

# **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 commonness 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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