited directly into the tank where it decomposes anaerobically (i.e. without oxygen) in the same way it would in a septic tank. The tank requires desludging (Broome & Trattles 1986:44).

2. A Ventilated Improved Pit Latrine (VIP) is a traditional latrine to which a vent pipe, covered with a screen, is added to minimise odour and fly problems. In Kumasi the VIP with alternating sludge holding compartments was developed. The twin-pit concept enables the contents of one pit (once filled) to decompose while the other is in use, provided that sufficient time is allowed (two years or more). Afterwards, the decomposed materials can be dug out by hand without any serious health risks. This type of latrine is very easy to maintain and, aside from regular cleaning and repairs, need no further attention until the pit is nearly full (Mensah 1996:26).

3. The research by Frantzen consisted of a series of multiple interviews with officials from the KMA and various departments in Kumasi, private contractors and Assembly Members. It also comprised a random survey of users of seven public toilet sites representing the different types of latrines and the various kinds of areas in town (Frantzen 1998).

4. The originally assumed importance of privacy has to do with Western presumptions. Users in Kumasi are apparently less concerned about privacy. It is also important to realise that urban residents using public toilets usually belong to the same social stratum. One can safely say that people in higher societal positions have private toilet facilities at their disposal.

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Toilet als statussymbool?

Sjaak van der Geest

Toen vorig jaar de riolering door 11.000 lezers van het gerenommeerde tijdschrift British Medical Journal werd uitgeroepen tot de belangrijkste medische doorbraak sinds 1840, kreeg 'sanitation' eindelijk de erkenning waar het recht op had.

Toch blijft hygiëne het stiefkind van het medisch beleid. Het verwijderen of voorkomen van vuil heeft niets spectaculairs; het is nederige arbeid in vergelijking met wat in laboratoria, operatiekamers en intensive care units tot stand wordt gebracht. Je hoeft er niet voor gestudeerd te hebben. Het hoort thuis in het dagelijkse leven van gewone huishoudens. Bovendien heeft het te maken met vuil en dat maakt de bedrijfstak extra onaantrekkelijk. Het is ironisch, maar degene die het vuil opruimt wordt ermee geassocieerd (en 'besmet'), niet degene die het produceert.

De voorzichtige erkenning van het belang van 'sanitation' heeft wel geleid tot wereldwijde bevordering van betere voorzieningen zoals toiletten en schoon water. Terecht want ruim 2½ miljard mensen beschikken nog niet over zulke basale sanitaire voorzieningen. Helaas is het inzicht van beleidsmakers in hygiëne op zijn zachtst gezegd simplistisch en worden op grote schaal hygiënische verbeteringen opgedrongen die volgens de betrokkenen helemaal geen verbeteringen zijn.

Toiletten

Ik stootte op het onderwerp 'toilet' toen ik in een Ghanees dorp onderzoek deed naar ervaringen van ouder worden. Ik zat te praten met twee vrienden over het leven van ouderen en het gesprek kwam op toiletbezoek. De meeste huizen in het dorp hadden geen eigen toilet. Mensen gaven er blijkbaar de voorkeur aan het vuil en de vieze lucht op veilige afstand te houden. Er waren toen slechts twee openbare toiletten voor de ongeveer 5000 mensen van het dorp. Sommigen moesten tien minuten of langer lopen vóór ze bij het toilet waren. Hoe deden ouderen dat die slecht ter been waren of helemaal niet konden lopen, vroeg ik. Er ontspon zich een geanimeerd gesprek dat tot de avond duurde. Alle facetten van de stoelgang en alle soorten toiletten passeerden de revue. De situatie in het dorp maar ook de gebruiken en faciliteiten in Nederland kwamen aan bod.

Vanaf dat moment drong het tot me door welk een grote rol vuil – en vooral defecatie – in het leven van mensen speelt. Ik begon na te denken over de oorzaken van de collectieve verdringing van het onderwerp in de studie van culturen. De afgelopen jaren heb ik daarom geprobeerd stront op de (medisch-)antropologische agenda te zetten; met wisselend succes overigens. Er zijn gefronste wenkbrauwen: poep, dat is iets voor kinderen tussen één en twee, maar een professor? Deze verbazing, met een dosis hilariteit, bevestigt de ongemakkelijkheid van het onderwerp. Het is geen taboe om er over te praten, erger, het is kinderachtig. Wetenschappers doorbreken graag taboes maar ze willen niet infantiel overkomen.

Toch is het onderwerp van kolossaal belang en zouden we ons veel meer moeten verdiepen in de sociale en culturele complicaties van hygiëne en toiletgebruik. Gelukkig zijn er de afgelopen jaren enkele uitstekende antropologische studies verschenen over de culturele betekenis van toiletten, vuil en defecatie. Ze laten vooral zien dat vuil en hygiëne niet louter medische begrippen zijn maar vervlochten met talloze andere terreinen van de cultuur. Ndonko, een antropoloog uit Kameroen, schreef zijn proefschrift – overigens tot ergernis van

veel van zijn collega's – over toiletten. Aanleiding waren de reacties van dorpelingen in zijn land op het beleid van de regering hen te dwingen tot de bouw en het gebruik van toiletten. Tot die tijd hadden ze altijd hun behoefte gedaan in de 'bush' of op het strand.

Er bleek veel verzet tegen het regeringsbeleid. De traditionele 'stoelgang' was veel aangenamer en schoner (de frisse lucht tegenover een benauwd hokje) en bovendien verweven met religieuze en ecologische principes betreffende natuur en landbouw. Zo was het de regel zich te ontlasten in het open veld waar geen gewassen werden geteeld. Pas enkele jaren later werd het veld voor akkerbouw in gebruik genomen, tegen de tijd dat de ontlasting gecomposteerd en niet meer 'vies' was. Ndonko beschreef ook welke rol ontlasting in het dagelijks gedrag van mensen speelde, in hun taal, opvoeding van kinderen, symboliek, verhalen en grapjes. Mensen dwingen toiletten te bouwen is mogelijk, maar ze overtuigen die ook te gebruiken, is veel lastiger.

Schoonvader

Een collega vertelde mij hoe de verplichte bouw van een toilet in de achtertuin tot ongemak en gêne leidde bij haar kennissen in een Oegandees dorp. Je behoefte doen was altijd iets dat je in het verborgen deed. Je liep een stukje van huis weg alsof je iets te doen had of iemand ging bezoeken en dan zocht je een rustig plekje om je te ontlasten. Het was ongepast openlijk te kennen te geven dat je naar het 'toilet' ging. Poepen was iets dat je als het ware ontveinsde. Met een toilet pal achter het huis was dat niet meer mogelijk. Nu kon iedereen in huis zien wat je ging doen. Zo gênant. En wat nog erger was, je ging precies naar hetzelfde plekje waar zojuist iemand anders gezeten had. Voor de schoondochter die altijd een zekere afstand moet bewaren tegenover haar schoonvader, bij wie ze in huis woont, was het nieuwe toilet een ware verschrikking. Zij werd van nu af aan verwacht het toilet met diezelfde schoonvader te delen. Zoiets kon je toch moeilijk een verbetering in de hygiëne noemen. Dat was gewoon smerig. Geen wonder dat sommige toiletten werden omgebouwd tot gereedschappenschuurtje of kippenhop.

Status en prestige

Naast het verzet dat bestaat tegen het gebruik van toiletten is er ook een trend die een eigen toilet ziet als een teken van beschaving en vooruitgang. In een studie over 'social marketing' van toiletten in Bénin, West Afrika, schrijft de Britse Mimi Jenkins dat het hebben van een toilet weinig te maken heeft met hygiëne in de medische betekenis van het woord. Met een toilet aan huis demonstreren mensen dat ze modern zijn, een life style hebben zoals de mensen in de stad: voorzien van comfort en gesteld op privacy.

Ook in het Ghanese dorp was die trend merkbaar. Een eigen mooi en schoon toilet is een statussymbool. Vooral tijdens begrafenissen is een toilet belangrijk. Begrafenissen zijn gelegenheden waarbij vele bezoekers uren lang in het huis van de overledene verblijven en - als het een goede begrafenis is – grote hoeveelheden drank consumeren. Een mooi toilet is dan ook een belangrijk onderdeel van een geslaagde begrafenis; het hele huis is dat trouwens. De bezoekers, vooral die van ver komen en nog nooit het huis van de overledene hebben gezien, meten hun bewondering en respect voor de gestorvene af aan de kwaliteit van zijn huis. Als dat een armoedige toestand is, zeggen ze: Hij deed altijd zo gewichtig, maar kijk eens wat een armoedig huis hij had. Hij was toch niet degene die we dachten dat hij was. Maar het omgekeerde kunnen ze ook concluderen: Hij was veel belangrijker dan we beseften; kijk eens wat een prachtig huis. Een toilet moet in het licht van dat soort gesprekken begrepen worden.

Schone handen

Associaties met beschaafdheid, prestige en aantrekkelijkheid worden ook gemaakt bij lichamelijke hygiëne. Men weet dat hygiëne gezondheid bevordert, maar er is veel meer. Lichamelijke reinheid laat zien wat voor een persoon je bent. Het is een cruciaal element in je zelf-presentatie, evenals schone kinderen, een opgeruimd huis en een aangeveegd erf. Het belangrijkste motief voor hygiënisch gedrag is dan ook het 'menselijk opzicht', het verlangen door anderen aantrekkelijk gevonden te worden en gerespecteerd.

In het 'Westen' is dat niet anders. Onderzoek met een verborgen camera in een openbaar toilet in de Verenigde Staten liet zien dat mensen na het gebruik van het toilet veel vaker hun handen wasten als er andere bezoekers aanwezig waren dan wanneer ze alleen waren.

Onderzoek bij moeders in Ghana leverde 'alarmerende' cijfers op: slechts 4% van de moeders waste de handen nadat ze naar het toilet waren geweest en nog minder (2%) deden dat als ze hun baby hadden verschoond. Maar zo alarmerend is dat niet. Als ik na het toilet mijn handen was, doe ik dat vooral voor anderen om die te beschermen tegen het vuil dat van mij komt. Ik toon me zo een sociaal en verantwoordelijk persoon. Als het aan mijzelf lag, zou ik mijn handen veel minder wassen want ik ben nu eenmaal niet vies van mezelf. Geen wonder dat het een verschil maakt of er wel of niet anderen aanwezig zijn wanneer ik mijn handen was – of zou moeten wassen.

Als ik echter in aanraking komt met het vuil van een ander, heb ik weinig aansporing nodig mijn handen te wassen. Het vuil van de ander is immers veel vuiler dan dat van mezelf. Geen wonder dus dat Ghanese moeders zich niet zo haasten hun handen te wassen als het slechts om vuil van henzelf of hun kinderen gaat.

Daar komt nog bij dat moeders in Ghana het verschil tussen de linker en rechter hand maken. De rechter is voor sociale contacten – in letterlijke zin – terwijl de linker gebruikt wordt voor onreine handelingen. De toepassing van dat onderscheid is overigens niet afhankelijk van de aanwezigheid van anderen. Het correcte gebruik van rechter en linker hand wordt ieder kind vanaf het eerste jaar ingeprent en wordt een automatisme, een tweede natuur. Een goede vriend vertelde mij dat hij tijdens seks automatisch van rechts op links overschakelde als de hand bij 'onreine' lichaamsdelen arriveerde. Mij persoonlijk heeft dit strikte onderscheid altijd het veilige gevoel gegeven dat ik bij een begroeting in Ghana een schone had schud. In Nederland heb ik dat gevoel allerminst, hoewel we overal omringd worden door kranen en zeeppompjes.

Voorzichtig met 'cultuur'

Beleidsmakers die zich inzetten voor betere sanitaire voorzieningen, zouden beter moeten begrijpen dat hygiëne over veel meer gaat dan gezondheid. We weten nog veel te weinig over de cultuur van vuil en defecatie; niet zo vreemd want dat is nu niet bepaald het soort cultuur waar de antropoloog met een notitieboekje en videocamera bij gaat staan kijken. Zonder kennis van de cultuur kan beleid voor sanitaire verbetering echter verschrikkelijk mis gaan.

Één voordeel hebben we echter wel, we kunnen ons eigen gedrag en onze eigen gevoelens onderzoeken. Het zijn niet alleen de anderen die zich cultureel gedragen. Het gedrag van die 'anderen' is juist zo begrijpbaar omdat wij – die allerlei gezondheidsvoorlichting bedenken – evenzeer culturele wezens zijn. Als deskundigen cultuur-gevoelig beleid voor 'sanitation' willen ontwikkelen, moeten ze zich niet zozeer in vreemde gewoontes van de anderen te verdiepen, maar nadenken over hun eigen hygiënische gebruiken en gevoelens.

Het toilet van de oudere

Over respect, intimiteit en vuil in Ghana

Sjaak van der Geest[1]

Voor Agya Mensah en Veronica[2]

Dit artikel beschrijft de problemen van ouderen in een Ghanees dorp bij hun gang naar het toilet. Hun toenemende hulpbehoevendheid bij een bezoek aan het toilet wordt gerelateerd aan heersende ideeën over vuil, respect en intimiteit. De afstand naar het (openbare) toilet, het gebrek aan privacy en percepties van vuil veroorzaken enerzijds ongemak, gêne en het gevoel minder gerespecteerd te worden; anderzijds benadrukt men dat afhankelijkheid nu eenmaal hoort bij de ouderdom en dat daar niets beschamends aan is. De ontlasting van oude mensen kan zowel afkeer als tedere zorg oproepen.

[ontlasting, toilet, ouderen, vuil, respect, intimiteit, Ghana]

Kwahu-Tafo, een dorp van ruim 5000 inwoners in het zuiden van Ghana, heeft zeer weinig privé toiletten; ik schat zo'n tachtig. Zestig daarvan zijn emmer-latrines. De ontlasting komt terecht in een emmer die elke week geleegd wordt. Agya Kwame Mensah, een oude man die om en nabij de honderd is, en blind, heeft zo'n emmerlatrine. Het is een bouwsel van golfplaat op zijn erf. Een van zijn zonen heeft een touw gespannen van zijn kamer naar het toilet, ongeveer 25 meter, zodat de oude man ondanks zijn handicap zelfstandig het toilet kan bezoeken. Kwame Mensah wordt verzorgd door zijn dochter Veronica die haar echtgenoot in Kumase achtergelaten heeft om bij haar vader te zijn. Het erf is schoon en ik neem aan dat dat ook geldt voor het toilet. Ik ben er echter nooit in geweest. Behalve de oude man, Veronica, en eventuele andere familieleden zijn er nòg twee oudere mensen die gebruik maken van het toilet. Ze wonen vlakbij. Het spaart hun een lange wandeling want zelf hebben ze geen toilet en het dichtstbijzijnde openbare toilet is voor hen minstens een kwartier lopen.

Van der Plaats (1984) beschrijft de problemen rond de toiletgang van oudere mensen in Nederlandse verpleeghuizen. Het verlies van zelfstandigheid en de emotionele verwarring die dit veroorzaakt wordt het meest intens ervaren in afhankelijkheid van anderen als men naar het toilet moet. Defecatie is waarschijnlijk de meest private menselijke activiteit in onze cultuur. Dat private karakter dient begrepen te worden vanuit de heer-

sende ideeën over vuil en intimiteit. Ontlasting is iets uiterst intiems dat als vuil wordt gezien zodra het uit de intimiteit breekt van de persoon van wie het afkomstig is. In afhankelijkheidssituaties gebeurt dit. Anderen worden geconfronteerd met de defecatie van de hulpbehoevende en deze kan dat ervaren als een inbreuk op zijn privacy en een verlies van zijn waardigheid. Toiletgang, concludeert Van der Plaats, is een onderwerp dat in de opleiding van verzorgers weinig aandacht krijgt maar in verpleeghuizen misschien wel de meeste problemen veroorzaakt.[3] Zij laat zien hoe problemen rond de toiletgang bij de ouderen steeds meer angst en onrust teweeg brengen en bij de verzorgers steeds meer irritatie en agressie. Het gevolg is een verwijdering tussen de verzorgers en de ouderen.

Over de moeizame gang naar het toilet van ouderen is weinig geschreven. In de Nederlandse samenleving begint de discussie nu echter los te komen. In Ghana, besefte ik, is over dit onderwerp praktisch niets bekend.

Onderzoek

Tijdens mijn onderzoek bij ouderen in een Ghanese gemeenschap heb ik me afgevraagd hoe toenemende hulpbehoevendheid bij de toiletgang gevoelens van waardigheid en zelfrespect bij deze mensen beïnvloedde.

Het veldwerk voor dit onderzoek vond plaats in 1994, 1995 en 1996 (in totaal ongeveer zes maanden) in Kwahu-Tafo, in zuidelijk Ghana. Het dorp ligt halverwege Accra en Kumase op een plateau nabij Nkawkaw. Het bevindt zich in het gebied van de Kwahu (of Kwawu). De Kwahu behoren tot de taal- en cultuurgroep van de Akan en zijn nauw 'verwant' aan de Asante: matrilineair, losse huwelijksband en relatief onafhankelijke positie van vrouwen. De Kwahu staan bekend om hun passie voor handel. Men vindt hun winkels en winkeltjes in heel Ghana. Half gekscherend, half in ernst wordt soms gezegd dat een Kwahu bij het bouwen van een huis eerder geneigd is een winkel bij zijn huis te zetten dan een toilet.

Het onderzoek richtte zich op de betekenis van ouderdom, op de zorg die ouderen ontvangen van hun omgeving en op de veranderingen die zich de afgelopen decennia hebben voltrokken op dit terrein. Het onderzoek was kwalitatief en bestond grotendeels uit lange en korte gesprekken met ouderen en hun familieleden, en uit observaties tijdens bezoeken en diverse activiteiten. Daarnaast hield ik enkele gesprekken met verschillende groepen mensen, veelal jongeren of mensen van middelbare leeftijd, soms spontaan, soms georganiseerd ('focus group discussion'). Een poging om de ideeën van de jonge generatie te peilen via schriftelijke vragen, onvoltooide zinnen en opstelopdrachten in schoolverband leverde weinig op. De kennis van het Engels was zo slecht dat veel van de antwoorden onbegrijpelijk of minstens onduidelijk zijn. Het vermogen van de leerlingen om zich schriftelijk in hun eigen taal uit te drukken bleek nog slechter.

Het thema 'toiletgang' diende zich aan toen ik mij verdiepte in de diverse vormen van zorg. Het ontbreken van privé toiletten[4] kwam mij voor als een groot probleem voor de ouderen en wel om twee redenen. Ten eerste, bedacht ik, moest de lange

afstand naar het openbare toilet voor veel ouderen erg lastig zijn. De meesten zijn slecht ter been en kunnen die afstand met moeite afleggen. Bovendien zijn ze waarschijnlijk minder goed in staat hun ontlasting zo lang op te houden. Een tweede reden waarom het openbare toilet voor ouderen een 'stressvolle' ervaring zou kunnen zijn was het ontbreken van privacy. Gebruikers van openbare toiletten zitten in één gezamenlijke ruimte. Het toilet heeft twee ruimtes, een voor mannen, een voor vrouwen. In beide ruimtes zijn zes gaten waarboven men gehurkt zijn behoefte doet. Er zijn geen afscheidingen, men zit pal naast elkaar. Gebruikt papier wordt in een mandje gedeponeerd. De toezichthouder van het toilet verbrandt dit papier achter het toilet.

Ik verwachtte dat dit gebrek aan privacy tijdens defecatie op gespannen voet zou staan met de maatschappelijke positie van de oudere. Kaye (1962:93-94) meldt dat volwassenen proberen te voorkomen tegelijkertijd met kinderen het publieke toilet te bezoeken "for fear they will see their genital organs and subsequently refer to them abusively". Zelfs waar toiletten privacy bieden, bestaat overal ter wereld een neiging leden van verschillende sociale categorieën gebruik te laten maken van verschillende toiletten: mannen en vrouwen, hoger- en lagergeplaatsten in een organisatie, leraren en leerlingen. De aanwezigheid van jongeren in dezelfde toiletruimte, zo dacht ik, zou voor de ouderen pijnlijk en statusverlagend zijn.

Hoewel ik mij enigszins verdiept heb in de zorg bij toiletgang, ben ik niet in staat geweest bovenstaande veronderstellingen over het 'ongemak' van ouderen ten aanzien van toiletbezoek uitgebreid te toetsen in gesprekken met hen. Ter compensatie heb ik daarom aan drie van mijn Ghanese vrienden en onderzoeksassistenten in Kwahu-Tafo gevraagd schriftelijk op deze visie te reageren en hierover gesprekken te voeren met enkele ouderen in hun directe omgeving. Ondanks de slechte postverbinding waren hun antwoorden op mijn vragen binnen twee maanden bij mij terug. Ik heb in dit verkennend essay dankbaar gebruik gemaakt van hun bevindingen en commentaar.

Los van het onderzoek onder ouderen was ik al geruime tijd geïnteresseerd in de wijze waarop men in de gemeenschap van Kwahu-Tafo omging met vuil, met name menselijke ontlasting. Dat had deels persoonlijke, deels 'antropologische' redenen, al zijn die twee natuurlijk moeilijk te onderscheiden. Wat de persoonlijke redenen betreft, toiletbezoek is altijd het zwakke punt geweest in mijn participerende observatie als onderzoeker in Kwahu-Tafo. De verklaring daarvoor lag natuurlijk in de kwaliteit van de toiletvoorziening. Gewend aan een privé en redelijk schoon toiletsysteem vond ik de twee meest voorkomende toiletvoorzieningen in Kwahu-Tafo, publieke latrine en emmer-toilet een zware opgave. Het vuil, de confrontatie met uitwerpselen van voorgangers en het gebrek aan privacy (spiedende blikken) braken mij op. Diverse malen nam ik me voor door te zetten, even zovele malen gaf ik het weer op.

De antropologische reden was mijn fascinatie met wat ik elders een paradox heb genoemd: de bezorgdheid van de Akan om lichamelijke reinheid lijkt volkomen in tegenspraak met hun zorgeloosheid en inefficiëntie betreffende de verwijdering van vuil, inclusief menselijke fecaliën, uit hun midden.

Op een dag bracht ik het onderwerp ter sprake, ik vrees tijdens het eten met mijn vrienden. We vergaten het middagprogramma en bleven aan het onderwerp 'poep' en ander vuil hangen. Ik stelde vragen, daagde hen uit en maakte aantekeningen. Mijn

vrienden verbaasden zich over mijn verbazing over wat voor hen doodgewoon was en werden eveneens gegrepen door het onderwerp.

De volgende dag schreef ik de voornaamste 'ontdekkingen' van onze discussie op, waarna zij het nog eens van commentaar voorzagen. Lange tijd bleef deze diarree van argumenten en anekdoten tussen mijn papieren zitten tot ik besloot het schrijfsel te publiceren (Van der Geest 1998). Toen het verscheen kreeg ik veel reacties van collega's die klaarblijkelijk getroffen waren door het feit dat hier gesproken werd over zaken die ook hen tijdens het veldwerk bezig hadden gehouden, maar waarover men nu eenmaal niet schreef. Ten onrechte, lieten sommigen mij nu weten.

Het besluit om een themanummer uit te brengen over 'poep en welbevinden' is grotendeels terug te voeren tot die geanimeerde discussie, bijna drie jaar geleden, in Kwahu-Tafo. In dit essay wil ik mij beperken tot de poep van ouderen en hun daarmee samenhangende welbevinden.

De dagelijkse stoelgang

Voor mensen in Kwahu-Tafo is een dagelijkse stoelgang een voorwaarde voor een goede gezondheid èn een bewijs daarvan.[5] Het accent ligt echter op het eerste. Ontlasting is vuil dat zich ophoopt in het lichaam en zo snel mogelijk verwijderd dient te worden. Vuil dat niet uitgescheiden wordt, gaat gisten en broeien en veroorzaakt hitte in het lichaam wat vervolgens tot allerlei ziektes kan leiden, zowel intern (koorts, hoofdpijn, maagpijn) als extern. De hitte zoekt zich een weg naar buiten via bijvoorbeeld zweren, aambeien en huiduitslag. Wie één dag niet naar het toilet is geweest spreekt al gauw van constipatie. Met laxeermiddelen, inclusief klysma's, tracht men de 'constipatie' te bestrijden.

Een geregelde stoelgang geeft ook een gezonde appetijt, men heeft immers plaats gemaakt voor nieuw voedsel. Een van de ouderen citeerde een spreekwoord om zijn visie hierop kracht bij te zetten: *Wo poma na wo to a, na egye* (Als je een geweer goed laadt, geeft het een harde knal). Na geschoten te hebben, kun je het opnieuw laden (en weer een harde knal produceren). Het spreekwoord geeft met een akoestische metafoor de voortdurende gezonde afwisseling tussen eten en stoelgang weer.

Niet alleen is het belangrijk dagelijks ontlasting te produceren, het is ook sterk aan te raden dat vroeg in de ochtend te doen. Toen ik een vrouw die haar bedlegerige moeder verzorgt vroeg waarom dat zo was, antwoordde zij: "Before you put in new food, it is better to take the old one out." Een man merkte op dat iemand die 's morgens niet naar het toilet gaat zich onder de zieken moet rekenen (*Sè wonkò tiafi anòpa a, woka ayarefoò ho*). Die stelregel lijkt minder strikt op te gaan voor ouderen die de dag wat later en rustiger beginnen en er de voorkeur aan geven het spitsuur bij het openbare toilet te vermijden. Het idee dat men zijn darmen dient te legen alvorens nieuw voedsel in te nemen wordt echter ook door ouderen onderschreven. "*Mayè basaa*" (ik voel me ongemakkelijk) zei een oude man, "als ik 's morgens niet geweest ben; alsof ik ziek ben. Ik heb geen trek in eten." Een oude vrouw antwoordde toen zij gevraagd werd hoe ze de dag begonnen was: "I went to toilet before I had my breakfast. When I have my breakfast before going to toilet, I fall sick."

Tegelijkertijd heb ik echter geconstateerd dat de ouderen – ook de jongeren trouwens[6] – flexibel omgaan met deze regel. In oktober 1994 volgden wij zestien ouderen gedurende twee dagen. Wij bezochten hen drie of vier maal per dag en vroegen wat ze in de tijd daarvoor hadden gedaan. Het bleek dat ze bijna allemaal vroeg opstonden, rond 5 uur gewoonlijk. Zeven van hen waren meteen na het opstaan naar het toilet geweest, vijf hadden dat niet gedaan en bij vier van hen ontbreekt deze informatie.

Ideeën over vuil

Vuil is een centraal begrip in de cultuur van de Akan en in hun visie op de fysiologie en 'sociologie' van de mens. Zoals reeds is opgemerkt, wordt vuil gezien als een van de hoofdoorzaken van ziekte. Bijna de helft van de ziekte-oorzaken die Warren (1974: 317-18) verzamelde in een andere Akan groep, de Bono, was gerelateerd aan vuil. Wie gezond wil blijven moet vuil vermijden. Men dient altijd het voedsel af te dekken tegen vliegen en ander vuil. Men moet pannen en ander kook- en eetgerei goed wassen, het erf goed vegen omdat afval op de grond insecten aantrekt die ziekte verspreiden. De drums, potten en jerrycans waarin water wordt bewaard, moeten steeds schoongemaakt worden, de kleren worden vaak en grondig gewassen en men neemt dagelijks minstens eenmaal, liefst tweemaal, een bad.

Er is een duidelijke analogie tussen het dagelijks wassen van het lichaam, de dagelijkse gang naar het toilet en het dagelijks schoonvegen van het erf. De analogie wordt nog overtuigender als we bedenken dat alle drie 'reinigingsrituelen' in de ochtend plaats vinden. Ze markeren het begin van een goede dag. Wie de dag begint met weglating van een van deze activiteiten maakt een slechte start en zal waarschijnlijk problemen tegenkomen.

Vuil is ongewenst, maar er zijn diverse soorten vuil die verschillen in hun graad van 'ongewenstheid'. *Efi* is vuil dat van buiten komt en zich hecht aan het lichaam, aan kleding, aan voorwerpen zoals eetgerei, en aan een huis. Het heeft een tijdelijk karakter. Een man die van het land komt, is vuil (*ne ho aye fi*) vanwege het werk dat hij gedaan heeft. Als hij een bad heeft genomen is hij weer schoon. Een kind dat in de modder speelt, is vuil totdat de moeder het gewassen heeft. Een erf waarop gewerkt en gespeeld wordt, is vuil totdat het weer geveegd wordt. *Efi* is geen ernstige vorm van vuil. Als men er tijdig iets aan doet, is het niet bedreigend.

Atantaneè (letterlijk: weerzinwekkende dingen) is vuil dat meer zorgen baart. Het is vuil dat uit het lichaam komt: speeksel, braaksel, menstruatiebloed, urine en ontlasting.[7] Als er menselijke uitwerpselen op de vloer van het toilet liggen, is dat ander – ernstiger – vuil dan bananenschillen en stukken plastic op het erf. *Eho ye tan*, zegt men van zo'n toilet, het is smerig, weerzinwekkend.

De graad van vuilheid neemt toe naarmate het vuil meer vanuit de intimiteit van de ander komt. Vuil is ongewenste intimiteit. Vandaar dat vuil ook een belangrijke plaats inneemt in de 'sociologie' van de Akan: de kennis en regels betreffende de omgang van mensen met elkaar.

Wie niet met het vuil (de intimiteit) van anderen geconfronteerd wenst te worden, is verplicht anderen ook niet met zijn/haar vuil in aanraking te laten komen. Talloze regels instrueren hoe dat kan voorkomen worden. Een daarvan is het taboe op het gebruik van de rechterhand voor activiteiten die met 'vuil' van doen hebben. De linkerhand dient het vuile werk te doen: op het toilet, het aanraken van lichaamsdelen die met vuil-productie geassocieerd worden, neus snuiten, het aanraken van 'vuile' voorwerpen zoals een po of maandverband. Ook bij seks geldt deze regel. Iemand vertelde mij dat hij bij het vrijen 'automatisch' van de rechter- op de linkerhand overschakelde als hij 'onreine' lichaamsdelen aanraakte.

Iemand met de linkerhand groeten, zelfs als dat uit de verte gebeurt, is een affront, een 'vuile streek', inderdaad een ongewenste intimiteit. De linkerhand gebruiken bij het eten is eveneens uit den boze, maar soms – om technische redenen – onvermijdelijk. Het eten van *een ander* met de linkerhand aanraken is echter onacceptabel.[8]

Vuil, schoonheid en respect

Atantaneè bevat de stam *tan* dat 'lelijk', 'weerzinwekkend' betekent. Als werkwoord betekent *tan* 'haten'. *Atantaneè*, zei iemand, doet zeer aan je ogen. Lelijk, 'hatelijk', vuil, onbehoorlijk, schandelijk ('shameful') zijn in deze context synoniemen. Vuil, in de betekenis van *atantaneè*, is het tegenovergestelde van respect. Wie op deze manier vuil is, wie zich vies gedraagt, verliest het respect van anderen. Zijn gedrag impliceert immers dat hij zelf anderen niet respecteert, en alleen wie anderen respecteert, ontvangt respect. Daarom zijn scheldwoorden die 'vuil' bevatten zo effectief om iemand te laten weten dat hij geen respect verdient. Warren (1974: 80) citeert veertien dergelijke scheldwoorden.

De ernstigste verwensingen in deze sfeer die ik in Kwahu-Tafo opving waren *Mene wo so* (ik schijt op je), *Meta wo so* (ik laat scheten op je) en – gruwelijk : *Mene w'anom* (ik schijt in je mond). Maar ook hier werkt de reciprociteit. Wie met stront gooit wordt er door besmet. Evenmin als een respectvol persoon anderen met zijn vuil confronteert of hun zijn linkerhand geeft, zal hij anderen verbaal met zijn vuil lastig vallen. Een beschaafd iemand zal nooit dergelijke taal gebruiken.

Wie echter tegen zijn wil – wegens ouderdom bijvoorbeeld – anderen met zijn vuil lastig valt – wederzijds ongewenst dus –, wordt dit strikt genomen niet aangerekend. Zo iemand zal logischerwijze ook andermans respect niet verspelen. Een kind dat nog niet zindelijk is mag zijn moeder lastig vallen. Maar als het geacht wordt zindelijk te zijn wordt er wel gelet op zijn gedrag. Als het op een ongepaste plaats zijn behoeft doet, wordt het gepest: *wakòbo dawiam* (letterlijk: je hebt iets ongepasts gedaan; vrij vertaald: Bah, wat vies). Ook een zieke of oudere die niet zelfstandig naar het toilet kan gaan of incontinent is, valt in de categorie van mensen die een beroep op anderen mag doen, maar theorie en praktijk stemmen niet altijd overeen. Hoewel het een ouder persoon niet kwalijk genomen wordt dat hij anderen met zijn ontlasting confronteert, kan deze situatie wel degelijk tot een vermindering van de respectabiliteit van de oudere

leiden, zowel in de ogen van de ander als in zijn eigen opvatting. Ongemerkt kan deze situatie tot een wederzijds gevoel van ontluistering en decorumverlies voeren.

Het tegenovergestelde van *atantaneè*, reinheid (*ahoteè*) is een begrip dat buitengewoon positief is en zich in het centrum van een wijdvertakt semantisch netwerk bevindt. Rein = netjes = mooi = aantrekkelijk = goed = beschaafd = respectabel. *Ne ho te* (letterlijk: zijn/haar lichaam is helder) is een compliment dat niet alleen verwijst naar fysieke reinheid, maar tevens zegt dat de persoon knap en aantrekkelijk en moreel achtenswaardig is. In Ghanees Engels is de uitdrukking "She is neat" nagenoeg synoniem met "she is pretty". Het is overigens een verbinding die tevens vervat ligt in het Nederlandse woord 'schoonheid'. Schoonheid in deze – ongebruikelijke – dubbele betekenis roept respect op en straalt respect uit.

Properheid van de huid, de tanden, de nagels en de lichaamsopeningen en properheid in het huishouden, in kleding, in de zorg voor de kinderen, vormen de basis van iemands aantrekkelijkheid, fysiek, sociaal en moreel, kortom van zijn respectabiliteit.

Zorg en de toiletgang van ouderen

Ouderen proberen zo lang mogelijk zichzelf te redden bij hun gang naar het toilet. Zoals we gezien hebben slaagde de blinde Agya Mensah daarin dankzij het touw dat zijn zoon gespannen had en maakten twee andere ouderen eveneens gebruik van zijn privé toilet. Mercy Ofori, die eveneens blind is en bij wie een been geamputeerd is, kon zich ook nog redden. Met twee krukken, vertelde haar zoon, kon zij de latrine op het erf bereiken.

De meeste ouderen van het onderzoek hadden toegang tot een privé toilet, ofwel in eigen huis, ofwel vlakbij in het huis van familie of buren. Van slechts twee ouderen weet ik met zekerheid dat zij gebruik maakten van een openbaar toilet, op enige loopafstand. Sommigen lieten de keuze over aan het moment of aan de plaats waar zij zich toevallig bevonden.

Mijn indruk is dan ook dat de eerste 'zorg' bij toiletgebruik van ouderen erin bestaat dat zij toegang krijgen tot een privé toilet in hun directe omgeving. Dit is in zekere zin een privilege. De emmer-toiletten, die slechts eenmaal per week geleegd worden, raken snel vol en de eigenaren beperken daarom het gebruik ervan tot de naaste familieleden en – eventueel – een oudere in de buurt die niet over een eigen toilet beschikt.[9]

Kwaku Martin, die bijna blind is, vertelde me dat zijn vrouw of een van de kamerhuurders hem soms helpt op zijn weg naar het toilet dat hoogstens 25 meter van zijn kamerdeur verwijderd is. "They are my left hand to the toilet", zei hij in het Engels. Ik neem aan dat hij daarmee bedoelde dat zij hem schoonmaakte na het toilet. De linkerhand doet immers het vuile werk.

Als iemand niet meer kan lopen of uiterst slecht ter been is, kan deze zijn behoefte doen in zijn kamer met behulp van een po. De po wordt weggebracht en geleegd buiten het dorp, achter het openbare toilet. Toen ik met Nana Agyei een gesprek had over respect, gaf hij spontaan het volgende voorbeeld om duidelijk te maken hoe men in het verleden respect toonde aan een ouder persoon:

> Neem me niet kwalijk, maar misschien moet ik in een po plassen omdat ik vanwege de pijn niet meer uit mijn bed kan komen. Dan komt een meisje of een jongen en vraagt: "Nana, hebt u geplast?" Als ik "ja" zeg, pakt het kind de po en leegt hem.

We vroegen Nana Ntiriwaa, die zichzelf nog goed kan redden, of haar kinderen of kleinkinderen haar zouden helpen als zij niet meer in staat zou zijn haar bed te verlaten om naar het toilet te gaan. Haar antwoord was kort en helder: "Natuurlijk, het zijn toch mijn kinderen!"

Een persoon die wel afhankelijk is, is Agya Suo, eveneens een blinde. Hij wordt verzorgd door een vrouw die een ver familielid is. Een andere oudere, een vrouw die aan dementie lijdt, heeft 's nachts een po bij zich, maar ze giet de po steeds leeg over de vloer van haar kamer. De kleindochter die voor haar zorgt is radeloos. Iedere week, zegt ze, koopt ze dettol ter waarde van 1000 cedis (een gulden) om daarmee de kamer van haar grootmoeder te ontsmetten. Elke ochtend maakt ze de kamer schoon.

Maame Korkor is gedeeltelijk verlamd ten gevolge van een hersenbloeding en is permanent in bed. Haar dochter zorgt voor haar en helpt haar met haar toilet. Ik (S) had de volgende discussie met de dochter (D) in het Engels:

D. We give her a bedpan in the bed.
S. And when she finishes does she call someone from the house?
D. Yes when she finishes she would call me and I come and take the bedpan away.
S. Does someone clean her after she has gone to toilet?
D. She does it herself.
S. She has toilet paper?
D. Yes.
S. Can she call anybody in the compound to take it away?
D. No, not everybody.
S. Not everybody but who does she call?
D. At times when I am not in, she sends to call a neighbour who is an old friend.

De hulp van anderen bij de gang naar het toilet wordt omgeven door tegenstrijdige gevoelens. Ten eerste is er het ongemak en de gêne. Een activiteit die men geheel alleen en zelfstandig placht te verrichten, vereist nu ineens de aanwezigheid van een ander. Het verstoort niet alleen de oude routine maar betekent ook een inbreuk op de vertrouwde privacy. Het is onprettig. Òpanyin Dei, die blind is, gebruikte een spreekwoord om dit duidelijk te maken: Eten met de rug van je hand smaakt minder dan met de palm van je hand. (*Sè wonsa akyi bèyè wo dè a, ènte sè wonsa yèm*). Er gaat niets boven zelfstandig naar het toilet te kunnen gaan. Hij gaf het volgende voorbeeld: "Als een kind een oudere naar het toilet brengt, is het ongeduldig. De oudere loopt langzaam en wil soms uitrusten, het kind wil weer gaan spelen. Het vraagt je of je wat vlugger kunt lopen." Nana Ntiriwaa, die nog steeds zelfstandig het openbare toilet bezoekt, zegt: "Ik hoop dat ik dit kan volhouden tot ik ga."

Tegelijkertijd verzetten ouderen – en jongeren – zich tegen de gedachte dat het gênant zou zijn hulp te krijgen bij het doen de behoefte. Als men oud wordt gebeurt dat nu eenmaal. Het is normaal. Bovendien, zoals we gezien hebben, is hulp bij het toilet

een uitgelezen gelegenheid voor een kind of echtgenote zijn/haar genegenheid en respect te tonen. Een van de ouderen: "Het is onplezierig werk, maar hoe dan ook, het is de plicht van een kind de urine en ontlasting van een bejaarde ouder op te ruimen. Wie dat doet, wordt meer geprezen dan iemand die geld geeft."

De zorg wordt nog zwaarder als incontinentie optreedt. De ambivalentie scherpt zich dan toe. 'Men' (de buitenwereld) beschouwde incontinentie als het meest on luisterende en het pijnlijkste dat iemand aan het eind van zijn leven kon overkomen. In bedekte termen werd soms aangegeven dat het voor zo iemand het beste zou zijn als hij spoedig zou sterven. In de zeldzame verhalen over gevallen van euthanasie die mij via via bereikten, werd incontinentie genoemd als een 'doorslaggevende' factor.

Tegelijkertijd zijn mij enkele gevallen bekend waarin een kind of echtgenote jarenlang met beperkte middelen voor een incontinente oudere gezorgd heeft. Patrick Atuobi schreef me hierover het volgende:

> Mary Adoman helped her husband, a teacher of about sixty years, who was incontinent for over two years until he died. I (P) had this short conversation with her (M):
>
> P. How was your husband going to toilet?
> M. In a bedpan, after which I cleaned him, put on his clothes and placed him in a chair or in bed.
> P. Did someone help you?
> M. No, I did it alone, but sometimes my six year old daughter would help me.
> P. Was he worried about you doing all this?
> M. Yes.
> P. How did you know?
> M. Because sometimes he did not want to take his food to avoid going to toilet.
> P. Did he feel ashamed?
> M. Not really, but he was worried because the relatives were not helping me.
> P. What would have been your feelings if someone else had done it?
> M. I knew my husband would have been ashamed if someone else were to do it and I also would have been disturbed... Before his death he called me and thanked me for the dedication I had shown to him.

Atuobi beschrijft nog een ander geval, van een zestig-jarige vrouw die voor haar incontinente vader zorgt. De vrouw klaagt dat geen van haar zusters haar helpt.

She told me how two of her sisters, who paid a visit to their father, left the room when the father suddenly eased himself in his bed while they were conversing. She was left alone to do the cleaning. The sisters expressed their surprise about the way she was able to cope with the situation.... One of her children brought her a box. When she opened it, it was full of disposable gloves. The child is a medical doctor.... The husband said he was disturbed about the plight of his wife, but there is nothing she can do because it is her duty to take care of her father. He said, the care of an incontinent person should be the responsibility of the children, especially if the parents took good care of them, but relatives also must assist.

In een gesprek met enkele jonge mensen, zei een van hen (een vrouw): “I will never entrust the care of my parent to anyone. Even if I have to break stones, I will do it myself” (*Sè meredwa òboò mu mpo a, mennyae maphwè m’awòfoò*).

Respect, intimiteit en vuil

Wat vooral opvalt in de reacties van zowel ouderen als jongeren over de toiletgang van de oudere is hun ambivalentie. Enerzijds wordt verlies van privacy tijdens defecatie gezien als een bedreiging van de respectabiliteit van een oudere, anderzijds wordt benadrukt dat daar geen sprake van is, omdat de oudere niets te verwijten valt.

In het voorafgaande zijn drie vormen of gradaties van ‘vreemde’ aanwezigheid tijdens defecatie aan de orde geweest. Ten aanzien van de eerste, bezoek aan een openbaar toilet, hoorden we diverse mensen zeggen dat een ouder persoon eigenlijk niet naar een openbaar toilet hoort te gaan. Het past niet bij zijn status. Een man van 76 merkte op dat het niet goed is als een oudere zich in dezelfde toiletruimte met jongeren bevindt: “If these children see your private parts, they don’t respect you.” Er komt een moment, aldus Òpanyin Dei, dat een oudere niet meer naar een openbaar toilet zou moeten gaan als hij een alternatief heeft. Een bezoek aan een publieke gelegenheid vermindert het respect van de jongeren voor hem. Hijzelf ziet zich echter voortdurend gedwongen het openbare toilet te bezoeken omdat het alternatief, het emmer-toilet van zijn zuster, meestal vol is. Enkele jongeren bedachten dat het een goed idee zou zijn speciale (openbare) toiletten voor ouderen te bouwen zoals er op scholen ook speciale toiletten voor leraren zijn.

Tegelijkertijd benadrukten velen dat er niets mis is met een oudere in een openbaar toilet. Atuobi schrijft:

> When I asked them whether their respect for older people was reduced when they met such a person in the public toilet, they denied this. All the young people expressed surprise at the question. They did not imagine why the respect for an old person should be reduced because he attended a public toilet.

Het bezoek aan een openbaar toilet is een oud gebruik, aldus velen, waarom zou er ineens iets beschamends aan zitten? Men is eraan gewend en heeft sociale manieren ontwikkeld om elkaars privacy te respecteren ondanks de fysieke nabijheid. In het openbare toilet wordt de ander genegeerd, weggedacht, niet gezien en men behoudt zo zijn privacy en respect. De intimiteit van het poepen wordt niet bedreigd en daardoor wordt ook de confrontatie vermeden met de ontlasting van de ander. Diens respectabiliteit komt niet in het gedrang.

Mijn veronderstelling dat de status van een oudere gevaar loopt bij het gebruik van een openbaar toilet komt gedeeltelijk voort uit mijn gebrek aan inleving in een andere poep-cultuur. Gedeeltelijk, want, zoals we gezien hebben, ook bij de betrokkenen zelf zijn er die van mening zijn dat een oudere eigenlijk van een privé toilet gebruik zou moeten maken.

Het negeren van de defecatie van een oudere is niet mogelijk voor degene die hulp verleent bij de activiteit en het verwijderen van ontlasting. De sociale techniek van niet-zien wordt hier vervangen door het tegenovergestelde: het delen in de intimiteit van de oudere. Dit kan alleen gerealiseerd worden, zo blijkt uit de reacties van de ondervraagden, door iemand die door huwelijk, verwantschap of vriendschap reeds dicht bij de oudere staat. Men voorkomt dat de faeces van de ander leiden tot afkeer en verlies van respect door diens ontlasting te gaan zien als iets vertrouwds, bijna iets van zichzelf.

Bij incontinentie is de aanwezigheid van een ander het meest noodzakelijk èn het pijnlijkst. Het is een situatie waarin jaren lang opgebouwde relaties op de proef gesteld worden. Waar geen hechte band tussen gehuwden of tussen ouders en kinderen is gegroeid, zal deze periode in het leven van de oudere tot grote spanningen en verlies van respect leiden. Waar de man niet in zijn echtgenote 'geïnvesteerd' heeft, zal deze haar man waarschijnlijk verlaten voordat hij hulpbehoevend, misschien zelfs incontinent, wordt. Ook de kinderen zullen trachten zich van de onaangename taak te bevrijden. In die situatie zal iedere confrontatie met ontlasting bij de zorgverlener afkeer en bij de oudere schaamte veroorzaken.

Vuil in absolute zin bestaat niet, schreef Mary Douglas (1970: 12), "It exists in the eye of the beholder." De poep van een ander is minder 'out of place' als die ander zelf minder 'out of place' is; als er intimiteit tussen verzorger en verzorgde bestaat. Poep kan daarom zowel afkeer als tederheid, zorg oproepen.

Noten

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1. De volgende personen hebben een belangrijke bijdrage geleverd aan het onderzoek: Patrick Atuobi, Anthony Obeng Boamah, Yaw Darkoh Ansah, Kwame Fosu, Samuel Sarkodie, Michael Buabeng, Benjamin Boadu en Monica Amoako. De eerste drie hebben voor het onderwerp van dit korte artikel speciale gesprekken gevoerd. Ik dank Geert Mommersteeg voor zijn commentaar op een eerdere versie van dit artikel.
2. Agya Mensah stierf in 1996, naar zijn zeggen honderd jaar oud. Ik draag dit korte essay aan hem op ter nagedachtenis aan hem en aan zijn dochter. Een probleem van onderzoek onder oude mensen in Ghana is dat zo weinigen echt oud worden. Sinds het begin van mijn onderzoek, vier jaar geleden, zijn de meesten van hen overleden. In dit essay laat ik ze echter leven, als drie, vier jaar geleden.
3. Een recent onderzoek van TNO meldt dat ruim vijftig percent van de bewoners van verzorgingshuizen in Nederland ongewild urine verliest, in bijna de helft van de gevallen "in ernstige mate" (Staats et al. 1998).
4. Systematische gegevens over typen toilet ontbreken, maar ik heb de indruk dat Ghana tamelijk uniek is in haar 'voorkeur' voor publieke toiletten. In de omringende landen blijken huishoudens op veel grotere schaal hun eigen latrine te hebben dan in Ghana. Men kan filosofe-

ren over het waarom van deze ontwikkeling. Frantzen en Post (1999) suggereren dat de gebruikers van openbare toiletten in Kumase weinig problemen hebben met het gebrek aan privacy. Ze klagen echter wel over de vervuiling van de toiletten (zie ook: Frantzen 1998).

5. Het belang van een regelmatige stoelgang voor de gezondheid heb ik elders verder uitgewerkt (van der Geest 1999).
6. Soms kiest men ervoor de gang naar het toilet uit te stellen omdat men later op de dag, bijvoorbeeld op school of op het werk, een meer comfortabel toilet ter beschikking heeft.
7. Miller (1997:15) is van mening dat gevoelens van afkeer het grootst zijn ten aanzien van menselijke afscheidingen en dat dit een universeel verschijnsel is. Voorbeelden waar dit niet op blijkt te gaan maken meestal deel uit van rituele handelingen en bevestigen de 'regel'.
8. Het voordeel van het taboe op de linkerhand in sociaal verkeer is dat anderen beter in staat zijn het hygiënisch gedrag van iemand te controleren. In de Nederlandse cultuur weet men nooit zeker of iemand die je hartelijk de hand schudt zijn handen wel heeft gewassen na het toilet bezocht te hebben. Ook weet men nooit of hij niet kort te voren in zijn neus of oren heeft zitten peuteren met dezelfde hand die de jouwe nu stevig omklemt. Daar tegenover staat echter weer dat men ook niet honderd percent zeker kan zijn dat de Ghanees in het privaat uitsluitend zijn linkerhand gebruikt heeft. Toch lijkt de tweede onzekerheid minder groot dan de eerste.
9. Als gast genoot ik dat zelfde privilege. Ik had een eigen sleutel van het toilet van mijn gastheer die ik "aan niemand uit mocht lenen".

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LIQUID WASTE MANAGEMENT IN URBAN AND RURAL GHANA: PRIVATISATION AS GOVERNANCE?[1]

Sjaak van der Geest and[2] Nelson Obirih-Opareh[3]

Introduction: governance and the politics of sanitation

In a chapter on the politics of public sanitation between 1920 and 1940 in Windhoek, Namibia's capital, Gewald (2000: 125–144) tries to find an explanation for the fact that "after years of consistent protest and demand on the part of location residents, there was no improvement in public sanitation facilities". The author leads us through a series of graphic quotes from official reports, letters and newspaper clippings about the horrible state of sanitation in the town. In one report from 1925 we read:

> In Windhoek proper, there are trenches, but these have developed onto cesspools and the stench coming from them is unbearable. Some of these trenches have been in use (open) for more than a year and the natives complain bitterly of their filthy conditions. In an experience of 25 years I have never seen anything worse (Gewald 2000: 133).

A few years later, in 1929, a German newspaper reports:

> …everyone can imagine what odours there are emanating during the hot and rainy season. It is simply unbearable. But it must be endured.… Some of these WCs stand in the middle of the location. Is it surprising that the mortality was so high of late? Shall we only pay our taxes or should we not also be allowed to elect people to our liking who are concerned about our welfare? (Gewald 2000: 136).

Township inhabitants used this situation to protest against the South African colonial administration and those who cooperated with the administration, with only limited success. Gewald concludes by listing

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[1] A slightly different version of this text was published in a special issue on "The governance of daily life in Africa" (Van der Geest & Obirih-Opareh 2002).

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four reasons for the authorities' lack of concern about public sanitation. One reason was the "squeamish unease in talking about and dealing with an issue which was generally felt to be below the level of suitable discussion". The second reason referred to the costs involved. The third was that the authorities wanted to discourage the African inhabitants from settling permanently in the town and the last was that they regarded the inhabitants as uncivilised, and not deserving of decent sanitary facilities (Gewald 2000: 144).

Visiting some of the poor neighbourhoods of Accra in the beginning of the 21st century one would imagine oneself walking through Windhoek in 1925. It happened to the two authors of this paper when they went to 'inspect' two public toilets in Nima, which is one of the most densely populated suburbs of Accra. The toilets were located in an open space between the houses and the road. Women and children were selling foodstuffs only a few yards away. The same space held two containers for solid waste disposal, which were overflowing. Goats were searching for food in the rubbish on the ground near the containers.

Both toilets had 16 squatting holes, eight for each sex. People visiting the toilet had to pay a small amount to the caretaker. In one toilet the pit was completely full and the faeces came up to and over the brim of the holes. Used toilet papers were lying about or had been deposited in large baskets, which were almost blocking the passage. The stench was as enormous as the physical and visual filth. For one not used to it, it seemed a miracle that people managed to relieve themselves in such conditions and reappear from the toilet totally spotless.

Close to one of the toilets, in the open air, was a huge container in which night-soil collectors emptied their buckets containing faeces from private houses. The buckets, which they used for their work, were standing next to the container. Little children often did not enter the toilet but defecated behind the toilet in the open space. Apparently they could not spend the money or they preferred the 'fresh air'.

While we were inspecting the place, taking some pictures and discussing the procedures with the caretaker, a group of people assembled around us and expressed their anger and dismay about the sordid sanitation conditions in their neighbourhood. They talked about unfulfilled promises of the city authorities and accused them of total lack of concern and of stealing the money allotted to the construction of proper sanitation facilities.

Toilets and governance

If 'governance' can be taken to mean, as Stoker (1998) suggests, the successful management of community affairs through a mixing of public, private and voluntary actors, sanitation is an excellent case to test the workings and adequacy of governance. In the area of sanitation public and private concerns and manners of addressing them come together. Defecation, which is a private and intimate activity, constitutes a public problem both in terms of health risk and environmental pollution. It may, therefore, be expected that the "blurring of boundaries and responsibilities" and the importance of "self-governing networks of actors", which Stoker (1998: 18) mentions as key elements of governance, will manifest themselves in the management of human waste.

Governance, with its emphasis on (governmental support of) autonomy of actors, reminds one of a concept, which was popular a few decades ago in the domain of health policy: Primary Health Care (PHC). The term is no longer used in health policy plans as it conjures up a too-optimistic picture of people's ability and determination to solve their problems by their own means. The term also assumes an overly positive image of the determination of governments to contribute to sustainable improvement at the level of local communities.

Almost two decades ago, one of us argued that PHC meant different things to different stakeholders with different (often conflicting) interests at different levels of social and political organisation (Van der Geest et al. 1990). For representatives of international agencies, PHC was a—somewhat utopian—ideal to realise "Health for all by the year 2000", a prescription for health—and overall—development from below. For national governments in developing countries, PHC was first of all a strategic term and buzzword to increase foreign financial aid and reduce spending on local health care. For local inhabitants, PHC meant a cut in government support, 'second-hand health care', and 'forced self-reliance'.

In this paper we raise the question what governance of public sanitation means to different people at different levels of social organisation or to different parties in the sanitation management. What interests us most is how the daily failure of governance—the absence of an efficient sanitation policy—can be understood taking into account the interests that different parties have in waste removal. We will present and discuss two cases of sanitation in Ghana, one rural, one urban, and suggest

that the poor management of human waste epitomises the limitations and failures of governance in present-day Ghana.

Toilet research

Doing research in and around toilets is not popular among anthropologists and other social scientists. Ethnographic studies focusing on toilet use and cultural habits of defecation hardly exist. One conspicuous exception is a study by Ndonko (1993) describing the resistance of local inhabitants to government-imposed toilets in Cameroon. There are many reasons, however, why anthropologists *should* devote attention to the topic, its mundane character, for example (are anthropologists not interested in everyday life?). Another reason could be their own experiences with toilets during fieldwork. It is well known that many anthropologists (figures are not known) feel rather uncomfortable about toilet use in the field and develop nasty problems with their defecation. It could not move them, however, to turn this into a research topic. Yet, many anthropological interests are believed to have an autobiographical origin.

The most likely explanation for the scarcity of anthropological studies of defecation is the nearly universal disgust to human waste, which prevents them from taking it up as an issue to be researched (cf. Van der Geest 2007).

That very neglect of one of the most basic facts of life (biologically and socially) prompted the authors of this study to direct their attention to the social, cultural and political implications of toilet use in two Ghanaian locations.

The first author stumbled on the topic while doing research on meanings of growing old and care of older people in a rural town in Ghana. The problems and paradoxes around toilet use presented themselves spontaneously when conversations turned towards care of older people and the importance of respect. Toilet use proved a crucial issue in the older people's views on good care and dignity (cf. Van der Geest 1998, 2002a). His research consisted of lengthy—often animated—conversations on the topic and occasional visits to their public and private toilets. Once, he and his assistant briefly accompanied the nightsoil collector on his nocturnal tour (Van der Geest 2002b).

The second author carried out an extensive study on solid waste collection in the capital city of Accra (Obirih-Opareh 2002). His interest was on the impact of Ghana's policy of decentralisation and

privatisation on the practice and performance of service delivery in solid waste removal. Alongside this research he also carried out some investigation into liquid waste management. He interviewed consumers, service providers and policymakers, studied administrative documents, conducted a questionnaire-based research among consumers and visited public toilets and disposal sites.

Public and private toilets in Accra

Policy-makers of the Accra Metropolitan Area (AMA) responsible for liquid waste management face a dilemma: should they promote and improve public toilet facilities in the city or should they encourage and assist inhabitants to have their own toilet in the house? Many homes in Accra do not have their own toilet. Toilets and bathrooms in houses in the central business areas have sometimes been converted into rooms and stores. As a result, the residents of such homes rely on public toilets, which may be inadequate and face serious maintenance problems. According to the metropolitan authority, public toilets are meant for visitors to the city and not for residents. The opposite is the 'rule' however. Public toilets have become permanent features for many residents in Accra as places to ease themselves. Accra faces acute sanitation problems and severe pressure on the few public toilet facilities available. These are manifested in unsanitary conditions in and around most of the public toilets, poor and dilapidated infrastructure for liquid waste management, inadequate funding for maintenance, poor sanitary habits, deficient management of existing toilet facilities, indiscriminate defecation in open spaces, into water bodies and drains, irregular collection of liquid waste from septic and other storage tanks, as well as from pan latrines, and limited connections from houses to the central sewage system.

Existing facilities

The existing toilet facilities in Accra, both private and public, include pan (or bucket) latrines, pit latrines, septic tank latrines, KVIPs (a particular type of storage tank), and water closets (WCs) with or without connection to the central sewage system. There are two types of public toilet ownership, namely (i) those built by the local authority, and (ii) those built by private firms and individuals for commercial purposes. Privately built public toilets are few in number. The public toilet facilities

are inadequate compared to the size of the population lacking toilet facilities in their houses and the demand for them. Long queues could be observed during early morning and evening rush hours. According to residents, some people defecate in empty spaces because of (i) the cost of a visit to a public toilet, (ii) a lack of toilets in the vicinity, (iii) long distances between public toilets and their houses, and (iv) the untidiness of the toilet facilities.

The infrastructure of the Accra central sewage system is inadequate. In 1999, there were less than 1,000 units connected to the central sewage system (GW&SC 1999). In most places, the infrastructure for waste management is either non-existent or in a deplorable state. As Akuffo (1999) noted, there are about 18 sewage systems and sewage treatment plants in Accra, but none of them is operating according to plan. The system that was built for Central Accra in the early 1970s by the Busia government is no longer adequate. There are few connections and insufficient links to water to enable flushing . In Accra, liquid waste management has broken down due to a lack of human, logistic and financial resources. The present approach based on harangue, sermonising and clean-up campaigns is not helpful. There is a need for injection of capital into the system, including strengthening existing institutions. Investments in plants and equipment in the present circumstances of complete institutional breakdown are clearly not the right approach.

If availability of toilet facilities and the method of removal and disposal are indications of level of development, the city of Accra cannot be rated high on the scale of development. A survey of toilet facilities in Accra by the AMA in 1992 showed that:

- 40% of the population had access to private toilets discharging into septic tanks or cesspools (and a small number into the sewage system);
- 25% used public toilets where a fee is charged per visit. There were about 127 public toilets in Accra;
- 20% still used private pan (or bucket) latrines;
- 5% had access to private Kumasi Ventilated Improved Pit Latrines (KVIPs) (explained further below) and
- 10% of the population had no access to any toilet facility and defecated in open spaces or made use of 'flying toilets' (see below).

Private (household) toilets are owned, maintained and used by individuals while public toilets are operated on a commercial basis. Toilet

facilities with connections to the central sewage system pay connection fees. This includes registration fees and monthly charges. Owners of toilet facilities without connections to the central sewage system pay fees for removal and transportation of their liquid waste to designated sites for treatment. Service providers are periodically engaged to remove the waste from toilets with septic storage tanks. Various fees are paid to the service providers depending on the type and capacity of the facility.

The KVIP is a traditional latrine to which a vent pipe, covered with a screen, is added to minimise odour and fly problems and with alternating sludge holding compartments. The twin-pit concept enables the contents of one pit (once filled) to decompose while the other is in use, provided that sufficient time is allowed (two years or more). Afterwards, the decomposed materials can be dug out by hand without any serious health risks (Post 2001: 33). The KVIPs were supposed to be built in areas with porous soil so that the liquid found in the toilet could be absorbed by the soil, leaving the scum to be scooped out for use as manure in gardening and agriculture. Unfortunately however, the soil in Accra is clayish and as a result cannot absorb the liquid from the toilet as expected. The toilet is therefore always wet and needs dislodgement by suction pumps.

Bucket or pan latrines are emptied during the night, usually by workers from the northern part of the country. This 'night soil' collection from buckets or pan latrines has been fully privatised since December 1987. The Waste Management Department (WMD) provides surface and underground storage facilities and collection vehicles to empty the tanks. New pan latrines are not allowed. Houses with buckets or pan latrines have been ordered to convert them to KVIP latrines or use available public toilets.

Removal and transportation of waste

The type of toilet facility determines the way the waste is removed and transported to disposal sites. Liquid waste from toilet facilities with sewage connections is transported automatically to the disposal point through the sewage system. Night-soil collectors empty pan latrines and carry the waste to central collection points (cesspools). The big containers are normally lifted at night and emptied at a treatment plant or approved disposal sites.

Toilets with septic storage tanks are emptied by service providers i.e. WMD of the AMA, private agencies or in the case of Labadi, by

a community-based organisation (La Mansaamoo Kpee). Quasi-public organisations such as SSNIT, the University of Ghana, (Legon), and the security services; (army, police, prisons, etc.) have their own liquid waste collection and transportation services to designated sites.

Institutional arrangements for collection and removal of liquid waste in the metropolitan area differ and can be summarised as follows: (i) cesspit emptying service for private households with a water carriage latrine system, (ii) public toilets' dislodgement for septic tank latrines, KVIPs, and WCs, (iii) surface containers for pan latrines, and (iv) the central sewage system. Each type of household facility has its own specific arrangement for removal.

The frequency of waste removal is directly linked to the type of facility and its capacity. Pan latrines are emptied twice or thrice a week to a central cesspit surface container, which in turn is removed every night, hence the name 'night-soil'. However, irregular liquid waste collection is the rule rather than the exception. Toilet facilities without a connection to the central sewage system (WCs, KVIPs, and septic tank latrines) are emptied when they are full, varying from once in six months to once in three years, depending upon their sizes and the number of people using them, as well as the frequency of visits

Who have an interest in toilets?

There are three types of stakeholders in the world of toilets: service providers, consumers and policy-makers. Our survey showed that service providers are satisfied with the present functioning of the institutional arrangements, but that 87% of the consumers prefer WCs connected to the sewage system. The position of policy-makers, as we will see, is ambivalent.

Service providers

There are three main types of service providers in Accra, namely (i) providers of toilet facilities, (ii) managers of toilet facilities, and (iii) those who remove and transport liquid waste (i.e. night-soil collectors and suction truck operators). Each of these has its own interests, depending on how much it gains from the service.

Public toilet service providers want more public patronage in order to make more profits. Public toilet operators are content with the institutional arrangement for provision, utilisation and payment, cost recovery, and cost-sharing arrangement, even though there is room for

improvement. The housing code requires every household to have its own toilet, but taking into account the profits earned from the operation of public toilets and the lucrative payments of user-fees for removal services, the discontinuation of public toilets is unlikely to occur in the near future. Suction truck operators want households to continue using septic storage tanks and public toilet operators want residents to continue relying on their facilities.

Consumers

Owners of toilets with a sewage connection pay fees and monthly charges to the Ghana Water and Sewage Corporation (GW&SC). For all other categories of toilet facilities without connection to the central sewage system, suction truck operators empty the storage tanks periodically. The removal of liquid waste is carried out by either the Waste Management Department (WMD) of the AMA or by private contractors. However, well-to-do households prefer WCs connected to the central sewage system to spare them the inconvenience and agony of searching for service providers to empty their septic storage tank whenever it is full. Besides, when the toilet is removed or dislodged, it leaves a terrible stench in the area for hours, if not days. Pan latrines need emptying twice or thrice a week. Irregular collection poses a severe sanitation problem, including stench. Flies are always abundant in the place. Besides, pan latrines have outlived their usefulness in the city and are a nuisance, particularly to the immediate neighbours. If toilet facilities are not emptied regularly, they pose health hazards and become breeding grounds for vectors of disease.

Though service consumers are relatively satisfied with the functioning of the institutional arrangements for provision and management of toilets, more suction trucks must be provided to prevent long queues for waste removal. Owners of public toilet facilities think the institutional arrangements for the provision, utilisation and payment (cost recovery, cost-sharing arrangements, etc.) are good. Users of public toilets, however, want cleaner and more pleasant toilets at affordable prices. The households prefer WCs connected to the sewage system. In their absence, they want efficient and affordable suction truck services. Pan latrine owners want efficient services from night-soil operators.

Policy-makers

Policy-makers would prefer central sewage facilities covering the entire metropolitan area. However, in the present economic situation, this

seems almost impossible. Although WCs connected to the central sewage system are preferred by all residents, poverty prevents most households from having their own toilet. For them, the public toilet remains the only choice. Policy-makers also acknowledge the high propensity for increased demand for public toilets as more and more houses spring up without their own toilet facilities. Besides, the growing number of homeless people will further increase the reliance on public toilets. To combat this problem, policy-makers search for better institutional arrangements for liquid waste management.

Policy-makers consider the institutional arrangements for provision, utilisation and payment (cost-recovery, cost-sharing arrangements, etc.) for liquid waste management as functioning well, even though they acknowledge that there is room for improvement.

Future policy dilemmas

Most respondents agreed that decentralisation in itself does not solve the problems of waste management unless it is backed with fiscal transfers to enable lower government structures to manage the responsibilities entrusted to them. Some residents want wider coverage by the central sewage system whilst others expect more from strict enforcement of housing regulations: new houses should have their own private toilets. At the same time, more and decent public toilets with neat and pleasant surroundings must be developed to take care of those without access to private toilets. As the operation of public toilets becomes more lucrative, so will the corruption in its revenue management. Ghana has a poor maintenance culture. The situation is worst in the waste management sector. The majority of the people think that the decision to lease or contract out the management of government-owned public toilets is the best policy so far. This has indeed led to improvements in the conditions of most of the public toilets. Privatisation has led to competition in the management of public toilets and suction truck service provision. This will improve even further, of course, if revenues for their maintenance are handled properly. Contract awards should therefore be made in terms of efficiency, transparency and capability.

The best policy for AMA seems a two-pronged one. Obviously, an overall policy of 'one house, one toilet' is not realistic for the time being. Financial constraints, both public and private, would not permit such a programme. Therefore, in the meantime, and for the poorer areas of the metropolis, the local government should embark on a thorough

improvement of public toilet facilities. 'Improvement' includes among other things: cleaner sanitary conditions, better management, easier access and more privacy. Privatisation and external contracting, if executed in a 'humane' and reasonable manner, can help to achieve this objective.

Public and private toilets in a rural community

Defective toilet facilities are particularly depressing in densely populated places such as the townships of Accra. The lack of facilities in rural places causes less direct inconvenience if 'nature' is near and mercifully hides and 'digests' the traces of human pollution. Moreover, many of the inhabitants are—at least part-time—farmers and have the possibility to relieve themselves on their way to the farm or on their farm. Cofie et al. (2005), in a study of peri-urban agriculture in Northern Ghana, found that most farmers (64% of a sample of ninety) welcomed human waste and used it as fertiliser on their land. Timmer et al. (1999) made similar observations in Mali. But in rural areas too, inefficient human waste removal may cause problems and irritation.

The small town of Kwahu-Tafo (in Southern Ghana), where one of the authors carried out anthropological fieldwork, may serve as an example of rural coping—and lack of coping—with inadequate liquid waste management.

In 1996, there were two public toilets, each with twelve squatting holes (six for each sex), in Kwahu-Tafo. This means there were just 24 public facilities for the entire town of about 5,000 inhabitants. Some people had to walk about ten minutes to reach a public toilet (to and fro twenty minutes). In addition there were semi-public toilets in two schools, which could be used by both teachers and pupils. The number of private latrines (almost all bucket latrines) was unknown. The sanitary inspector estimated their number at sixty. Finally, there were about ten private pit latrines and ten WCs, one in the chief's house, the others in the Catholic mission and the teachers' bungalows of the Technical School.

In and around public toilets

It is impossible to say how many people were in fact using the public toilets. Estimates varied from one-third to eighty percent of the population, which in absolute figures would be 1,000 to more than 4,000

people. Unknown is also the number of people who did not use toilets at all but eased themselves in the 'bush' at the edge of town or on the way to their farm. Some people defecated into a plastic bag and dumped the bag behind the public toilet or somewhere out of sight (so-called 'flying toilets').

The combination of plastic and human faeces is no doubt the most appalling form of pollution taking place in Ghana. Apparently some people view the plastic bag as a handy, portable and disposable, private toilet. It seems an attractive compromise: one can defecate at home and yet one is not stuck with the unpleasant presence of a permanent toilet in the home.

If we take a conservative estimate of forty percent of the people visiting the public toilet, it means that every day, about 2,000 people used 24 holes, that is almost ninety per hole, per day. Taking into account that both toilets were closed from about 9 pm until 5 am, one can conclude that the holes were occupied every five minutes. On the average both public latrines would receive about 1,000 visitors per day. When we discussed this with the caretaker of one of the latrines, however, he estimated a number of only about 200–300. He based his calculation on his daily income. Whatever the exact number, it is not surprising that there are queues early in the morning as most people prefer to ease themselves before they start the day.

For elderly people the way to the public toilet seems particularly uncomfortable. It may be far and the conditions do not befit their status of respected elder. Most elders therefore used a private latrine, either in their own house or in that of a kind neighbour. They were also likely to avoid the morning rush hour if they had to go to the public toilet (cf. Van der Geest 2002a).

Visiting a public toilet is not 'free'. The caretaker of the toilet (who is also responsible for cleaning the place) took twenty cedis (about US$ 0.01) from each visitor. In that way the old coins, which have lost nearly all their value, were still useful (the same amount was charged for a bucket of water from the public tap). The caretaker of one public toilet was observed sitting in a small kiosk with a pile of cut newspapers in front of him. He handed each customer one sheet and received twenty cedis. If customers brought their own paper, he said, they only had to pay ten cedis. Each day he had to pay 3,000 cedis to the sanitary inspector. He could keep whatever he earned above that amount. Funerals and other busy days were golden times for him.

The privatisation of public toilet management has certainly improved conditions. The squalor that the author noticed about two decades earlier, when the public toilets were free and under the responsibility of the local authority had disappeared. The place was relatively clean but the immediate surroundings had become a dumping place for all kinds of dirt. First there was the town's official refuse dump (*sumina*), which was about fifty meters away from the toilet. Between 6 and 7 in the morning there is a constant traffic of children and women carrying the waste they swept from their compound and dumping it on the *sumina*. Right behind the toilet another '*sumina*' had come into existence: town inhabitants emptied their chamber pots there, the labourers who cleaned the KVIP put its contents there, and—worst of all—some people brought their faeces in plastic bags and deposited them at the same spot. They did this usually at night when no one could see them. As we mentioned before, the combination of plastic with faeces is particularly pernicious as it prevents the faeces from decomposing.

Private bucket latrines

The sanitary and cultural conditions surrounding the private bucket toilet also deserve our attention, although no one has ever conducted a systematic survey of them. In 1994 the buckets were emptied every week for 800 cedis a month. That sometimes buckets overflowed may be due to the fact that the owner failed to pay his monthly dues or that the work force could not cope with their task. A man, who is referred to as *Kruni*,[4] emptied the buckets in the night. *Krufoò* earned 50,000 cedis per month, according to the sanitary inspector. I suspect that they got some extra rewards from the different houses they serve.

Natives of the town would never think of performing this kind of dirty work "…even if they paid me ten times as much", as one man stated. The work is extremely unpleasant. The *Kruni* carries a container on his head in which he empties the bucket. He has a broom to clean the bucket and a lantern to find his way. The bucket is behind a small door on the outside of the house. He has to carry the container for a long distance to a dumping place on the outskirts of the town.

The *Krufoò* are literally 'people of the night'. They are the personification of the local horror of shit and have to make themselves and

[4] A *Kruni* (plural: *Krufoò*) was originally someone from Sierra Leone, but presently most night-soil collectors are from Northern Ghana or Burkina Faso.

their load invisible. Just opposite the window of the room where I was staying was the bucket of the neighbour. Once a week I woke up when the *Kruni* came to empty the bucket, not because of the noise he made—he moved as silently as a mouse—but because of the stench drifting into my room.

It is unlikely that there will be any *Krufoò* in the near future. Those who are doing the work are getting old and no one wants the job anymore. Their children attend school and have other ambitions. In 1998 there was only one *Kruni* in Kwahu-Tafo. The man was getting old and could hardly cope with the work. He had no successor. Two years later we held some interviews with him and observed his style of working and his way of protecting himself against the stench and the dangers of his job. By then he was sharing the work with another *Kruni* (Van der Geest 2002b). It is unlikely that all bucket latrines will have been replaced by pit or KVIP latrines (as the official policy stipulates) by the time these two men stop their work as night-soil collectors.

Discussion and conclusion: Governance of daily life

There is hardly any activity, which involves so directly governance of daily life, as the daily visit to a toilet. Defecation should take place everyday in Ghana. One 'missed day' constitutes a health risk in the popular cultural perception (Osei 1987; Van der Geest 2003). If we accept human 'well-being' as the best criterion of good governance, sanitation presents itself as a crucial test of governance. In the quality of toilet facilities we discern medical as well as social and political indicators of welfare. Toilets are significant markers of social status (Jenkins 1999; Jenkins & Curtis 2005) and political power. Various authors, from Douglas (1966) to Curtis (1998), Lea (1999), Green (1999) and Gunawan (2005), have argued that experiences of dirt and cleanliness have far-reaching consequences for self-esteem, social identity and physical and mental health. What conclusions can be drawn from the two cases in this paper?

Our observations on the management of human waste in Accra as well as in the rural community of Kwahu-Tafo show a lack of concern and initiative with regard to sanitation both from the government and the local community. It is mainly the 'invisible hand' of small entrepreneurs that succeeds in bringing about modest improvements in the quality of sanitation. Let us briefly look at the different actors.

Proper sanitation, one would expect, is one of the most convincing legitimisations of politics. Individual initiative can hardly achieve building effective infrastructural facilities to dispose of human waste, but state resources can. Public authorities have the 'chance' to prove their concern about the well-being of their citizens by providing sanitary amenities and thus strengthening their political support in the community. That 'chance', however, is hardly utilised. Local authorities, both in urban and rural areas, have a poor record when it comes to the building and maintenance of sanitary facilities.

Three of the four reasons suggested by Gewald (2000: 144) to account for the lack of political will to improve sanitary conditions in Windhoek almost one hundred years ago, still apply to Ghana today. Financial constraints are obvious factors—or excuses—to explain the government's inertia in sanitary matters. Most shocking is the fact that the racist attitude of the South African government towards the Herero population in the 1920s can still be detected in the discriminatory behaviour of Ghanaian politicians to the poor members of their society. Having access to their own clean private toilets, they close their eyes to the squalor of public facilities on which their less fortunate co-citizens rely. "Squeamish unease" and outright discrimination conveniently merge into politics of neglect (see also Frantzen & Post 1999).

Surprisingly, local inhabitants and users of public facilities also do little to improve the situation. If good governance involves both 'governors' and ordinary citizens, we may conclude that both sides lack initiative in this respect. We call this lack of initiative 'surprising' because it seems to contradict a strong cultural concern about cleanliness as a physical and moral state. During our visit to the public toilets in Accra people complained bitterly about the authorities' lack of concern and their failure to improve sanitary conditions, but they themselves showed no initiative to do something about it either. Their concern about cleanliness did not motivate them to take sanitary governance into their own hands; it rather seemed to discourage them from doing anything. Elsewhere one of us (Van der Geest 1998) has proposed that cultural rules of cleanliness have led to the paradoxical situation that people cope with the daily confrontation with dirt by keeping defecation at bay, both geographically and mentally. Governance of sanitation is mainly a matter of not thinking about it. Ironically, this applies to political authorities as well as to local inhabitants.

Entrepreneurs who are able to make a profit out of the management of public toilets and the collection of human waste from private bucket

latrines provide the best 'governance'. The slight improvements, which have been achieved in the management of liquid waste, seem to be mainly the result of the incentives of privatisation. Private caretakers of public toilets have tried to make the visit to the toilet less unpleasant by keeping the place relatively tidy. In densely populated areas ownership of toilet services has now become an attractive asset and may lead to strong entrepreneurial and political competition (Ayee & Crook 2003). Examples of this entrepreneurial development have been reported from Accra (Obirih-Opareh 2001), the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo (this article) and from the city of Kumase (Frantzen & Post 1999; Post 2001).

The performance of the night-soil collector (van der Geest, 2002b) is another example of private enterprise. Ironically, it is the inadequacy of public services responsible for the further disposal of human waste, which thwarts the good performance of the toilet manager. In Accra failure to empty the storage tanks in time causes an overflowing of the toilet holes. In Kwahu-Tafo they deposit the contents of the KVIP tank right behind the toilet turning the place into a mess.

From the limited evidence of our observations in Accra and Kwahu-Tafo we are inclined to conclude that both policy-makers and users of public toilet facilities have their 'reasons' to remain inactive with regard to the improvement of public toilets but that some effect may be expected from the privatisation of public toilets. Privatisation should not be restricted to the management of the facility, however, but also include the further removal of liquid waste.

Organising the use of human waste for compost/fertiliser seems an interesting option that serves two purposes: waste disposal and manure, provided it is carried out without causing harm to human health. Unfortunately, the mere idea—though widely accepted in East Asian countries—is disgusting to the Ghanaian population. Ironically, it is already practised surreptitiously in many places, apparently without the knowledge of consumers and authorities. Good governance of daily life in both urban and rural Ghana could thus lead to both better sanitation and agricultural production, if politicians *and* the general public are able to 'change' their minds.

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De verlangens van een oude man

Sjaak van der Geest

Ik hoorde voor het eerst over Aristoteles en Phyllis bij een bezoek aan de Grote Kerk van Dordrecht. Een van de misericordes onder de koorbanken toont een kruipende oude man met op zijn rug een jonge vrouw die met een zweep zwaait. Ik was gefascineerd, alsof de vrouw op mijn eigen rug zat. Bij navraag bleek het om Aristoteles te gaan die hals over kop verliefd werd op een jeugdige hofdame en voor haar door het stof ging. In het boekenstalletje van de kerk vond ik meer informatie in een boek over de koorbanken en internet deed de rest.



Figuur 1 Aristoteles en Phyllis door Lucas van Leyden.

Het verhaal was zeer populair bij schrijvers en beeldende kunstenaars tussen de dertiende en zestiende eeuw. De ontluistering van de oude wijze man die niet opgewassen blijkt tegen de charmes en schoonheid van een jonge vrouw, bood een niet te missen kans voor kunstenaars een omgekeerde wereld uit te beelden. En voor predikanten leverde het verhaal stof om de (mannelijke) gelovigen te waarschuwen voor de listen en verleidingen van de vrouw.
De legende duikt het eerst op in een middeleeuwse vertelling *Lai d'Aristote* van de Normandische dichter Henri d'Andeli. Aristoteles, de Griekse wijsgeer en leermeester van Alexander de Grote, had zijn pupil berispt dat hij zich te veel bezighield met zijn geliefde Phyllis en de belangrijke zaken van het koningschap verwaarloosde. De jonge koning nam de raad van zijn meester ter harte, zeer tegen de wil van Phyllis die op wraak zon. Vroeg in de morgen vertoonde zij zich, verleidelijk gekleed (met losse haren en op blote voeten, meldt de dichter), voor het raam van de filosoof, dat uitkeek op de paleistuin.
Aristoteles, die diep verzonken was in zijn boeken, hoorde haar zingen en keek uit het raam. Dat was het einde van zijn concentratie. 'Oh mijn God', zou hij geroepen hebben (volgens een commentator was dat gericht aan de god Eros) en toen Phyllis nog dichterbij kwam, reikte hij uit het raam om haar vast te pakken en verklaarde haar zijn liefde. Het meisje beloofde hem zijn liefde te beantwoorden maar hij moest eerst bewijzen dat hij werkelijk van haar hield. Ze vroeg hem als een paard op handen en voeten door de tuin te kruipen en haar toe te staan op hem te gaan zitten. De wijsgeer deed onmiddellijk wat zij vroeg en liet de schone Phyllis luid zingend hem berijden.
Op dat moment keerde de jonge Alexander uit zijn raam en zag het tafereel. Hij onstak in woede maar de verteller laat alles goed komen. De filosoof hervindt zich en trekt een wijze les, meer voor Alexander echter dan voor zichzelf: als een oude grijze man al niet bij machte is de liefde te weerstaan, hoeveel moeilijker zal het dan zijn voor een jonge warmbloedige man als Alexander. Alexander vergeeft zijn meester en herenigt zich met Phyllis.
De belangrijkste conclusie wordt echter niet getrokken door de middeleeuwse moralisten: onderschat de verlangens van een oude man niet.

Oude mannen in Ghana

Enkele jaren vóór mijn bezoek aan de Dordtse kerk had ik in Ghana een gesprek met vier oudere mannen over liefde en seks. Het gesprek ging eigenlijk over de ervaring van het ouder worden, maar plotseling zaten we in het onderwerp seks. Ik was verbaasd, want over seks praat men nauwe-

lijks in Ghana, zeker niet met een ouder iemand. Maar we waren met mannen onder elkaar en blijkbaar was het onderwerp relevant als het ging over de pijn van de ouderdom. Een van de mannen zei:

> *Als je oud wordt, moet je al het werk dat je in je leven gedaan hebt achterlaten en vooruitkijken.... Achter vrouwen aan jagen komt voort uit liefde en geluk, maar nu ben ik niet gelukkig, want ik heb geen kracht meer. Ik ben niet meer sterk en achter vrouwen aan gaan kost meer energie dan een boom omhakken. Het is erg vermoeiend. Als je oud bent zoals ik.... Ik heb nu zonen en dochters.... Als ik een vrouw zoek terwijl mijn zoon nog niet getrouwd is, betekent dat dat ik niet aan mijn zoon denk. Dat zou niet goed zijn. En nutteloos. Je kinderen zullen niet meer voor je zorgen.... Kijk, er komt een tijd dat je penis niet meer omhoog kan. Hij is dood. En als er geen kracht meer in je penis zit, houdt alles op.*

Een ander voegde er aan toe:

> *Wat mij betreft, ik zeg het eerlijk: ik ben oud. Ik word gekweld door ziekte, maar ik doe 'het' nog een klein beetje. Als ik het doe zeg ik tegen haar dat ze rustig aan moet doen; ik ben niet zo sterk meer.*

Het gesprek ging nog een hele tijd door en de mannen aarzelden niet om man en paard te noemen als het ging om de fysieke kant van de liefde en de slijtage van de benodigde organen. Twee dingen vielen me op. Ze hadden het steeds maar over verlies van kracht en het fysieke onvermogen het nog te doen. Alsof alles ophield met het verminderen van de energie.
Ik was benieuwd of er naast lichamelijke kracht nog wat anders was, bijvoorbeeld verlangens, of andere manieren om de liefde te 'bedrijven' op oudere leeftijd. Het leek of ze niet goed begrepen wat ik bedoelde. Opnieuw begon een van hen over energie te praten en zei dat vrouwen het veel gemakkelijker hadden; die hoefden alleen maar te liggen, als een pad waar fietsen overheen reden. Hij kreeg luid bijval van de anderen.
Toch dacht ik het verlangen naar liefde en seks bij deze mannen te ontwaren in de manier waarop ze praatten, in hun blik, in de stiltes. Het gesprek zat vol nostalgie en milde humor over een van de grootste verliespunten van de ouderdom.
Daar kwam nog iets anders bij: het respect van de oude man. Interesse in liefde en seks zou zijn reputatie kunnen schaden. Een goede vader moet dat soort verlangens en praktijken opzij zetten en zijn aandacht richten op het welzijn van zijn nageslacht. En hij moet zeker niet met zijn zoon concurreren in de liefde. Dat zou uiterst gênant zijn, zowel voor hemzelf als voor de zoon. Publieke censuur houdt de oude man in toom. Toch droomt

hij heimelijk nog van een kleine opleving. Een oudere man vertelde me dat een mooie jonge vrouw zijn machine misschien nog wel aan de praat kon krijgen. Aristoteles in Ghana.
Wat ten slotte opviel, was dat de echtgenotes van deze bejaarde heren niet of nauwelijks in het verhaal voorkwamen. Pratend over liefde en seks gingen hun gedachten in een andere richting. Blijkbaar was niet alleen hun energie aan slijtage onderhevig.

Clichés en taboes

De censuur op seks van ouderen lijkt van alle tijden en plaatsen. Seks is het eigendom van de jeugd. Ouderen zijn onaantrekkelijk als het om seks gaat en men neemt algemeen aan dat ze ook niet in seks geïnteresseerd zijn. Als ze dat wel zijn, is er iets mis met ze. Seks tussen ouderen, schrijft Levy, is gênant en onesthetisch.

> *Beelden in de media en andere vormen van 'popular culture', zoals spotprenten en ansichtkaarten, portretteren ouderen met belangstelling voor seks als grappig, bespottelijk, schandelijk of weerzinwekkend, zelfs als pervers.*

Een normale oudere is niet geïnteresseerd in seks, of zou dat niet moeten zijn. De 'perversiteit' van de op seks beluste oudere is voor de eeuwigheid vastgelegd in het (apocriefe) bijbelverhaal van de kuise Suzanna die tijdens haar bad door twee ouderlingen begluurd en (bijna) tot seks werd gedwongen. Rembrandt en vele andere schilders hebben dit dramatische moment, en de morele les, dankbaar in kleuren vastgelegd.
Het clichébeeld van de niet in seks geïnteresseerde normale oudere blijkt echter niet overeen te komen met de ervaringen van de ouderen zelf. Er verschijnen steeds meer studies over dit onderwerp, zij het met zeer tegenstrijdige bevindingen. Sommige auteurs bevestigen de vermindering van seksuele interesse bij ouderen en geven allerlei verklaringen, zoals mentale of fysieke vermoeidheid, in beslag genomen worden door werk, overmatig eten en drinken, ziekte, angst voor seksueel falen, monotonie, voorspelbaarheid van bestaande relatie.
Er zijn echter ook auteurs die beweren dat seksuele verlangens blijven bestaan tot het bittere eind, al verschilt men dan weer van mening of dat voor mannen én vrouwen geldt. Kellet concludeert dat de vermindering van seksuele activiteit op oudere leeftijd meer cultureel dan biologisch is. Freud wist ons reeds te vertellen dat er nauwelijks iets is dat kinderen zo schokkend vinden als hun ouders bezig te zien met seks. Het lukt niet hen tot andere gevoelens te brengen door erop te wijzen dat ze er niet geweest zouden zijn als hun ouders geen seks bedreven hadden. Te rationeel.

Enigszins impressionistisch meen ik te mogen vaststellen dat de verminderde seksuele bedrijvigheid bij ouderen inderdaad meer sociaal en cultureel is dan biologisch. De retorische vraag van Alice in Wonderland 'Do you think, at your age, it is right?' vat het taboe kernachtig samen.
Maar driften gaan niet met pensioen, zoals iemand schreef naar aanleiding van een film die de vooroordelen over het liefdesleven van ouderen wilde wegnemen. In de film *Brutti, Sporchi e Cattire* (Lelijk, vies en gemeen) van Ettore Scola zegt een oude man met tranen in zijn ogen: 'Ik droomde dat ik neukte.' Als een verzorgster hem tracht te troosten, reageert hij met nog meer droefheid: 'Hoe ouder ik word, hoe meer ik ernaar verlang.'
Die botsing tussen verlangen en betamelijkheid is zelden zo indringend tot uitdrukking gebracht als in het gedicht *De Klacht van den Oude*, dat Elsschot – op jonge leeftijd! – schreef. Dit gedicht is ook opgenomen in de bijdrage van Helga Ruebsamen, ik citeer hier alleen de vijfde strofe.

Maar waar ik wél toe ben bereid,
dat is voor elke jonge meid
zooals er honderdduizend loopen,
de kleeren van mijn lijf verkoopen

Verlangen

Tegenover de dramatische klacht van Elsschots oude *outcast*, staat de milde zelfspot waarmee Italo Svevo over het ouder worden en de liefde schrijft. In *Nieuwe bekentenissen van Zeno* (een door de uitgever bedachte titel, die het moet hebben van de verwijzing naar Svevo's beroemdste boek) zijn vijf min of meer losse, halfvoltooide teksten bij elkaar gebracht.
Svevo kwam door een auto-ongeluk om het leven en anderen hebben de teksten bijgeschaafd en uitgegeven. Uit brieven van Svevo kort voor zijn dood, blijkt dat hij inderdaad bezig was aan een nieuwe roman waarin hij zijn hoofdpersonage uit *De bekentenissen van Zeno* opnieuw aan het woord liet. Zeno is bijna zeventig en ondergaat het ouder worden met een mengeling van geluk en spijt.
In het eerste fragment, *De oude man*, vertelt Zeno over een treffend moment dat de toon zet voor de mijmeringen die gaan volgen. Vanuit zijn auto ziet hij een jong meisje dat zich sierlijk en behendig tussen het drukke verkeer doorwringt. Heel even vangt hij haar blik.

Ik weet niet waarom, maar ik voelde dat het wreed zou zijn als het moment voorbij zou snellen zonder ook maar enige relatie tussen dat meisje en mij te doen ontstaan. Al te wreed. Maar ik moest snel handelen, en de haast schiep verwarring. Ik herinnerde me! Er bestond al zo'n relatie tussen haar en mij. Ik

kende haar. Ik groette haar, waarbij ik me naar het raampje boog om te worden gezien, en ik liet mijn groet vergezeld gaan van een glimlach die mijn bewondering voor haar moed en jeugd moest uitdrukken. Meteen daarop onderdrukte ik mijn glimlach, daar ik me realiseerde op die manier al het goud te ontbloten dat ik in mijn mond had, en bleef haar ernstig en oplettend aankijken. Het meisje had de tijd me nieuwsgierig op te nemen; ze beantwoordde mijn groet met een aarzelend knikje dat iets heel ingetogens gaf aan haar gezichtje waarvan de glimlach was verdwenen en dat daardoor van licht veranderde alsof tussen haar en mijn ogen een prisma was geplaatst.

Het moment voert zijn gedachten naar een meisje dat hij in zijn jeugd heeft gekend en de twee ervaringen schuiven in elkaar.
De tweede tekst handelt onder meer over zijn zorgzame maar wat saaie vrouw Augusta, zijn kinderen en een schoonzoon waar hij heimelijk een hekel aan heeft.
Het derde fragment draait om zijn kleinzoon Umbertino. Kijkend naar het jongetje wordt hij vervuild van ontroering en tederheid, maar ook van spijt en bitterheid over zijn eigen leven.

Ik ben een man die beslist op het verkeerde moment is geboren. In mijn jeugd werden alleen oude mensen geëerd en ik kan zeggen dat de ouderen van toen gewoonweg niet gedoogden dat de jongeren over zichzelf praatten. Ze legden hun zelfs het zwijgen op als er sprake was van dingen die men toch tot hun terrein zou kunnen rekenen, van de liefde bij voorbeeld.... Nu ik oud ben, zijn alleen de jongeren in tel, zodat ik door het leven ben gegaan zonder ooit in tel te zijn geweest. Daaraan heb ik stellig een zekere antipathie ontleend tegen de jongeren die nu worden gerespecteerd en tegen de ouderen die het vroeger werden. Ik sta alleen op deze wereld, aangezien zelfs mijn leeftijd voor mij altijd een inferioriteit is geweest.

Dan volgt zijn conclusie:

Ik geloof werkelijk dat ik zoveel van Umbertino houd omdat hij nog buiten de leeftijd staat. Hij is nu zeven en een half en bezit nog geen enkele van onze ondeugden. Hij kent geen liefde en geen haat.

Het volgende fragment gaat over een crisis in zijn leven als zakenman, over een vernederend contract dat hij gedwongen werd te tekenen. Maar het was mij vooral om het laatste fragment te doen waarin de oude Zeno verhaalt over zijn poging de 'natuur te misleiden'. Hij besluit om zijn seksuele potentie (waar alles uiteindelijk om draait) op peil te houden door een minnares te nemen.

Onder onze organen is er een dat het middelpunt vormt, zoals de zon in een zonnestelsel. Tot voor enkele jaren nam men aan dat het hart dat orgaan was. Thans weet iedereen dat ons leven afhangt van het geslachtsorgaan. Carlo [een neef die geneeskunde heeft gestudeerd] trekt zijn neus op voor verjongingsoperaties, maar als het over geslachtsorganen gaat, neemt ook hij zijn hoed af. Hij zegt dat, als men erin zou slagen de geslachtsorganen te verjongen, men stellig het hele organisme zou verjongen. Dat hoefde hij mij niet te vertellen. Ik zou zelf wel op het idee gekomen zijn.

Dan rijpt het idee een medicijn te zoeken om dit centrale orgaan te onderhouden: een jonge minnares. Hij leert de 24-jarige Felicita kennen die hem twee maal per week ontvangt, maar hij ontdekt dat een mens niet zomaar als medicijn gebruikt kan worden. Felicita is een 'samengesteld medicijn dat ook een flinke dosis vergif bevat'. Ze laat hem fors betalen en hoewel hij zuinig is op zijn geld weet ze hem toch veel af te troggelen. Zij kent zijn zwakte.

Ze was beslist de duurste vrouw die ik in mijn hele leven heb gekend. Heel kalmpjes peilde ze, met die mooie heldere ogen die ze vaak half dichtkneep om beter te kunnen gluren, tot in hoeverre ik me zou laten plukken.... Ze probeerde meer dan eens haar hand in mijn zak te steken maar trok haar terug om niet het risico te lopen mij te verliezen. Maar op een keer gelukte het haar toch. Ze kreeg van mij het bedrag voor een vrij kostbare bontmantel, die ik overigens nooit heb gezien.

Soms zegt ze dingen die hem pijnlijk treffen ('Vreemd! Ik ben niet vies van je.'), maar hij blijft optimistisch over zijn vermogen te charmeren. Hij wil niet herinnerd worden aan het feit dat hij een groot deel van zijn leven getracht heeft niet vies gevonden te worden. Hij overtuigt zichzelf dat er wel degelijk momenten zijn geweest dat zij van hem hield.
Op een dag raadt Carlo, die niet weet van zijn relatie met Felicita, hem aan een meisje met gerontomanie te zoeken. Hij vraagt zich af of Felicita een gerontomane is, maar realiseert zich dat dat helaas niet het geval is. Als hij op zekere dag verstek laat gaan omdat hij er naar verlangt alleen te zijn en naar de Negende van Beethoven te luisteren, bedenkt hij de volgende dag: 'ik moet toch maar gaan, ik heb immers betaald'. Hij treft een andere oude heer bij haar aan. Plotseling ziet hij zichzelf in een spiegel en alle lust vergaat hem. Hij laat Felicita weten dat hij ermee stopt. Enkele dagen later stuurt ze nog wel haar broer om het laatste maandgeld op te halen.

Het was mijn laatste liefde.... Felicita met haar blonde haren, haar blanke gezichtje, haar fijne neusje, haar ondoorgrondelijke ogen, haar spaarzame woorden die niet vaak onthulden hoe koud haar hart was, verdient dat ik met weemoed aan haar terugdenk.... Tot de carrière van grijsaard, waartoe ik nu ben veroordeeld, ben ik opgevoed door Felicita. Nu pas weet ik dat ik in de liefde slechts tel voor wat ik betaal.

Maar zijn verlangens en zijn blikken richting vrouwen blijven.

Ik kijk naar de vrouwen die voorbij komen, volg met mijn ogen hun voetstappen terwijl ik probeer in hun benen iets anders te zien dan een werktuig om te lopen, en weer het verlangen te voelen hen aan te spreken en te liefkozen.

Maar hij moet voorzichtig zijn: '...dat mijn ogen niet onthullen wat ze zoeken'. Hij moet tegelijkertijd onverschilligheid voorwenden, maar ook weer niet te veel. 'Het is het lot van oude mannen zich op fraaie begroetingen toe te leggen.'
Het verhaal eindigt met een kleine gebeurtenis die de herinnering oproept aan het tafereel waar het boek mee begon. In de tram zit hij tegenover een mooi jong meisje ('een sierlijke amfoor'), maar zijn blik is te open, te verlangend.

Ik keek vol bewondering naar dat figuurtje en dacht, om moeder natuur die me in de gaten hield beter te misleiden: 'Het is wel zeker dat ik nog niet hoef te sterven, want als dat meisje het zou willen, zou ik nog tot voortplanting bereid zijn.'

Als het meisje de tram verlaat, mompelt een oude vrouw die haar blijkbaar begeleidt: 'Ouwe viezerik'. De oude man schrikt op uit zijn droom. 'Ze noemde me oud. Ze riep de dood aan.'

Dood

Liefde en seks op oudere leeftijd is een ongemakkelijk onderwerp, dat is inmiddels wel duidelijk. Ouderen doen er het best aan hun verlangen naar de lichamelijke liefde een beetje onder stoelen en (koor)banken te steken. Of zoals Cicero te verkondigen dat ze blij zijn eindelijk verlost te zijn van die lichamelijke distracties om zich nu op belangrijker zaken te kunnen richten. Tederheid is in orde, maar geen wilde passie meer. Geven ouderen geen gehoor aan die maatschappelijke regel en tonen ze hun verlangen te uitdrukkelijk, dan kunnen ze rekenen op hilarische of afkeurende reacties. Seksuele activiteiten tussen ouderen mogen gênant gevonden worden, tus-

sen partners met een groot leeftijdsverschil is er sprake van regelrechte veroordeling; misschien wel het grootste taboe na de pedofiele relatie. Erover schrijven in begrijpende termen, zoals Svevo gedaan heeft – en ik nu doe – is haast even riskant als de liefde zelf. Toch komt het thema verrassend vaak ter sprake in romans en verhalen, alsof de – vaak wat oudere – auteurs onder de vermomming van de protagonist de late liefde alsnog willen proeven of verdedigen. Svevo's/Zeno's bekentenis is ontroerend door zijn volstrekte eerlijkheid en milde zelfspot. Wat na het eind van de affaire overblijft, is het kijken en fantaseren en zich toeleggen op fraaie begroetingen.

De Japanse auteur Junichiro Tanazaki vertelt een vergelijkbaar verhaal maar, in tegenstelling tot Zeno, verandert de hartstocht deze oude man in een 'ouwe gek'. In een dagboek schrijft hij over zijn geheime verlangens; over de achteruitgang van zijn gezondheid terwijl zijn seksuele behoeftes alleen maar lijken te groeien bij het dichterbij komen van de dood. Satsuko, zijn schoondochter, komt hem af en toe een beetje tegemoet. Hij mag naar haar kijken terwijl ze een douche neemt, hij mag haar rug afdrogen en een keer zelfs een zoen geven in haar nek. Een andere keer mag hij haar uitgestoken been kussen en haar tenen in zijn mond nemen. Dat is het hoogtepunt. Zijn bloeddruk stijgt gevaarlijk maar dat deert hem niet. De dood wordt bijzaak in de opwinding van zulke momenten. De schoondochter heeft wel een prijs, net als Felicita, en de oude dwaas betaalt gewillig drie miljoen yen voor een kostbare ring. Een verpleegster die hem verzorgt meldt in haar rapport dat de oude man lijdt aan 'abnormale seksuele impulsen'.
Zeno komt op late leeftijd tot de ontdekking dat niet het hart, maar het geslachtsorgaan het middelpunt is waar alles om draait. De oude man in Scola's film klaagt dat zijn verlangens alleen maar toenemen naarmate hun vervulling onmogelijker wordt. Zelfs de oude wijsgeer blijkt niet bestand tegen de verlokking van het mooie jonge meisje.
Svevo heeft die contradictie van het ouder worden – afnemende kracht tegenover groeiende verlangens – op superieure wijze beschreven. Zeno schikt zich in het lot van de grijsaard die genoegen moet nemen met de beperkingen die natuur en maatschappij hem opleggen, maar voedt intussen heimelijk zijn verlangens. Het blijkt een riskant compromis. Als hij voor 'ouwe viezerik' wordt uitgemaakt, wordt hem ontnomen wat hij al die tijd is blijven koesteren.
Als ook het verlangen verboden wordt, is dat het aanroepen van de dood.

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