

Not Knowing about Defecation

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In his celebrated essay that inspired the theme of this book, Murray Last writes: "I suggest that under certain conditions not-knowing or not-caring-to-know can become institutionalised as part of a medical culture."¹ That institutionalization of not knowing makes the not knowing such an important issue in understanding a culture. If we know why people systematically do not know certain things that are part of their everyday experience, we will be better able to understand their culture.

Murray's essay, on (the absence of) Hausa medical knowledge, made us aware of anthropologists' wrong assumption that people always know their culture. The *Aha-Erlebnis* that this article produced was that there are indeed many things people do not really know and feel perfectly comfortable not knowing. Yet they "forget" their not knowing when they are interviewed and pressed to give "proper" answers. Too often anthropologists do not accept "Don't know" as an answer, although that sometimes is the best answer.

My contribution deals with another kind of institutionalized not knowing: not knowing about defecation. That not knowing does not refer to lack of knowledge on the part of informants about their defecation practice. They know very perfectly well, to the smallest detail, when, where, and how they defecate. Not knowing in this case lies with the anthropologists who never asked questions about it. Why? Is it important to know about the not knowing of anthropologists about defecation? Does it teach us something about the culture of practicing anthropology? I think it does. It shows that anthropologists are more caught in the web of their own culture than we realized. They seem to be restrained by

relatively trivial codes of decency, which stop them from openly speaking or writing about such dirty and childish matters as human defecation.

I only know two anthropological studies of defecation. Interestingly both authors write about their own culture. The first is Flavien Ndonko's² study on "cultural representations of faeces" in two Cameroonian societies, the Bamiléké and the Yasa. Ndonko describes these people's resistance to the government's introduction of latrines. Latrines, Ndonko shows, threaten the very basis of their cosmology and ecology. The second is Rachel Lea's³ dissertation on defecatory practices in Britain. The ethnographic contribution of her study is more limited: conversations with a few friends about their ideas and practices and those of their children. The emphasis of Lea's study is theoretical: her discussion of defecation literature (and art) is unparalleled.

These two studies are, however, exceptions. Overall, defecation is practically absent as a focal point of ethnographic interest in anthropological work. My first reaction to this is amazement: why did—and do—anthropologists hardly study defecation? One can think of many reasons why they should be interested in it, medical anthropologists in particular. I will discuss several reasons.

Ten Reasons for the Study of Defecation

The first reason is its everyday character. Anthropologists have a strange relationship with ordinary life. They claim that it is the daily routines they are after—is that not what we mean by culture?—but in their own daily practice of fieldwork they show more interest in dramatic events and in festivals that occur only once a year. The acclaimed "discovery of everyday" did not really take place in anthropology. Everyday life can rather be found in the work of sociologists. Is that perhaps the reason that some anthropologists find them boring?

Defecation certainly—and hopefully—is a daily routine, one of those "drab, everyday, minor events," which Malinowski admitted he did not treat "with the same love and interest as sensational large happenings." Loudon,⁴ who quoted these words, applied the critique to himself. More "shaming" than the subject itself, he wrote:

is that I have only the smallest amount of direct concrete evidence about the mundane minutiae of such a seemingly straightforward matter as where and when the people among who I worked for two years usually defecated, and what they thought about it.

If the everyday appearance of feces could not capture the curiosity of the anthropologists, what about their *disappearance*, or—to speak with

Leder⁵—their *dys*-appearance? Anthropologists have always been fascinated by the unseen. One of the paradoxes of the anthropological quest is that we swear by participant observation but feel attracted by what we cannot observe and cannot participate in. Hidden knowledge, black magic, forbidden practices, covert conflicts, secret societies, and nocturnal rituals are some of the unobservable popular topics in ethnography. Yet defecation, one of the most concealed activities, has never been on the short list of anthropological favorites.

A third reason to be interested in defecation is its central role in learning culture, as Freud pointed out a long time ago. Toilet training is the first step to the acquisition of culture by children (not by anthropologists, apparently). Learning to distinguish between what is dirty and what is clean is essential for proper functioning in a society. Children are taught not to touch what comes out of their body, because it is “dirty.” Certain objects, body parts, animals, and activities are also considered unclean. In each household the anthropologist can observe how culture is manufactured in the way children are treated. What is concealed in the lives of grown-up members of society is still visible among small children. Unfortunately, the anthropologists—even those who were interested in socialization of children—largely overlooked these mundane enlightening practices.

One of anthropology’s roots is in the never-ending nature-nurture debate: from Tylor and Boas onwards, resistance against biological determinism has indeed been a major source of inspiration and motivation to study cultural variations of phenomena and habits that were regarded as “natural” at home. Defecation—like health and illness, and the senses—seems an eminent subject to study the complex intertwinement of what we call “nature” and “culture.” How much culture is there in nature’s call? In a newspaper clipping from 1991, I read that the famous Irish cyclist Stephen Roche had to leave the world’s most prestigious cycling event, the Tour de France, because he arrived too late at the start of the second day. Reason: an urgent call by nature. Certain facts of nature, the message seems to tell, one can never escape. “Shitting comes before dancing” (*Poepen gaat voor dansen*) a Dutch proverb goes. First nature, then culture. As many wisdoms, this one is too simple. Roche was an experienced cyclist. In 1987 he had won all three top prizes of cycling: Tour de France, Giro d’Italia, and World Championship. He probably had good reasons to let nature take its course this time. There may have been strategy in his defecation, or, to stay with the Dutch proverb, dancing in his shitting. The fact that toilet training, as we have just seen, signals the beginning of culture, suggests that we witness a crucial nature-culture interface in the lonely act of defecation, but anthropologists forget to pay attention.

One particular nature-culture encounter that has always intrigued anthropologists is the human body. From Mauss to Foucault, Czordas, and Devisch—with excursions to history, psychology, philosophy, and art—body and embodiment have been almost constant foci of anthropological research. Themes that were discussed over the years included the cultural construction of the body, its symbolic representation of cosmos and society, the body as a means of communication, as the focus of identity, as object and subject of political control, and the ongoing process of embodiment. Body products—and faces in particular—seem very tangible metonyms of bodily presence in the world. They could be “key informants” for understanding the meaning of body and embodiment in the context of culture. Their near absence in the anthropology of the body is—again—remarkable. It is mainly studies dealing with the failing, sick body⁶ that take up the matter of defecation, that is: defecation as a problem. Those dealing with the “normal” healthy body remain reticent about the ultimate proof of its normality: regular defecation.⁷

More recent is the anthropological interest in the senses. After Stoller's⁸ plea for “tasteful ethnography” anthropologists have increasingly attempted to extend their sensory arsenal of participant observation. Seeing and hearing were too limited to understand culture, smelling in particular, but also touching and tasting had to be part of the fieldwork experience. They always had been, of course, but not as consciously as now was proposed. One would expect that feces, around which the most intense sensory experiences take place, had become a more regular topic in this new “sensitive” ethnography but—once more—it has not. As Lea⁹ points out, Stoller himself “forgot” about the “distasteful” appearance of feces and other dirt during his fieldwork. His plea for tasteful, after all, had to be taken in the conventional meaning of the term: decent, clean.

My seventh reason for expecting the rise of defecation in anthropological writing is of a somewhat different kind and will be discussed more lengthily. Growing 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—or perhaps not—one of the main worries of fieldwork, defecation, remains conspicuously absent. Miller¹⁰ praises the bravery of anthropologists who “endured life without toilet paper,” but how and if they defecated remains a mystery. Van der Veer,¹¹ who is one of those brave anthropologists, writes that “the symphony of the bowels” dominates the diaries of anthropologists in the field but rarely can be heard in their academic publications—he undoubtedly speaks of his own experience. The diarrhea 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 that most mundane “drab, everyday” activity. Seeing his tent pitched on the shore in one of the photographs of his *Argonauts*, one cannot help becoming curious. It is ironic, to say the least, that he canceled 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 own experiences elsewhere¹² and it would become a monotonous symphony to repeat those stories here. It suffices to note that it was not only the rebellion of four of my five senses (fortunately, taste was not involved), which made me run away from the 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 to cope with the technical and social problem 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 toilets has 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, as we have just seen, my truant reaction made me lose that 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 that omission can be an important motive 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.

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 told me about their students' fear of defecation in the field. One told me that he could read the emotional burden of fieldwork from his students' “infantile obsession with their own defecation.” That silence reminds me of the secrecy surrounding initiation rituals. When Freilich¹³ many years ago called fieldwork an initiation rite, he was more right than we realized at the time.

That is not to say that all fieldworkers are always silent about it. Some made one or two remarks about their experience, keeping it decent and limited. Dentan¹⁴ who did research in Malaysia, writes that he always got 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?" A mumbled "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 seems to have 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). Goodenough¹⁵ 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." Some, who enjoyed a comfortable toilet, went there to find privacy. Scott,¹⁶ for example, in Malaysia, found his toilet a "place of—apparently pleasant—solitude." For some it was even a place to jot down fieldwork notes.

A few anthropologists volunteered to tell me about their uncomfortable (or peaceful) toilet experiences in the field. Irene Agyepon, from Ghana, 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 feces were immediately consumed by pigs. That was too much for her. Peter Ventevogel,¹⁷ 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 (17 October 1991).

Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall wrote an extensive diary (three volumes) about their fieldwork among Hamar people in Ethiopia.¹⁸ There is very little in it about defecation but in an e-mail message (May 2003) Strecker summarized their experiences as follows:

[W]e 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* (*grewia mollis*). 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.

After this defecatory reflection on fieldwork we still have to deal with three final reasons why defecation deserves more attention in anthropology. The most important one is the theoretical relevance of dirt. The concept of dirt offers people the opportunity to order their life. The old functionalist paradigm that order is the heart of culture has never been abandoned, however loudly structural-functionalism was 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.¹⁹ Excretions of the body are the most strongly felt matters out of place and, therefore, the most informative pointers of cultural boundaries and identity construction. The more surprising it is that feces are practically absent in anthropological theory, even in Douglas's own classic book.

It stands to reason that for medical anthropologists feces and defecation are particularly relevant. A regular and smooth movement of the bowels is both a sign of good health and a condition for it. Crawford's²⁰ definition of health as the perfect balance between control and release applies first of all to the defecation experience. The focus on regular excretion to maintain health seems widespread. But, unfortunately, even in medical anthropology, the ethnographic and theoretical focus on defecation ideas and practices is scanty. Lea's²¹ study is an outstanding exception.

The only domain in anthropology that *has* been frequently calling attention to the social and cultural aspects of defecation is applied medical anthropology. Anthropologists involved in sanitation and public health projects have repeatedly pointed out that health policies must take into account local perceptions of dirt and hygiene.²² It is indeed mainly sanitation development work and concern about conditions surrounding children's diarrhea that have evoked most interest in the anthropological study of defecation. Ironically, that research and those publications are

little respected in mainstream (medical) anthropology and considered too quick and too dirty (!) to satisfy the “proper” anthropologists. These publications are mainly found in project reports, newsletters, and other “gray” literature (on and outside the Internet), hardly in the established prestigious journals.

Avoiding Defecation

Having discussed so many good reasons for studying the culture of defecation, we should ask why anthropologists, some excepted, preferred not to know about it.

In 1975 J. B. Loudon delivered a paper on body products at the Annual Conference of the British Association of Social Anthropology in Belfast. He remarked that there was probably no human society where excreta and the act of excretion were not subject to public or private arrangements involving the establishment of boundaries. This, to my knowledge, was the first serious sign of anthropological interest in defecation. In the shortened version of his talk, which appeared a few months later in the newsletter of the Royal Anthropological Institute, he concluded his appeal for research on the matter as follows:

Like sex and food, faeces and defecation have a social component as well as a biological one. No doubt the code is relatively limited. The space-time clock initiated by the gastrolic reflex has restricted meanings. But deciphering them is relevant to the study of small-scale social relations, of concepts of intimacy, privacy and distance, of the link between thinking and stinking.²³

This statement outlined some important themes in the anthropology of defecation, but was an understatement. Much more is at stake in ideas and practices around defecation, not only at the level of small-scale relations, but also at the level of national governments, not only concepts of intimacy and privacy, but also of politics and power.

By far the most prominent—and almost universal—arrangement that Loudon talked about is the concealment of both the act and the result of defecation. Most of the few ethnographic accounts of defecation across the world emphasize its disappearance from public life and the existence of embarrassment, shame, fear, and disgust surrounding the topic. Malinowski²⁴ reported that people of the Trobriand Islands were very particular about defecation. A Trobriander, he writes,

shows far more delicacy than most Europeans of the lower classes, and certain ‘sanitary’ arrangements in the south of France and other Mediterranean countries would horrify and disgust him.

Trobrianders had specially reserved places in the bush at some distance of the village and would never go there together.²⁵ They felt disgusted by feces, in particular their smell. The Cameroonian anthropologist Ndonko made similar observations in two societies, the Yasa and the Bamiléké, in his home country: concealment is the rule and even speaking about it is considered wrong.²⁶ The Australian anthropologist Seymour writes that routine bodily functions such as defecation are "cloaked in secrecy":

Not only does the management of these activities take place behind closed doors, but beyond crude jokes or clinical situations, civilised behaviour provides few opportunities to openly discuss these topics. Talking about such things makes people feel uncomfortable; embarrassment, humiliation and shame compound the furtive, hidden nature of the activities. No one escapes the need to eliminate bodily wastes, yet these routine functions are often hidden in euphemism and furtive behaviour. Propriety has created disgust at the normal activities of healthy bodies.²⁷

Sixty percent of a thousand respondents in an American survey in the 1960s reported that they would interrupt or postpone defecation if they had no privacy.²⁸ Significantly, together with sex and death, defecation has proved the most frequent reason for using euphemisms. The need to avoid the topic, however innocent and natural it may seem, occurs worldwide.

That avoidance is also noted in anthropology. Rachel Lea rightly remarked that defecation "was ignored in ethnography just as it is ignored in daily life."²⁹ Clearly, the two are related; not writing about feces 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 which is asocial and acultural because it takes place in a social and cultural vacuum. Defecation may be relevant for biology, medical sciences and psychoanalysis but not for social scientists as it lacks any social dimension.³⁰ My point is that widespread concern about privacy rather constitutes evidence of its high social and cultural relevance. The anthropological silence is directly related to that social and cultural relevance (read: embarrassment). Fiske³¹ in his handbook on human relations, rejects what he calls the "Null orientation," the supposed existence of nonsocial behavior. Taking defecation as an example, he emphasizes its social orientation. Defecation, he writes,

is social in that most adults take care to do it in private, since it is embarrassing to be observed. Similarly, most action that is asocial in the

immediate, narrow sense of the term is asocial just because cultural implementation rules define it so. Thus for the most part it is the culture itself that determines the domains in which people act individualistically....³²

I agree with Lea, quoting Frankenberg, that the "presence of absence" of "coprology" in anthropology is significant and raises intriguing anthropological questions.³³

Several authors emphasize an ambivalence about feces; on the one hand they see them as substances that have been rid, just matters out there; on the other hand they regard them as ultimately linked with the body, part of it and therefore vulnerable, a cause of embarrassment and liable to evil practice, if they are not taken care of.³⁴ A Bamiléké riddle, quoted by Ndonko,³⁵ strikingly expresses that ambivalence: "I am your intimate friend, we walk together day and night without seeing one another and if you see me, we separate."

If speaking, let alone writing, about shit, to call the substance by its name, is improper, an anthropology of defecation would be equally improper. It does what it is claiming 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."³⁶ 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 this 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. They 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 embarrassing and ironic. It shows how much anthropologists remain encapsulated in their own culture.

Anthropologists claim taking distance from of their own culture. They love to justify their ethnographic work as cultural critique, a contribution to defamiliarization by what Marcus and Fischer³⁷ call "cross-cultural juxtaposition." For many anthropologists reflecting back upon their own culture constitutes the *raison d'être* of their work. More recently the same authors concluded that anthropologists have taken that job "much less seriously than that of probing the cultures of others."³⁸ The Dutch anthropologist Ton Lemaire³⁹ made a similar observation when he remarked that anthropologists tend to be progressive abroad ("in the field")

but conservative at home. Anthropologists, both in their ethnographic and their comparative reflection, appear more ethnocentric than they may be willing to admit. This small excursion into the culture of defecation suggests that they even seem to be "imprisoned" by their own cultural code of propriety when it comes to choosing a topic for their research.

Shit is an improper topic at home; it is not so much a taboo, it is worse, it is a childish and ridiculous topic. Colleagues will not take you seriously when you write about it. It happened to Ndonko when he arrived in Cameroon after defending his dissertation in Germany. His colleagues were shocked and embarrassed: why had he not studied a proper Cameroonian topic?

Paradoxically, my own interest in the topic not only met frowned eyebrows and insipid jokes. I realized that the subject—although of bad taste—generated lively and most interesting conversations. When I brought up the topic, it guaranteed an entertaining evening, especially if those present were from different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, many friends and colleagues sent me notes from novels, films and newspapers, references, and personal anecdotes on defecation, since they knew I was interested in the topic. They never did this when I was studying kinship or medicines. Loudon⁴⁰ and Lea⁴¹ had the same experience: their colleagues and friends showed an extraordinary interest in their project but declined to write about it themselves.

Notes

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