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

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1. A *Kruni* was originally someone from Liberia.

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