

WILDNESS & SENSATION

Anthropology of Sinister and Sensuous Realms

ROB VAN GINKEL & ALEX STRATING (EDITORS)



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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 if 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 crep-itus 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 eyes¹⁸ 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 aesthetic object. Readers will run away in disgust when they realize that their seeing is touching (and tasting). An aesthetic 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 ebɔn 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 ye 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 déféquer, si ce n'est en plaisantant avec de camarades...'
- 16 *Duaso wokɔ 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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