

The Belly Open: Fieldwork, Defecation and Literature with a Capital L

by Sjaak van der Geest

Abstract: This contribution takes the opening scene of Wim van Binsbergen's fieldwork novel *EenBuikOpenen* (Opening a Belly) as a starting point for a reflection on the hidden worries, shame and discomfort around defecation among anthropological fieldworkers in other cultures. The essay focuses on the question of why this part of life remains largely untold in the many fieldwork accounts that are now being published, and what role literary work can play in the articulation of personal emotion in anthropological fieldwork.

Keywords: fieldwork, anxiety, defecation, Literature

Introduction

He strained as if his very intestines were in need of being expelled and moaned softly, without conviction, for his mother. All that came out was some yellowish-brown foam and mucus. The sharp-edged lumps that Pieter felt in his abdomen were nothing but cramps. Squatting down as far as he could, he supported himself with one arm on his thigh and clasped the roll of toilet paper, reduced by half since the day before. With the other hand he held his pants away from whatever might come out of his body and whatever was already flowing beneath him. Dizzy, nauseated, he wondered how he had caught this diarrhoea, and if this was how he would be spending the entire seven months of his research time in this North African village' (van Binsbergen 1988: 9; translation Nancy Forest-Flier).

Twice (if I remember well) Wim and I corresponded orally or in written form

about an anthropological issue that we seemed to disagree on. Once was through three brief articles on ethical concerns during fieldwork that appeared in *Human Organization* and to which Wim refers in his *Vicarious Reflections*.¹ The other time was after I had read his stories *Zusters, Dochters* (Sisters, Daughters). He gave me a copy of the book and scribbled a friendly kinship term on the front page. I was impressed by the way he captured 'the existential thrust' (Wim's term, thirty years later) of the fieldwork experience. I told him that his literary work was perhaps even more effective ethnography than his elaborate anthropological essays. He did not appreciate the comment and in reaction used a term that I cannot repeat in a contribution to a book of friends. But I wonder how he would react today. This is one of the reasons why I have chosen to renew our too brief debate of about 25 years ago.

Let me first give an example to explain why I was impressed. In the first story, *God prutst maar wat bij het scheppen* (God is messing around with creation), a Zambian woman, Pauline, tells her friend (the writer) the story of her love for a man, Patrick, who was very different from all those men who wanted to have sex with her. She tells the story while she and the friends spend the night together. The setting of the night the mud house, the simple room, and the very bed that plays a role in her story captures the double meanings and intimate contradictions of love and sex; more than I have found in the desperate anthropological attempts to dissect the 'mechanisms' of love. Little details in her narrative about her daily life and work in a shop provide the 'stuff' that stories are made of but would need long explanations in an anthropological account. The point of the love story is that Patrick respected her and treated her as a 'sister'. Her love for him would last as long as they remained 'brother and sister', until

¹ My thanks go to Wim van Binsbergen, who over the past 35 years has been a unique and outstanding colleague in anthropology in the broadest sense of the term. I don't need to explain – certainly not to Wim – that the term 'unique' has many shades of meaning. Personally, I had the privilege of receiving from him numerous stimulating comments on my own work, which began with my PhD thesis. When I finally defended that thesis in the Dutch ceremonial fashion, Wim was prepared to fulfil the humble task of 'paranymph', which is generally regarded as a token of friendship. More recently, our paths have gone in different directions, but this fact increases my gratitude for having been invited to contribute to this *Festschrift* and being given the opportunity to re-ignite an old fire. I apologize for the self-plagiarism in this text (Van der Geest 2007); it is better to admit this before you are 'accused' of it. I thank Nancy Forest-Flier for translating the fragment from Wim's novel into Literary English, and Zoe Goldstein for editing the final text.

the night that Patrick persuaded her to have sex with him, and then it was over. This point is alluded to in the title of the story and in a traditional song that Pauline and her friend had heard that very evening: God created people and trees, but 'Why did he create my sister Shongo so beautiful that I wish she was not my sister?'

The rapprochement between anthropology and literary text can be viewed from two perspectives: the anthropological character of the literary text and the literary style of the anthropological text. The 'discovery' that Literature such as novels and poems contains ethnography is related to the search for an 'experience-near' anthropology. The story provides the 'true-to-lifeness' that the anthropologist is looking for and thus offers an attractive format for the presentation of research data. Ironically, the authority and authenticity of a story – that apparently does not try to prove anything is greater than that of an academic text that wants to bring insight to the reader. This latter task is attempted by following various anthropological conventions, including theoretical digressions, which may rather disturb the ethnography.

Literary writers are better equipped to reveal the more hidden experiences and thoughts of their interlocutors than anthropologists. They do not have to draw a representative sample and are not dependent on painstaking interviews with informants who are unwilling to answer impertinent questions. Literary writers often know what they write about from personal experience. Things they have picked up along the way. Their 'research method' is more natural participant observation than that of the anthropologist. They have seen and heard it all and speak from experience. They can close their eyes and explore their memory.

Fieldwork, anxiety and diarrhoea

My contribution will be a reaction to Wim's remark about a contradiction in his work:

'What was effectively expressed in the routinised, globalised discourse of professional anthropology... on second thought turned out not to capture the existential thrust of the fieldwork encounters on which it was based, and what was even more regrettable, did not make any sense to my original fieldwork hosts, and could hardly be a source of pride and identity to them. And what came closer to the latter (e.g. my 1988 novel in Dutch, *Een Buik Openen* [Opening a Belly], on my first fieldwork in North Africa, 1968;

and many of my poems) was, with some exceptions, considered irrelevant to the furtherance of anthropology' (van Binsbergen 2015: 3).

The quote that opened this essay is the first paragraph of the novel he mentions in the citation above. The novel is about an anthropology student doing fieldwork in Tunisia, unmistakably a story full of autobiography. The defecation scene sets the tone for a whole series of anxieties that I will not be able to elaborate upon here. Diarrhoea as a metonym for the insecurity, fears, frustrations and unfulfilled desires of anthropological fieldwork suffices for the purpose of my contribution. It enables me to present some of my thoughts about Literature and fieldwork, as well as about dirt, defecation and intimacy. Colleagues who have supervised students travelling abroad to do research in harsh conditions know that fears about defecation are as prominent as fears about food, health, privacy and loneliness. But we hardly ever hear or read about defecatory anxiety; the topic seems more at home in novels than in anthropological publications.

Growing academic 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, however, one of the main worries of fieldwork defecation remains conspicuously absent. Miller (1997: 22) praises the bravery of anthropologists who have 'endured life without toilet paper', but how and if they defecated remains a mystery. Van der Veer (1988: 21), who is one of those 'brave anthropologists', writes that 'the symphony of the bowels' dominates the diaries of anthropologists in the field, but can rarely be heard in their academic publications. He is undoubtedly also speaking of his own experience. The diarrhoea 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 this most mundane, drab, everyday activity. Seeing his tent pitched on the shore in one of the photographs of his *Argonauts*, one cannot help being curious. It is ironic, to say the least, that he cancelled 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 experiences elsewhere (Van der Geest 1998) and it would become a monotonous symphony to repeat the story here. It suffices to note that it was not only the

rebellion of four of my five senses (fortunately taste was not involved) that made me run away from that 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 of coping with the technical and social ineptness 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 public toilets have 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, my truant reaction made me lose this 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 this omission can be an important motivation 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. Yet 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 have told me about their students' fears of defecation in the field. One told me that he could read the emotional burden of fieldwork in his students "infantile obsession with their own defecation". This silence reminds me of the secrecy surrounding initiation rituals. When many years ago Freilich (1977) called fieldwork an initiation rite, he was more right than we realized at the time.

This is not to say that all fieldworkers are always silent about the subject. Some have made one or two remarks about their experiences, keeping it decent and limited. Dentan (1970), who did research in Malaysia, writes that he always had 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?' Amumbled '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 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 (1992) 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'.

A few anthropologists volunteered to tell me about their uncomfortable (or peaceful) toilet experiences in the field. Irene Agyepon, a medical doctor from Ghana with anthropological talents, 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 faeces were immediately consumed by pigs. This was too much for her. Peter Ventevogel, 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" (diary 17 October 1991).

Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall (1979) wrote an extensive diary (three volumes) about their fieldwork among the Hamar people in Ethiopia. There is very little in it about defecation but in an email message (May 2003) Strecker summarized their experiences as follows:

We 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*

(*grewiamollis*). 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.

Defecation as a literary subject

Together with sex and death, defecation has proved the most frequent reason to use euphemisms. The need to avoid the topic, however innocent and natural it may seem, occurs worldwide. This avoidance is also noted in anthropology. Rachel Lea (2001:51) rightly remarked that defecation ‘was ignored in ethnography just as it is ignored in daily life’. Not writing about faeces 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 that is non-social and non-cultural because it takes place in a social and cultural vacuum. Defecation may be relevant for biology, the medical sciences and psychoanalysis, but not for social scientists, as it lacks any social dimension (Lea 2001: 8-9). My point is that the widespread concern about privacy surrounding the topic rather constitutes evidence of its high social and cultural relevance. The anthropological silence is directly related to this social and cultural relevance (read: embarrassment, unease).

A more plausible ‘theory’ for the absence of defecation in ethnography and in anthropological reflection is the disgust of this ‘matter out of place’, to use Mary Douglas’ (1966) famous definition of dirt. If speaking, let alone writing, about shit – to call the substance by (one of) its name(s) – is improper, an anthropology of defecation would be equally improper. It does what it claims 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’ (Quigley, cited in Lea 2001: 14). 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 the 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. These 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 both embarrassing and ironic. It shows how much anthropologists remain trapped in the rules and conventions of their own culture. I call this 'ironic' since anthropologists claim to take distance from their own culture. They love to justify their ethnographic work as cultural critique, a contribution to defamiliarization by cross-cultural juxtaposition (Marcus & Fischer 1986). Artists, like literary authors, seem more inclined and able to break conventions and broach topics about which we have learnt to keep silent.

When half a century ago Laura Bohannon wanted to let readers look behind the scenes of fieldwork, she opted to write a novel and a pseudonym, as she feared that the novel would damage her scholarly reputation. Her novel *Return to laughter* (Bowen 1964) provided a more effective tool for writing about the day-to-day affairs and hiccups of anthropological fieldwork in a colonial African society. I do not remember that there was anything about defecation in the novel, but the choice for a literary form was significant. It allowed for more personal anxiety and other normal human sentiments, without risking being criticized for exhibitionism or making an inappropriate display of emotion and personal drama.

Another Dutch novel, *Allemaal projectie* (All projection) by Gerrit Jan Zwier (1980), tells the story of an anthropologist who is so scared of doing fieldwork that he secretly stays home and employs a Moroccan assistant to do the work. When his fraud is threatened with discovery, he flies to Morocco and takes up residence in a hotel. His assistant is as fraudulent as his employer, and fills out

the tests and questionnaires himself. The anthropologist's boss is very pleased with the outcome of the research. I suppose that the author, who is also a geographer and anthropologist, did not write an autobiographical story, but the novel certainly reveals real emotions and practices that occur in fieldwork.

Wim's graphic description of diarrhoea and angst in his novel would probably not have been appreciated, let alone accepted for publication, in a conventional anthropological account. It would have been rejected as what I have just called exhibitionism and an inappropriate display of emotion and intimacy. The novel, however, allows him to reveal this very personal part of his fieldwork. But is it 'irrelevant to the furtherance of anthropology', as he worried about in the quote above? I do not think so; the tandem of academic and literary work that he has pursued in his career presents a challenge for anthropology as scholarly tradition. Both writing options still have to come to terms with one another. Discussions about subjectivity, narrative, auto-ethnography, aesthetics, intersubjectivity, introspection and serendipity are indications of a future anthropology in which boundaries and overlaps between these various perspectives will be more profoundly and eagerly examined.

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