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Children and dirt in Kwahu, Ghana: A social-anthropological perspective¹

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

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. *Atantanè*, 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...

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. 7: To the dunghill



Fig. 8: At the dunghill



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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