

<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13936>

Poop

2017-11-20 12:23:05

By Joshua Grace

For colonial officials in British East Africa, African excrement endangered public health because Africans were reckless defecators. The world was their toilet, and they simply went where they pleased. Indeed, in 1866, [David Livingston](#) suggested Zanzibar be renamed “Stinkibar”: “The stench from a mile and a half to two miles of sea-beach, which is the general depository of the filth of the town, is quite horrible. At night it is so gross or crass that one might cut out a slice and manure a garden with it ... No one can long enjoy good health here” (Livingston, 1874). Ten years later, Scottish physician [James Christie](#) turned his attention to public defecation on the island as he attempted to pinpoint the spread of cholera in the western Indian Ocean.

According to Christie, the beach was the main site of “public convenience for negroes of both sexes, at all hours of the day, and with no more regard to decency than if they were brute beasts.” This fouled one of Zanzibar’s main attractions for European populations, who could only boat at high tide, but because “negroes are not, as a general rule, very sensitive in sight and smell” the town’s Swahili residents supposedly enjoyed the waterfront during a shit-filled low tide. Christie added that the “crème de le crème of native society” relieved themselves “under the very windows of European houses where European ladies are resident.”

After investigation, neither of these sites explained cholera’s movement into homes, onto ships, and through caravan trade networks into central Africa. Christie found an answer in proximal defecation near wells by the women who fetched water for city residents and outgoing ships: “There is nothing more calculated to excite one with horror and disgust at the entire negro race than the sight of the water-women at the Shamba well-pits ... The border of the pit is used as a convenience, and, as women adopt the custom of washing, Moslem fashion, there are other ingredients mixed up with the excreta.” The physician called on public authorities to construct a sewage line to carry the old town’s excrement away from wells and houses and into the ocean (Christie, 1876).

There are many reasons to doubt the veracity of Christie’s descriptions. According to [William Bissell](#) and [Garth Meyers](#), the main problem with colonial perceptions of African filth in Zanzibar is that they fail to explain

the absence of cholera cases in Ng'ambo where most Africans lived and relived themselves. Nor can these discourses account for long stretches of relatively stable public health. We can add to this an archaeological record of Swahili toilets that gives African sanitary practices a place and material form, as [Henry Lewis Gates Jr.](#) illustrates.

Equally important is that Christie's work marks the beginning of a materialist approach to African excrement still used today. Four assumptions inform this approach. First, Africans poop recklessly, and thus contaminate their immediate living environment. Second, this recklessness occurs on a society-wide level because Africans lack dedicated sanitation technologies. Third, and by extension, Africans need toilets and other sanitary systems. Finally, poop in Africa is safe when it is either distanced from the dumper (as in Christie's sewer-to-ocean solution) or when it is buried and encased in a dedicated subterranean space.

A 1937 film made for African audiences in colonial Tanzania, only two kilometers from Zanzibar, provides a useful example of this materialist approach. "[Tropical Hookworm](#)" features a male labor migrant walking on a "native path" through a rural farm. When he needs to relieve himself, he steps to the side of the path, squats, and defecates. He then carries on, ultimately showing signs of hookworm that are diagnosed and treated at a colonial dispensary.

But then his shit starts to act. After showing worms in the man's intestine, the film declares: "The worms lay eggs that he evacuates. After a week or two the little worms will hatch out and spread over the ground." When another traveler steps in the excrement, "the little worms have burrowed into his bare feet" and give him the disease. A slide states that medicinal cures, though sometimes effective, will not prevent re-infection.

The directors thus return to the original defecation scene – a form of shitting that contaminates African society – before stating that "pit latrines will prevent infection provided everyone has them." A how-to for building a pit latrine follows: dig a hole; place a concrete slab cover over the top; and then build walls and a roof. Now safely closed off in its subterranean home, the migrant's poop loses its toxic qualities. Just to be sure, the last half of the film demonstrates methods of making sandals out of used automobile tires and animal hides, "perhaps the most simple way to prevent" infection.

Combined, the sandals and pit latrine placed Africans at the bottom of a racialized infrastructure of colonial shitting. Officials defined "European" toilets as Water Closets (W.C.). Motor lorries moved W.C. waste from household tanks to large refuse incinerators or to pipes that shot the

refuse into the ocean. When W.C.'s were not available, officials used a "[Thunderbox](#)," a bench with a hole and a can. African night soil collectors removed the latter daily via a trap door outside the house or outhouse. In both cases, European poop [rarely](#) had the chance to become toxic to its defecator because it quickly moved to other places via human and mechanical labor.

"Asian" latrines were squat toilets with a porcelain commode, some water access, and a septic tank to process the waste. "Native" latrines, though little more than holes in the ground, were considered an improvement over what officials thought existed before: nothing. Importantly, the growing piles of excrement in pit latrines rarely moved *en masse* to be processed at incinerators (Scott, 1929). As a colonial technology, the pit latrine made poop an integral part of Africans' immediate subterranean worlds with consequences for dense settlements explored below.

Turning African defecation into a technological problem presented a more immediate challenge: colonial officials had to build and maintain infrastructure. In villages like the one shown in "Tropical Hookworm," homesteads were responsible for making and maintaining a pit latrine.

But the movie's focus on rural communities did not address the most worrisome spaces of African defecation: cities and sites of labor such as mines and plantations. In cities, sanitation officials wanted to replace or enhance a bucket system in which trucks picked up human waste left on the sides of roads. For migrants like the man in "Tropical Hookworm," Department of Labor officials proposed an integrated infrastructure consisting of roads, rest houses, pit latrines, and spaces set aside to safely process excrement.

Colonial material interventions fell far short of this standard. In labor camps and plantations, latrines were both temporary and second-hand. One proposal for a camp latrine instructed engineers to place used timber over two empty oil drums. When contents reached two feet from the planks, sanitation workers covered the contents with dirt. Though this model was not built, others like it were. When they fell apart, officials did not blame the latrines' temporary materiality or a lack of maintenance but rather returned to questions about Africans' ability or willingness to use them.

For example, "Notes on Camp Hygiene for Employers of Laborers" states: "The lack of latrines and of their compulsory use is the most common cause of hookworm disease which rapidly reduces the output of work from a man infected with it." And yet, at cotton markets: "The Medical Officer, Morogoro, is of the opinion that permanent latrines are quite unnecessary and would fall into utter disrepair between seasons."

And in Ulanga: “The latrine has recently fallen down. The total number of labourers and travelers using the camp in 1937 has been an overall average of 302 per month or 10 per night” (TNA, 1938).

Not building and maintaining these toilets was acceptable because of a belief that laborers would not use them. In one case, a District Officer interpreted the “immaculate” condition of latrines as evidence that modern sanitation cannot be “imposed” on Africans. Therefore, construction was pointless.

Urban sanitation schemes tell a similar story. A 1927 description of waste in Dar es Salaam noted that “we dispose of about 18 tons a day of house and other refuse” before adding that “the method of disposal hitherto in use has consisted of slow burning in open incinerators constructed of old steel Railway sleepers” repurposed by the Public Works Department “gratis.” This document mentioned the incinerators because an “excessive number of flies” bred in their wet waste, especially after rains. One, located only 460 yards from the city’s largest market, led to complaints from shoppers. The Chief Secretary of the colony conceded: “I satisfied myself that the prolific breeding then occurring at the disposal station was largely responsible for the condition of the market” (TNA, 1927).

However, due to cost, the government declined to replace these incinerators with “permanent” infrastructure. Officials had already ruled out the construction of incinerators designed for mines on the South African Rand by American physician Alexander Orenstein. A health officer in Dar es Salaam suggested a military incinerator known as the “[Khartoum model](#)” used by British soldiers in Egypt during World War I. Inspection of a similar design used by the King’s African Rifles in western Tanganyika found it inadequate (Balfour, 1908). This left engineers with few choices outside of cheaply repurposing used technologies as they already did.

In the meantime, archival minutes described townships as places where “heaps of rubbish have to lie about until lorries become available to remove them. These deposits are not only an eyesore but not infrequently become offensive.” Using motor vehicles to collect bucket waste merely created “a large dump of refuse which is breeding flies in numbers.” Unable to cope with the cost of purchasing and maintaining urban sanitation systems, officials delegated responsibility for waste disposal onto “individual households” and their pit latrines. In [postwar](#) Dar es Salaam, the result was that “hundreds of homes shared just one public water point” and that latrines in new housing projects [filled](#) rapidly.

It also meant that waste collected in a subterranean shitscape of pit

latrines that expanded with and below the city as the number of households grew without parallel investments in a centralized (or bundled) sanitation infrastructure to move and process excrement. When heavy rains raise the water table, these poop globs may seep into walkways and homes depending upon a latrine's location. This seepage and its toxicity is not the result of misuse or a pathological form of African urbanization. Instead, it is an austere colonial technology working as designed and evidence that questions about Africans ability or to desire to use toilets are wildly misplaced (Mavhunga, 2014).

[Sharad Chari writes](#) that remains can “persist” and “frustrate” technopolitical change for subsequent decades. Similarly, decades of not building or maintaining systems between the 1920s and 1950s made it difficult to think about sanitation in colonial or post-colonial Tanzania without going through the pit latrine – a racializing technology that affixed growing amounts of shit to African residences – and an infrastructural politics that delegated the costs and responsibility of sanitation onto urbanites who did not have the resources to move and transform excrement on a city-wide scale.

Communities address the gaps left by unbundled infrastructure and their possibly “toxic everyday life realities,” [as Anne Berg puts it](#). Such everyday realities are also products of longer histories of infrastructural neglect that merit attention for at least three reasons. First, in colonial Tanzania, they were a common and acceptable form of technopolitics. Second, over decades, infrastructural austerity gained its own [momentum](#) (Kay, 1975), making it difficult to conceive of politically and economically viable solutions to “[excremental post-colonialism](#),” as [Peter Redfield and Steven Robins](#) illustrate for post-apartheid South Africa.

Finally, pondering the longer-term effects of material austerities explodes the ridiculous image of the recklessly defecating “brute beasts” first popularized by Christie, an image still championed by [anti-open defecation activists](#). Instead, it turns attention toward the material things and movements that make our shitting acceptable or toxic.

[Joshua Grace](#) is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of South Carolina, where he teaches African history. His current manuscript project, *The African Car*, explores the technopolitics of development in Tanzania from the road to the repair garage to post-OPEC oil trading from the late-1800s to the present. His future research is about histories of informal infrastructures in urban Tanzania.

References

Balfour, Andrew. *Third Report of the Wellcome Research Laboratories at the Gordon Memorial College Khartoum*. London: Balliere, Tindall & Cox, 1908.

Christie, James. *Cholera Epidemics in East Africa: An Account of the Several Diffusions of the Disease in that Country from 1821 till 1872, With an Outline of the Geography, Ethnology, and Trade Connections of the Regions Through Which the Epidemics Passed*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1876.

Kay, Geoffrey. *Development and Underdevelopment: A Marxist Analysis*. London: Macmillan, 1975.

Livingstone, David. *The Last Journals of David Livingstone in Central Africa, from 1865 to His Death, vol I (of 2), 1866-1868*. London: J. Murray, 1874.

Mavhunga, Clapperton. *Transient Workspaces: Technologies of Everyday Innovation in Zimbabwe*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014.

Scott, R.R. *A Glossary of Some Scientific Terms used in Sanitary Practice by Swahili-speaking Africans*. Dar es Salaam: Government Printer, 1929.

Tanzania National Archives (TNA) files:

ACC 61/14/18/I. "Labour Camps." 1938.

Tanganyika Secretariat 22798. "Notes on Camp Hygiene for Employers of Labourers" 1935.

Tanganyika Secretariat 11292. "Incinerators for Refuse Burning." 1930.

AMA citation

Grace J. Poop. *Somatosphere*. 2017. Available at:
<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13936>. Accessed November 20, 2017.

APA citation

Grace, Joshua. (2017). *Poop*. Retrieved November 20, 2017, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=13936>

Chicago citation

Grace, Joshua. 2017. *Poop*. Somatosphere.
<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13936> (accessed November 20, 2017).

Harvard citation

Grace, J 2017, *Poop*, Somatosphere. Retrieved November 20, 2017, from <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13936>>

MLA citation

Grace, Joshua. "Poop." 20 Nov. 2017. Somatosphere. Accessed 20 Nov. 2017. <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13936>>