

Introduction

Perceptions of cleanliness and dirtiness have been used to describe, praise and denounce individuals and groups subscribing to different social, economic, religious or ethnic backgrounds. Villages, urban quarters, cities, even whole nations have been declared clean or filthy. Some colonial travellers even succeeded in projecting their dislike of other cultures onto the natural environment. As they traversed a country, they would decide that it was as dirty as its inhabitants, even though nowadays such landscapes may be renowned for their beauty, and the population might not have been as unclean as they presumed. Apparently blind to all evidence which might lead to a different conclusion, being clean was and is one of the yardsticks by which people declare themselves superior to others who differ from them in social and economic status, nationality, religion, and, as we all are sadly well aware, the colour of their skin. The consequence was that in propagating health and cleanliness, misled by feelings of superiority, some of the movements went terribly wrong, only to be damned and discredited for generations to come. Nowadays the German Hygiene Museum, founded in 1930 by the manufacturer of Odol mouthwash, is a Museum vom Menschen, a Museum of the Body, distancing itself from a past in which the Nazis high-jacked a perfectly comprehensible global movement promoting hygiene and health, in which Germany had been one of the forerunners (*Deutsches Hygiene-Museum* 2005:5-9).

Roughly since the middle of the nineteenth century, cleanliness has also become inextricably linked to the combating of epidemics and contagious diseases; sometimes leading to the enforcement of drastic sanitary measures by governments, health authorities, and colonial civil servants. In Europe slums and their inhabitants – the proverbial ‘great unwashed’ – had to be cleaned up in the name of progress. In Asia and Africa the indigenous population and non-white immigrants, who were viewed in more or less a similar way, were subjected to hygiene campaigns and sanitation projects. Needless to say, a great deal was accomplished, but ignorance, misconceptions about the causes of diseases, prejudices – not least about being or not being clean – and mutual distrust fostered by

nationalist sentiments or personal dislikes influenced the research, the precautionary measures taken, and the efficacy of combating epidemics.

The efforts to combat contagious diseases both in Europe and the tropics produced an impressive array of socio-medical studies about personal and public hygiene in the Western and non-Western world. A dazzling Dutch example is a study by the pharmacist H.F. Tillema, published between 1915 and 1923, in which he analysed the sanitary conditions in the Netherlands Indies: six volumes, in quarto format, over 2000 pages in total, with hundreds of black-and-white photographs. In recent years, a number of books of another nature have been published. These deal with how attitudes towards cleanliness, towards taking a bath, washing clothes, and changing underwear have shifted over time. Some are simply entitled 'clean' (Smith 2007; Ashenburg 2008), others stress the 'dirt' at a particular moment in history (Cockayne 2007). The bulk of this literature refers to Europe. The non-Western world and the 'cleanliness superiority' Westerners outside Europe and the United States claimed receives scant attention. This book focuses on cleanliness in Indonesia. It contains a selection of the papers read at a conference about cleanliness sponsored by the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV, Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies) in Leiden in August 2007 organized by Kees van Dijk.

The first two chapters deal with physical hygiene and the everyday environment; taking a bath or not, the washing of clothes, and keeping houses, yards and streets spick and span. This is followed by two contributions about cleanliness and the battle against such diseases as beriberi and skin complaints in a tropical environment. In a fifth chapter the attention shifts from the physical to the immaterial, to the sensitive topic of social and political cleanliness. The final two chapters turn away from the past; dealing with body care in present-day Indonesia.

In his well-known study, Schama (1988) has drawn attention to the fame of seventeenth-century Dutch housewives and their maids who were renowned for their scrupulous cleansing of their streets and homes. The Dutch even transported this habit to their colonies, where as Kees van Dijk relates, by enforcing city cleanliness regulations in Malacca autocratically, a certain Mr Sweep even entered the realm of Malay literature. When personal hygiene was concerned it was a different story. Bodies were not scrubbed as vigorously as the streets. In the first chapter Kees van Dijk traces the change in the cleanliness of Europeans in Europe and in the tropics. One of the questions he tackles is how in an age in which

both Westerners and Asians frequently washed their bodies Europeans in their colonies succeeded in convincing themselves that they and only they had claim to be really clean, and that Malays, Javanese, Indians and other such peoples fell short of the proper qualifications to be referred to as such. For a brief period in history one answer found was that the former used soap and the latter did not, making soap one of the markers of civilization. Another way of maintaining Western cleanliness superiority was to concede that Asian bodies might be clean, but that their clothes and houses were filthy; obviously blotting out all the assiduous washing of clothes which took place in full public view, and indeed of which many pictures and photos have been preserved.

One vast collection of such pictures and photos is in the possession of the KITLV. What it can tell us about the topic of cleanliness is analysed by Jean Gelman Taylor. As it did in Europe, the change in favour of taking a bath among Europeans in the tropics commenced in the middle of the nineteenth century. Before that moment, Europeans must have been a conspicuously smelly minority amid a wider indigenous society whose members took a bath more than once a day. Later the Europeans in the tropics did wash themselves frequently, but striking differences remained entrenched. Europeans had transported to the tropics their sense of privacy regarding such acts as washing. As Jean Gelman Taylor writes in her chapter, the colonial and Indonesian elite washed their bodies in the bathroom and away from the public gaze. Hence there are no pictures of Europeans or sultans and princes taking a bath, but an abundance of photos of Indonesians bathing in canals and rivers.

The next section, cleanliness and the battle against diseases, opens with Mary Somers Heidhues tracing the search for the cause of beriberi, a vitamin deficiency, at the end of the nineteenth century. The story told resembles that of other contemporaneous medical breakthroughs. Racist notions, rivalries among medical researchers, and the strong belief that a disease from which so many people suffer must have something to do with a filthy environment and poor hygiene – or with germs – spurred scientists and policy makers on in the wrong direction. They ignored, indeed even ridiculed findings indicating what really did cause beriberi. Or, as she writes: ‘For years, however, ideas of cleanliness or contagion turned out to be enemies of appropriate treatment for the victims’. One community where beriberi struck in the Netherlands Indies was among Chinese coolies mining tin in Bangka. It would be the second decade of the twentieth century before the cheap, industrially milled and vitamin denuded white rice the coolies ate was replaced by healthy brown rice. Thereafter beriberi no longer posed much of a problem.

Changing medical knowledge also features in David Henley's treatise on hygiene and health in the Minahasa in North Sulawesi. Nineteenth-century literature depicts the its inhabitants as extremely filthy and given to unhygienic habits. The conclusion was easy to draw. Because access to water for washing and drinking was then limited in many parts of North Sulawesi, various kinds of chronic skin disease were rampant. In contrast, nowadays such afflictions are rare, as are cholera, dysentery and a number of the other diseases which used to plague the population. In explaining the significant improvement in health conditions during the last century, Henley turns to changing housing patterns, the outcome of a combination of colonial health policy measures and a spontaneous reaction to new economic opportunities and the establishment of peace. Houses were built closer to roads and streams; big, multiple-hearth houses were replaced by smaller ones; supervisory measures were taken to keep dwellings and their immediate surroundings clean; and children were taught how to clean themselves. Soap and footwear were introduced. As Henley concludes, such changes were important, but it is difficult to weigh up their effects on general health against those of administering medicines and improved nutrition.

The colonial section ends with a contribution by Marieke Bloembergen. So far attention has centred on European images of the other, with an occasional insight into how these Europeans preferred to depict themselves. In this chapter the ideal self-image of a particular group of Europeans, the police force, is presented. It also highlights the gruesome consequences the use of cleanliness and related words can have when used in a metaphorical sense, especially when being clean is linked to being pure and, as a further step, to strength. In Indonesia between 1965 and 1998 the authorities succeeded in giving the term clean environment their own special metaphorical meaning. The way they used the term had nothing to do with the tidiness of cities or nature, but had all to do with the barring of people who had or had had communist relatives, friends, or tutors from government positions. Marieke Bloembergen describes something similar but in the colonial setting: the sudden pursuit of European homosexuals and the arrest of around 225 men, among them senior colonial civil servants, in the Netherlands Indies in 1938 and 1939. Commenting on the investigation colonial newspapers, the authors of letters to the editor, the police, and colonial authorities all spoke in terms of cleanliness and hygiene, using terms such as a spring-clean and a cleansing process; a vocabulary all too familiar to present-day newspaper readers. As the title of her chapter suggests, the police campaign

against homosexuals was intended to show that European society and the police in the Netherlands Indies were clean and hence strong in a time of growing political problems in the colony itself and in the world.

The last two chapters focus on bodily hygiene and religion. George Quinn discusses traditional Javanese bathing-places as centres of communal life and religious ritual and the ceremonial washing of hair. In Java, the ritual washing of hair is performed in public and *en masse* at holy places during religious holidays and as a private ceremony in the family sphere at important transition points in human life, such as in the preparations for marriages, during and after pregnancy, and after death. In these ceremonies, the hair is cleansed with lye made by burning dry rice stalks. Traditional shampoo is still widely used in rural villages but commercial brands, some still based on the rice stalks extract of the past, have stolen a march in the cities. Social and economic changes have inevitably left their mark, resulting in complaints that the hair-washing ceremonies at holy places have been robbed of much of their original meaning and have become more of a tourist attraction. Even so, tradition lives on, albeit it in a different form. The option of wearing of a headscarf taken by an increasing number of Muslim women requires frequent washing of the hair, imbuing the action with an element of piety. As its members move up in the world socially and are proud to show it, the burgeoning middle class copies many features of the traditional Javanese wedding ceremony, including the washing of the hair.

An image of the East contrasting with that described by Kees van Dijk in which Westerners claimed to be standard-bearers of cleanliness is discussed by Bart Barendregt. His contribution examines the world of the tropical spas, a fast-growing sector of the leisure industry in Southeast Asia, frequented by well-to-do Europeans and Asians. An analysis of coffee-table books and magazines reveals that owners and managers of such spas show a distinct propensity to link up with a romanticized Asia of the past: extolling the healing qualities of rivers and springs, the beauty of the human body and the natural environment. Ancient goddesses, queens, princesses and palaces, and spirituality, are all pivotal elements. Hence, the concomitant stress on traditional Asian beauty and health treatments. Such spas come in various forms. There are luxurious spa resorts where rich tourists and wealthy Southeast Asians can stay overnight, but also Muslim day spas. In Indonesia, clients can also engage the service of a spa to prepare for a marriage in traditional style and the bathing ceremonies required by such a marriage ceremony, a practice which George Quinn also notes has gained popularity in

Indonesia. The spas are an integral part of a New Asian Lifestyle of the local well-to-do, emphatically proclaiming the virtues of slow traditional food, the natural and the authentic.

The topic of cleanliness presented in this book is part of a new trend in bringing sensory history to the field of Southeast Asian Studies. The sources are manifold. They include travel books old and new, anthropological and medical studies, ego-documents, Southeast Asian traditional and modern literature, brochures, eye-witness accounts, laws, newspaper stories, advertisements, images, and song texts. It shows how cleanliness of body and spirit is integral to individual and group identity and the conception of the other.

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