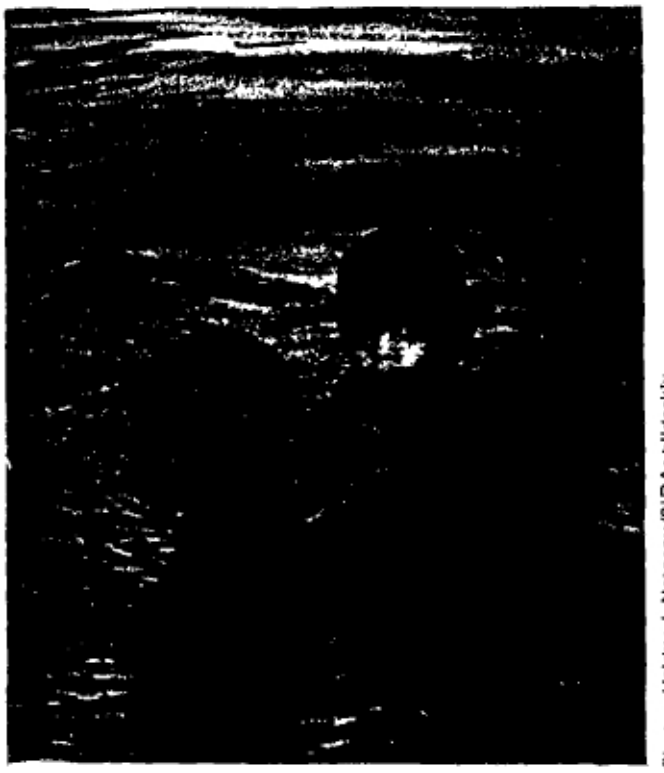
PERSONAL AND DOMESTIC HYGIENE IN RURAL BANGLADESH



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S I D A

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It is not a specific study sponsored by SIDA but a research work for a doctoral thesis in social anthropology. However, SIDA has found it valuable as a detailed description of how personal hygiene is performed on the grassroot level in a poor rural setting.

Much medical research in the field of e g cholera has been carried out in Bangladesh and elsewhere, but this kind of basic information about the daily life of the villagers is not very common.

I hope that this study can shed some new light on the relationship between water and health and that it can be of use in the training of technical assistance personnel from Sweden and SIDA's own staff.

Stockholm, November 1984

Carl Wahren
Director, Health Division
SIDA

1 INTRODUCTION

This report is a preliminary description of some aspects of personal and domestic hygiene in rural Bangladesh. It deals with washing and bathing, eating habits, cooking procedure and handling of water, which all have implications for the pattern of prevalent diseases in Bangladesh.

The research on which this description is based was carried out in a remote village in Gopalganj subdivision between November, 1982 and December, 1983. The area is densely cut by canals and richly dotted with ponds of various sizes and depths. There is no electricity, no motorable road and no small industry. As the crow flies it is only 60 miles south west of Dhaka; however, by launch it takes 24 hours. The upazila[1] headquarters in a neighbouring village is 40 minutes walking distance. It has a permanent bazaar, a police station, a bank and a 30-bed hospital. The irregular supply of electricity runs four rice mills and there are four TVs owned by the rich families.

People of Gameranga are rice cultivators, fishermen and many have a subsidiary income from jute and tapping date palms. All the villagers in the para[2] where I carried out my study are Muslims. There is one highschool and a madrasa[3]. The year of my field work was marked by the introduction of a few innovations: a water seal latrine, the first to be seen, was built adjacent to the primary school; the first development project was a family planning center - financed by a foreign aid agency and run by a graduate student from the village; the first diesel driven rice mill was being constructed on my departure.

1.1 Methodology

The data for this report were acquired informally by participant observation, which was followed, after seven months, by a household survey[4] of the 202 families[5], which form one village unit - a para. The survey was accomplished with the help of a male assistant - resident in the village. It covered 17 topics regarding the socio-economic status and composition of the family. Questions were directed to the householder and 13 questions covering health and hygiene were directed to the householder's wife.

2 GENERAL BACKGROUND

During 14 months in Gameranga I noticed that the ocurrence of some communicable diseases followed seasonal patterns. In my arrival in November 1982, a cholera epidemic was responsible for about 50 deaths out of some population seven thousand in the area. Then the incidence of scabies, which mainly troubled children and their mothers, increased. This was followed by malaria and another skin ailment - boils. Intestinal infections, worms, influenza, eye diseases, headaches and dizziness, however, seem to be more prevalent throughout the year. Injuries from accidents related to falls from trees, burns and cuts were outweighed by injuries inflicted in fights which accompany, also seasonally, land disputes during the rice harvests. There is a high incidence of TB as elsewhere in Bangladesh.

The MBBS doctor from the nearby hospital reported the following diseases as the most common[6]: bacillary and amoebic dysentry, scabies, gastric ulcers, worm infestation, influenza and anaemia. Child mortality is very high. The 184 married women of the survey reported the death of 446 children. The biggest category was infants who died after birth. The medical cause of death could not be clearly determined or remembered. The newly born child, his mother and delivery place (attur ghor) are in a state of pollution for 40 days after birth and therefore attract evil spirits. Most children in the sample died in attur ghor or "matrikha", a name for a wide range of diseases, all ascribed to spiritual powers (chorabao bhut, bhut, pacha pachi rog, char matrikha, jibut panna, qurogera). Some mothers used expressions indicative of recognized child diseases (kuti thakli, choto motor rog, choto moto ja tai, kurti chotto). The death of older children was due to dysentery (dasto), asthma (bhapi), sudden fever (hotat jhor), diarrhoea (haga), "shutika", (rokto beshi thake na, kirmi upore outchilo = aenemia, worms), "achotka" (suddenly swollen body), worms (kirmi bikar, beshi pokha). Deaths by accidents were all due to drowning, and two children just disappeared (taken away by bhut[7]).

Although overpopulation, malnutrition and diet, are traditionally considered the pre-eminent causes of the above, this paper will deal only with hygiene, sanitation and general body care.

3 DRINKING WATER

3.1 Water sources

Tubewell. Out of the 202 households of the sample, 23 claimed to drink tubewell water all the year[8], 41 occasionally[9], and 125 never[10].

There are four shallow tubewells in the community of 1 903 people. They were all installed between 20 and 50 years ago at government expense. Two of them are adjacent to a mosque, another two within the bounds of two significant baris[11]. Only two of them are operating today and both get prompt service whenever they break down. The best maintained tubewell has a cement base. It is located in the madrasa and is therefore inaccessible to women during the day.

Carrying water, like everything which has to do with domestic duties, is women's work. However, fetching madrasa water is usually done by men or children. The adult women who have to violate purdah openly by using the madrasa pump are the poorest women who are employed as domestic servants.

When an increased incidence of trespass was noticed, a bamboo fence was built across the path which leads to the well. Daily transgression is now limited to after dark or to non-prayer hours on Fridays when the madrasa is closed. Whenever a female adult servant has to fetch madrasa water, she has to persuade a small boy or girl to pump it for her, while she hides in the bush behind. The safest time is after sunset and evening prayer, but the ghosts and snakes are believed to be at large then.

The second working tubewell is adjacent to the stable of a traditionally prestigious bari. The ground is consequently always mucky. This pump is open to everyone but is utilized only by some members of that compound.[12]

Distance from the resource is obviously an important factor. However, the taste in the case of tubewell water in Gameranga seems to be equally important. The high level of iron makes water from local tubewells cloudy and unpalatable. It turns clear and tastes better after overnight storage. The reasons given for not choosing tubewell water in nearby baris are expressed in the following statements: "drinking this water makes me vomit", "it has no taste", "I have gastric pain", "I'll get sick like my son if I drink it", "it is smelly", "it is salty", "it is red". Pond or canal water for drinking is preferred for its "sweet" taste if not its proximity.

There is no privately owned tubewell in Uttor para and nobody seems to be contemplating introducing one. In a neighbouring para (with only one tubewell on mosque ground), a family installed a tubewell at the beginning of my fieldwork. They were able to do it cheaply because one householder works with the government water supply department in the subdivisional town. Whenever I visited them and was offered a glass of water, they commented on its bad taste. If I used this water for washing myself, women would discourage me saying "your

hair will get matted". When this pump broke one day, nobody seemed to mind.

When I inquired about two tubewells which had broken down during the last two years, it became clear that villagers consider tubewell water to be government property and therefore the responsibility for maintenance lies with the government.

The canal (khal)[13] joining a river is definitely the most popular water-source in Gameranga. Besides transportation and fishing it provides water for drinking, cooking, washing dishes and clothes. Cows are driven there to drink and bath. Animal corpses are disposed of there and its edge is a convenient place for urinating and defecating. It has no quay (ghat) and the bank is very steep and slippery. Cement bathing steps lead from the madrasa, and in some places palm trees are cut down to facilitate access to the water. The canal although some 100 miles from the sea is affected by the tides. When the canal flows in an upstream direction people avoid the water, when downstream the tidal flow attracts many to bath and to fetch water. After the monsoon from about October until April, the water level is so low that it is considered unsuitable for drinking. During that time, other sources such as ponds are utilized. In the monsoon when the water in the canal gets too turbid, villagers occasionally collect rain and other water. The canal's water level is highest between June and September.

The pond (pukur)

Each bari has one or two ponds close by. Not all of them are used. Some of them are just shallow ditches (kua) left after removing clay for house construction. Some ponds have a reputation for good water (misti pani) and are rimmed by palm or banana trees. No one uses such ponds for washing clothes, dishes or themselves, although bamboo stems are submerged in them for curing. Children are reprimanded for defecating nearby. One such pond, close to the bari where I lived, on the border between dwellings and fields (danga) was flooded between June and October, but from November (when the level of water in the canal decreases rapidly and is not suitable for consumption) it provided the "sweetest" water in the vicinity. In April this pond got "spoiled" (noshto hoye gieche) by decaying leaves and the households which used it went back to canal water.

The most popular water tank in Uttor para is owned by a landlord and the school he founded years ago. It is attached to his bari and the school's playground which serves as a market site (hat) once a week and occasionally for political meetings or a bichar (village court). The tank is therefore convenient for ablutions before the prayers accompanying these meetings and hats as well as before the individual prayers of the landlord and his brother. Besides that, it is used for morning washing, midday bathing, washing of bedding, clothes and diapers, dishwashing, disposal of emptied coconut shells consumed on market days, as urinal by the owner and his brother, for breeding fish, curing bamboo stems and it also provides water for cooking and drinking in five surrounding

compounds. Only when the landlord was seen to fertilize it with cowdung, to increase fish production, did neighbours make disapproving comments.

Rain water (brishti pani)

is collected occasionally from the roof during the rainy season. Gutters do not exist but at times the hollow stem of a banana plant is attached to the edge of the thatch and a bucket or kolosh is put underneath.

3.2 Handling and storage

Containers

Water for drinking or cooking is carried and stored in earthen pitchers (kolosh). For washing, bathing or watering animals, buckets are used. A kolosh is an earthenware container with a spherical lower portion, a short narrow neck and wide brim. Men carry it on their heads or shoulders but women clasp it around the neck and hold it on their left hip. When carried on the head, a ring made of gamsa (gauze-like towel) is placed underneath. A similar straw ring is placed under the kolosh to keep it upright when it stands on the floor. Sometimes a concave hole is dug in which to fit the rounded kolosh.

Water is poured by leaning the kolosh over a drinking cup. It has no handle or ears, but the way its brim is moulded means it can be handled without putting fingers inside or touching the widened edge over which water flows. This advantage is however not recognized by the users, particularly children. Even glasses are often carried by holding the brim between forefinger and thumb. A kolosh with water for drinking is always placed inside the house. It is covered with a small plate or a hollow coconut shell. The container with surface water for cooking and washing are stored outside the house.

Water, like anything else, is always served with the right hand. During the meal, if water has to be given by the left hand, then the elbow of the extended hand is supported by the back of the right hand. Drinking during the meal follows the same pattern. Children, if they want to drink during the day, help themselves.

Pumping

Already at the pump tubewell water may become contaminated. The kolosh is first emptied of residual water and then rinsed. Sometimes, if no water comes after a few pumps, water is collected from any surface source to prime the pump.

The second instance of contamination at the tubewell is a widespread habit of sieving water. The user even ties gamsa (a towel used for cleaning hands, sweat, dishes) over the mouth of the pipe to prevent the intrusion of sand or iron.

Third is the children's habit of putting their hand inside the pump mouth.

Boiling

Purifying water by boiling is unknown in Gameranga. When women saw me boiling water before drinking, they always asked if I had caught a cold, assuming that I wanted to cure myself by drinking warm water, as they would do if they had a sore throat. They were amused when I tried to explain that I was killing germs (pokha) to prevent dysentery. Boiled (shidho or phutoi) was equated with warm (gorom) in all households where I was a guest. To be sure that the water was not simply heated, it was safest to supervise the procedure.

Filtering

is not practiced in Gameranga, though an indigenous stationary filter was used in two well-off households (one in the upazila village and the other in the subdivisional town). The filter is constructed entirely of local low-cost materials and is simple enough to be maintained by house servants. It comprises three stages. A wooden construction holds three stacked earthenware pots (kolosh). Each is filled with a filtering substance. Water first passes through a stratum of coarse sand. It leaks out through a jute fiber wick (inserted into holes bored in the bottom of each kolosh) into the kolosh beneath, where it passes through a layer of charcoal. The third and last stage is a kolosh filled with fine sand. Clear water, free from sand leaks into the last kolosh which stands on the ground.

In one household, the pond water was filtered after boiling. In the second, tubewell water was processed without previous boiling.

Chemical purification

Phitkari - crystal of alum was seen in two town-connected households to be used as a water purifier. The crystal is clutched in the forklike end of a jute stem. Before drinking, the "fork" holding phitkari is inserted in the glass to effervesce in water for a while. It is believed that water becomes safe after such a treatment.

These are very exceptional cases, however, and the vast majority of the peasant and urban populations of Gopalganj subdivision drink untreated water.

3.3 Discussion

Water sources in Gameranga are not exploited rendomly. Canal, pond, tubewell and rain water are complementary. The pattern of utilization is based on season, availability and purpose. The proximity and quality of the water are the decisive factors. In selecting the source for drinking, and also for bathing, criteria include taste, appearance and colour, not bacteriological quality. The principle of evaluation is based on the symbolic notion of purity/impurity. It denotes a wide range of material and mental states and actions and holds an important place in Islam, Hinduism and indigenous Bengali lore. The interconnection of the physical and the spiritual purity/impurity bias is expressed by Mohammed: "purity is

half faith". The official religion provides its followers with detailed guidelines for hygienic behaviour. The scriptures (books of Fikh) name cold water as the acceptable means of ritual purification. Such water is considered pure "if running, but if from a pool (it should be) above 100 sq cubits in area", or from a smaller pool "as long as the colour, taste and smell do not vary". The quality of drinking water is not specified in the holy books. Religious teachers in Gameranga, using sanctified water[14] (pora pani) in healing procedures do not seem to discriminate between sources and use any water available in the house of the sick. The first and the only tubewells in Gameranga were installed at the madrasa and the mosques. These were meant primarily for religious ablutions, not for drinking.

The villagers hold the view that water from a canal is safest. When I questioned this by pointing out its excrement-covered bank they would say "the tide takes it away". However, they took precautions to avoid dirt. When the soiled spot was noticed by a woman coming to fetch water she would condemn it by spitting and collects water a few meters further on. Once when I went to wash a sari in the canal, a neighbour advised me to avoid a place where he had seen somebody defecating the previous night. When the corpse of a calf got stuck in the water hyacinths, a message was immediately sent to the muchi (the caste which cures and tans hides) to remove it.

The reason for the scarcity of tubewells in Gameranga and lack of motivation to introduce new ones seems to be the high density of canals and ponds. Surface water is easily accessible and ground water from the existing (functioning) pumps is considered unattractive and unpalatable. It looks cloudy, and smells and tastes of iron. It causes discoloration of teeth and clothes. Many people in the village believe that well water causes "gastric" and is unsuitable for bathing because it makes ones hair sticky.

The use of groundwater in most places in the Gopalganj subdivision is clearly restricted to drinking. The few tubewell water drinkers in my sample who were able to overcome its metal taste and smell never use it for cooking or washing vegetables and fruits[15]. In every household which reported drinking groundwater, there were always a number of containers with surface water but only one with tubewell water.

The families drinking tubewell water occasionally, reported to use it exclusively during epidemic outbreaks or when a family member has had diarrhoea for some time. They revert to surface water as soon as they feel better. This category also includes families with young unmarried girls (pre-menarche) for whom the walk to the well is a welcome excuse to escape their mothers' supervision.

Access to water sources varied considerably in the area surrounding Gameranga. The hospital building nearby was constructed 12 years ago on a platform on the village canal bank. Because the area was found unsuitable for either deep or shallow tubewells, the only water supply to that 30-bed hospital is three pumps which raise water from the canal.

In spite of this, the wife of the hospital doctor urged her husband to refuse the post offered in the subdivisional hospital, "because there are no canals in Gopalganj and tubewell water over there is disgusting". The water sources she uses in her current residence are the canal and ground water for drinking, four kolosh of which her servant collects by country boat twice a week in a distant village. She prefers this to moving to a residence where she would have to rely solely on a tubewell.

In another village (about the same distance from Gameranga as the hospital) on the river Modhumoti, most households use groundwater for both drinking and cooking. There is no canal in the village and only a few tanks. In such an area, one would expect only compounds at the riverside to use surface water as an alternative to the tubewell water. It seems also that the groundwater there has a lower content of iron than the wells in Gameranga. I used to visit this village only occasionally and was not able to focus on the subject in detail. However, I happened to befriend two women from that village who were married in the para where I lived. Both of them continued using tubewell water for drinking after establishing their households in Gameranga even if they found the taste inferior to what they were used to in the home village. Before their marriages, their husbands' households drank only canal water. Both of them managed to persuade their husbands to fetch water in spite of the considerable distance from source - the madrasa.

It has been observed in other instances of hygienic behaviour, such as use of soap, that daughters-in-law from different villages often bring new ideas to their husbands' houses. It would be too optimistic, however, to expect that their behaviour would set an example for imitation.

Given the poor quality of ground water obtained from tubewells in Gameranga and in view of the finding (ICDDR report no. 6, 1979) that the present pattern of drinking tubewell water is not associated with a reduction in the incidence of cholera, it seems, that other sources of potable water, such as open wells[16], or rain water, would be considered. As mentioned earlier, the villagers themselves are concerned and take some, albeit insufficient, protective measures once they find water in a tank "sweet". Occasionally, they collect rain water.

If such tanks could be identified, cleaned, protected and provided with low-cost technology to draw water without gross contamination this would be an acceptable beginning.

To solve the problem of high saline intrusion in ground water in the southern tip of Bangladesh, HEED[17] included in their rural preventive health programme in Chalna, a re-excavation and protection of existing tanks. An agreement was made with the owners of such tanks, in which HEED paid for the cost of the re-excavation and provided handpumps for water withdrawal. The owner took responsibility to prevent people and animals from entering the tank. The tanks were hedged and regularly cleared of grass to prevent decay.

Such an arrangement, accompanied by an education programme which takes into account the local traditional beliefs, could serve as a tentative model if any water improvement programme is undertaken in Gameranga. It is especially important to create awareness among women as they act as curators of family health and are responsible for the inculcation of purity/impurity rules.

4 DOMESTIC CLEANLINESS

4.1 Housing standards

A typical dwelling in Gameranga has a high pitched roof thatched with grass or made of corrugated iron. The house frames of hardwood or bamboo are erected over an elevated clay platform and the walls are made or interlaced jute matting. The roof of the house shelters the center room and the verandas. The ceiling, if any, covers usually only the sleeping portion of the room and is made of wooden planks or a matting of some local material. The room inside is divided by a screen, behind which grains and other foodstuffs are stored in earthen pots (hari) or huge cylindrical baskets. They are placed on wooden or bamboo planking above the floor on poles.

The main house (boro ghor) serves basically two purposes - sleeping and storage. Non-family members rarely enter inside. The front veranda is on the other hand a place for women to work and gossip and for children to play. The women process grains, seeds and lentils there, while children crawl about. The veranda is partially or wholly encircled by a fence, while the side and back porches are open. Sometimes a hearth or clay chicken coop is located there. It is a place where firewood is stored.

The floor of the house is regarded as a suitable waste area. People have the habit of disposing refuse or spitting on the floor. When a family member is sick and bound to bed, an earthen spitoon may be provided. It is then "disinfected" by sprinkling it with ash. Having children up to 3 years urinate on the floor and beds is tolerated.

The veranda floor is often littered with leftovers of grain processing and social gatherings. These can be palm leaves used for weaving mats, straw, husk, twigs, peals, seed or sugar cane trash. The floors are swept at least twice a day with a broom made of the palm leaf fibre. Local soft grass is used for kitchen brooms. Two or three times a month the floors and the sides of the elevated foundations (doa) of the houses are smeared with moistened mud. Mudwashing is always done after somebody dies in the house or after a child is delivered on some secluded part of the floor.

The courtyard (uthan) area is used mainly for drying rice, grains, seeds and fuel as well as hanging clothes to dry. With the first dry days after the monsoon ends, the yard as well as the cooking area is meticulously cleared of all grass[18] and a thorough housecleaning starts. This area is frequently washed with a water-cowdung mixture (gobor mati). Cow-dung - the waste of the venerated animal - is considered pure and makes an adequate waterproof layer necessary for drying rice. In the rainy season, the yeard and the houses in general do not receive the same attention as during the rest of the year and look quite neglected.

4.2 Sleeping and bedding

A large wooden bed (khat) occupies most of the space in the main hut. Beds are covered by a woven date-palm mat. Pillows and winter quilts are stuffed with kapok or other suitable material. Mattresses, if any, are also stuffed with kapok. Year-round bedspreads (katha) are made of old saris and lungis. Mosquito nets have to be purchased in the market. Many villagers cannot afford a bed and sleep on a mat spread out on the floor inside the house or veranda each evening and taken up in the morning. Every morning bedding is taken out to air on the veranda fences or bamboo poles in the yard. Washing of the kathas is done about every other month in the dry season, hardly ever in the monsoon. When an infestation with bed bugs is too annoying, all the bedspreads are boiled in water softened with locally available detergents like soda or the ash of burnt banana stems (khar). When no such detergent is available, or there is not time for washing, the bedspreads are laid out on the roof in the hot sun. Occasionally, separate pieces are washed in soapy water, when soiled by infants' excrement. Rags made of old saris are placed underneath infants as diapers and if they are only soiled with urine they are rinsed in plain cold water or not washed at all but simply placed in the sun.

Bedding is not changed or washed after a guest has slept in it, but it is always washed (boiled in soapy water) after a person has died. The wife of a dead man is not allowed to sit on the bed after her husband's death unless it is washed. Also, bedcovers and bedspreads used in the delivery must be washed on the sixth day after birth.

The Western concept of having one's own bed and the privacy of individual sleeping are unknown in Gameranga. Only a respectable guest is alloted a bed for himself. Crowded sleeping and shared bedding is preferable irrespective of available space. Parents sleep conjugally until the birth of their children when they separate and each co-sleeps with one child or more. Mothers sleep very close to the youngest child. Most children sleep with one of their parents up to 10 years of age at least. The re-arrangement of the pattern takes place at the onset of puberty when daughters tend to co-sleep with sisters and the sons with their brothers. Men are more likely to cope with sleeping alone than women.

4.3 Vermin

Rats, mice, bed bugs, cockroaches and ants invade the houses frequently. To protect unused bedding or clothing from damage they are rolled together and suspended from the ceiling beams. Frequent sweeping is regarded as the best way of keeping the house free from ants. In some houses ash is spread around the outside edge of the base for this purpose. Poison to kill rats is available in the market but not often used. Instead cats are kept in some households to ward them off or a homemade spear does the job. Red sticky" medicine" bought in the market is sometimes smeared on a banana leaf to poison flies. Mosquito nets are used in some households but are usually torn and do not provide sufficient protection. Mosquito coils are too expensive and are not to be seen in

the village. It should be noted that the vermin, particularly the rats, ants and mosquitos, are not looked on as a carrier of infection. The measures against the vermin are taken to prevent body discomfort and material damage to grains and clothes.

4.4 Disposal of wastes

Garbage

There is a garbage heap behind the fence which encircles the cooking area. The refuse is discarded there to be cleaned up by crows, dogs, cats and rats. The ash from the oven, which is also scattered there, helps to keep it smellfree.

Latrines

A bamboo construction is erected over a hole somewhere in the undergrowth behind the hut for use as a latrine. Sometimes it is stretched over a pond and screened by old mats. A few well-off households have an outhouse made of tin sheets or wood. The place decided upon for the latrine is believed to be frequented by bad spirits and is therefore dangerous. The waste pit is "disinfected" by ash or paddy husk to impede the smell. Whenever the stench from the latrine becomes too offensive, housewives from nearby houses make loud comments to coerce some action. In Gameranga the latrines are never shared with other families. Visibility and direction (in the view of cardinal points), not the distance from dwelling area, are considered when a site for a latrine is chosen. A latrine is viewed as a place to provide privacy rather than as a sanitary measure.

There were two cement latrines in Uttor para. Each in the cement building of well-off and urban connected peasants. The first two water seal latrines were constructed at government expenses for the use of the primary school in May 1983 in an open area in the middle of the school's playground. They were build in such a way though, that the potential user would have to squat with his back toward Mecca - the direction sacralized by the official religion. When this serious shortcoming was noted by madrasa leaders, the latrines had to be rebuilt. Since June when the school latrines were eventually reconstructed in a manner which does not offend anybody, they have been kept locked up and unused because the school is not staffed with a sweeper who would undertake the defiling task of cleaning them. Small girls attending the school admitted they were embarrassed to ask the teacher for the key. Besides, white-washed latrines in the middle of the most public place in the village seems to be another inhibiting factor for female users.

Urinals

A couple of bricks for the feet are placed on the ground in a space usually secluded by hanging old mats. It is always separated from the latrine and closer to the house, since urine is not considered as defiling as feaces[19] and also

because it requires uncovering a smaller portion of the private parts. Urinal is occasionally used by women for "showering".

5 COOKING AND EATING MANNERS

5.1 Preparation of food

Food is prepared and cooked in a separate hut (ranna ghor) during the rainy season. When the rains come to an end, a new outside clay hearth[20] is set up or the old one is renovated. The ranna ghor usually shelters: a dekhi- the wooden pedal for husking rice, a shil pata - grinding stone and pestle for daily preparation of spices, kolosh - an earthen water container with water for cooking and drinking and cooking pots (hari), pans and utensils. Oil and salt are kept in small glass bottles suspended from the wall. Other things like matches and soap are inserted between the jute sticks of the walls.

The poorest households who dwell in one hut only, use the back veranda for cooking in the monsoon. The ranna ghor, though quite airy, is not provided with a chimney. The fumes to which women and children are exposed during cooking, may be a contributing factor to the high incidence of eye infections, headaches and dizziness of which they so often complain.

Cleaning vegetables and fish is done thoroughly. Also cooking pots and utensils are washed many times during the process of cooking. It is always done with surface water, however. For dishwashing, a large jute fibre swab is used, to wipe the pan between frying two different dishes or to remove soot from the outside of the pot in which rice is boiled. The cook never tastes food with a spoon, because contact with saliva is polluting and therefore the food would get spoiled. She pours it on her right palm and licks it or asks her older child to taste if there is enough salt and spices in the curry. A bath is taken by everybody before having the midday meal; only the sick and women in their first three days of menstruation are exempted. No housewife would ever serve this meal without having taken a bath which includes immersion in water[21].

5.2 Serving of meals and eating

Food is served on the bare floor or a mat (pati) laid out on the floor inside the cooking hut. Occasionally, if visitors are involved, it is served on the wooden bed of the boro ghor. Those eating take off their shoes (if they have any) before stepping on the mat. The men sit in a half- circle cross-legged or, more politely, with their right knee up and left leg flat on the floor. Women always eat with their legs under them, to one side or in a squatting position. A glass of water is put next to the plate for washing one's mouth, right hand and the plate. One's mouth is rinsed before the meal by swilling, and the water is then spat in the corner or on the wall of the house. Sometimes the gums are also cleaned by rubbing with the right second finger. The right hand is washed by pouring water from the glass over the eating plate. The plate is then wiped by using circular movements with the right hand to ensure that it is clean. Finally, used

water is thrown out the door, window, the hole in the wall or when a guest is present, in a special bowl.

When everybody has been served rice, each takes a pinch of salt to be mixed with it before an additional dish is served - usually vegetables and fish.

A Bengali always eats only with his right hand. The left hand is reserved for cleansing body impurities. It may also be used for holding a glass while eating but then it is being symbolically supported under the elbow by the back of the right hand.

The rice is mixed thoroughly with the additional dish. Each bite is then moulded into a ball before it is eaten. Smacking noises are not acceptable but belching is considered unavoidable. The fingers are licked before serving a subsequent dish. After finishing the meal the fingers of the right hand are licked and then washed by pouring water over the plate if no separate bowl is provided. Bones or seeds are spat on the floor and often there are cats to take care of the refuse before the meal is finished. A basket lid to cover dishes and protect them from flies, used in some semi-urban households, is not to be found in Gameranga. Instead, the housewife ignores the flies or waves them away ineffectually if they seem to be annoying a guest. Usually after a meal, pan - areca nut folded in a betel leaf - is served for chewing. A box of leaves, a smaller tin box of lime paste (chun) and a basket with areca nuts are always kept so that a hostess can treat an unexpected guest. The leaves are sprinkled often with water (non-well water) to keep them fresh.

5.3 Cleaning up

When all the men have eaten, the housewife throws away the dirty water from each plate and the dishes are washed with a minimal amount of water, by pouring it from one dish to another. Once a week or so, dishes are taken to the pond or canal to be scoured with ash or sand or a mixture of both. Leftovers from other plates are considered polluted because of the contact with saliva but can be eaten by children or servants. Women always eat after men, usually together with their children.

After everybody has eaten, the floor is swept clean and the mat is shaken and rolled up[22]. The food which was not consumed during one mealtime is saved. Rice is kept in earthen pots (hari) and curry or fish in aluminium pans (koroy) for later re-heating. It is covered with a lid and sometimes weighted down by a brick so that cats or rats will not reach it. Ants are a constant threat to anything edible but at the same time help keep the floor spotlessly free from crumbs.

5.4 Feeding children

Children are breastfed up to three years of age. At that age or earlier, mother's milk is supplemented with a porridge (hala) of powdered rice (gura) or wheat flour (atta). Children are fed in their mothers' lap. The mother pushes the lump of porridge with her forefinger into the child's mouth.

She pushes back what the child spits out and then gives him more. By intervals she drops water with the tips of her fingers into his mouth.

It is understood that children do not have much pleasure from this and a mother terminates it by offering her breast. When the infant gets diarrhoea, it is never linked to the contaminated water or hygiene. It is believed that the cause is mother's spoiled milk due to the evil eye or other spiritual powers. She withholds breastfeeding and gives her child only a glucose water (misri pani) diet. Her breasts are simultaneously treated with a medicine, usually a mixture containing mud, cowdung and other readily obtainable ingredients.

When a mother is pregnant again, she speeds up weaning by offering supplementary food. Another method is smearing the breast with something unsavoury like green pepper or mashed leaves of the nim tree (nimer pata). One mother used feaces of her newly born child to stop the older one competing for the breast. This was en exceptional case and she did not succeed.

In families where a variety of food is available, the child is asked what he prefers. Usually the child is coaxed to taste a little of each but is never forced. It is understood that children dislike very spicy food. Mother therefore first washes off the spicy sauce from any piece of vegetable which accompanies rice. Because canal water is always used for the washing of anything, the food which was probably safe after cooking may get contaminated through the contact with surface water[23].

It is assumed that children can hardly go throughout the day with only one full meal and there is a lot of between-meal eating. As they whine for food incessantly, the children can get rice and curry set aside from each meal. In the morning, the cold moistened rice from the evening meal (panta bhat) can be mixed with mild or molasses if the family can afford it. Snacks such as roasted lentils (koloy), wheat or green fruits (boroy, chalta, jolpoy) mashed with koriander leaves, salt and pepper, are often prepared by more enterprising older children and distributed among all present. Sometimes such snacks are taken instead of the midday meal when mother is overworked as during the rice harvest. As they walk or play, children often eat unripe fruits, which they pick up from the ground[24]. Sugar cane, peanuts or sanasur are favourite children's snacks on the weekly market day. Children are also given the pots for licking after something sweet has been cooked - "paesh", "khir", "shimoy" etc. Children eat wherever they happen to be, often fed by mothers of other children or treated by their peers. Their main meal is always at home though.

5.5 Preservation of leftovers

There are various ways to save the food which has gone bad or to preserve it. The most common is the preservation of the rice in the hot season. The cooked rice left after the evening meal is soaked in cold water to be eaten next morning. Panta bhat makes a popular breakfast food for at least

three months of the year. If the housewife suspects it is about to go off, she fries it with peppers. With other foods such as fish or meat, spices or sour leaves of the neem tree are used as preservations. Re-heating is also believed to purify what has spoiled.

6 PERSONAL CLEANLINESS

6.1 Concept of pollution and purity

The idiom of cleanliness and dirt in Gameranga does not derive from a Western notion of hygiene, based on germ theory, but is a complex religious concept based on the symbolic categories of purity and pollution. Contrary to Western medical science such categories encompass both physiological and social states. The organic is linked with the social through a body as a symbol - physiological pollution is viewed as an expression of undesirable contacts. At the same time it is a principle control device to guard against "the threatening disturbances of social order"[25]. A bath or washing a particular part of the body is an act of purification from both material and mental defilements. Washing away a perceptible impurity is not only a purification of the body but the spirit as well from "all that is not God".

Pollution - dirt, is "matter out of place" hygienically, socially and psychologically. It is associated with wrongdoing, formlessness and has the same endangering effect on the existing social structure as pathogenic organisms may have on the human body. Its opposite - purity, is an expression of righteousness, the ideal order and structure of the society.

Within the rigid hierarchical system of Gameranga where the social categories, their boundaries, points of power, the links of influence and demarcation of roles are well articulated[26] every individual and his actions are evaluated in relationship to the danger or pollution. Anybody in contact with this danger is at risk to discharge the effect of malevolent spiritual powers or evil eye. Therefore, any contact with danger or desire to avoid it calls for an action to resume the state of purity. Ritual avoidance of dirt and required purifications motivated by purity/pollution bias may in some cases coincide with Western medical criteria. For example, the major daily ritual - midday immersion in water - is perceived as purification from accumulated actual dirt, a cooling of one's head and a symbolic purification from presumable sins[26]. Also the presupposed nature of some cleansing agents such as ash, sun rays, mustard oil, the juice of the neem tree assumes local observations of some scientific merit.

Pollution rules are universally concerned with physical contact and digestion. They deal with the secretory and excretory functions and products of the human body such as sweat, blood, sperm and saliva, urine, feaces respectively. These rules comprise ideas about digestive processes, sharing of food and disposal of body wastes. They also determine the criteria for sexual avoidance and the value of virginity. Dangerous antisocial acts liable to regulation by these rules are associated with impulse, lust and violence.

For people in Gameranga the rules of personal cleanliness are laid down in great detail by the Al Hadiz, the book of Islamic tradition. In Islamic scriptures for example, wine,

pigs, dogs, corpses and discharges from the body are considered bodily impurities. Sexual intercourse, menstruation and childbirth are religious impurities.

They also have antecedents in Brahmanical Hinduism. Some practices, where cleaning is linked with the categories of hot/cold (e.g. emphasis on clearing the throat of phelgm or abstenation from the head bath) derive from Ayurvedic meta-medical theory. Some other customs like the prominence of oil and mud in body hygiene are probably indigenous to the sub-continent.

It follows, that views organized on the basis of Islam, Hinduism, Ayurveda and indigenous lore constitute the paradigm for hygienical and medical thought current in peasant and urban Bangladesh.

In what follows I will give a descriptive account of how body care and hygiene is conceived and practised in Gameranga.

6.2 Purifying and cosmetic agents

Origin

Villagers in Gameranga make use of a great variety of readily available substances - liquids, semi-liquids, solids of various textures - as purifiers and beautifiers. Some of these materials, like maternal milk, water or mud are obtained simply; others like ash, husk or charcoal are bi-products of major household procedures - cooking and rice processing. Only one substance is purposely produced as a substitute for soda by gradual transformation of juicy banana stems into ash (khar). Products of chemical technology - soap, soda, bleach can be obtained for cash in the market.

The following is a list of some agents according to their provenance:

Products of NATURE	Products of CULTURE
Sky: water; sun rays	Market: soap; soda; bleach; mustard and coconut oil; kerosene oil
Earth: water; mud; alum	
Human: maternal milk	
Animal: cow-dung	Itinerant sellers: Oils
Garden, field:	Shops: same as above
henna leaves	
nim leaves + twigs	
betel leaves + nuts	
tobacco leaves	
turmeric root	
jute fibre	
Household fire:	
ash; charcoal	
burnt clay	

Some products such as turmeric, henna, oil and soap are significant components in major ritual performances - birth, circumcision, weddings, Sob-i-Borat, Ramadan, gashir din[28]. Water, mud, oil and husk are used in every day cleansing.

In the following chapter I give a detailed description of four culturally relevant items; water/oil and soap/mud. References to the rest of the cleansers are given throughout the course of this paper.

Water and oil

Water together with oil is an ubiquitous purifying agent in rural Bengal. The omnipresence of the binal is implied in a popular saying "Tele o jole Bangali" - oil and water is Bengali.

According to the Islamic scriptures, clean water is a sufficient means of purification and water is considered clean when running. People in Gameranga always use surface water for washing while the canal is the most popular water-source[28].

A drop of oil is as precious as a grain of rice. When cooking, after pouring oil into the frying pan, women wipe the drops which remain on the bottleneck into their hair in the same manner as oil sellers do. Oil together with a sari and rice constitute the essentials which wives and female servants should be provided. When I inquired about the qualities of a "good" husband, women would say he is "somebody who supplies abundantly with saris and good oil" (oil is mentioned more frequently than soap).

Mustard oil is believed to have a warming effect and in winter, when the water is cold, it is applied both before and after a bath to mitigate the freezing effect of water and to prevent the malevolent potential of water entering the body through the pores. It is also believed that mustard oil helps to keep the skin free from scabies and rashes.

Coconut oil on the contrary is perceived as a cooling agent and is used only for hair treatment as it is of utmost importance to keep one's head cool. To distinguish these two from edible oils (soyabean and sesame) they are referred to as "good oils" (bhalo tel).

Soap

There are two sorts of soap available in the local market. Scented "Lux" (5/- Taka) for bathing and "170" (4/50 Taka) for washing clothes. During the survey in May 1983 soap was found in 64 out of 202 households (data was not obtained on 13 households). There is a clear preference for the brand "170" because it is sold unpacked and therefore can be halved and obtained for 2/25 Taka. "Lux" was found only in the richest peasants' households.

Possession and utilization. The possession of soap among different classes surveyed was distributed as follows:

	%	No. households surveyed
Landlord	0	1
Rich peasants	71	7
Middle peasants	46	67
Small peasants	30	30
Poor peasants	23	84

It is obvious that the possession of soap is linked to the purchasing capacity of the householder but the point of interest here is the frequency and the reason for its use. In the very beginning of the survey we noticed that many female respondents[29] gave a positive answer even if there was no soap in the house. When we altered the question "Do you have soap?" to "Can we see what sort of soap you use?" some women would promptly send a child to borrow one from a neighbour for demonstration. Other women would be apologetic about being able to show us only "170"-non-scented brand. "A few years back, when we were well-off I used to have Lux" said one housewife. Only the poorest women would admit to not having any soap without embarrasment.

The absence of soap in 54 % of the middle peasants surveyed and 70 % of the small peasant households was often explained as incidental. In the case of the widowed housewives unsolicited excuses were always given. They were related to the absence of a husband, like "Jaman nei, keda debe" (I have no husband who will give me one), "Shami chilo, basher shaban dieche, ekhon shami nei, keda shaban anbe" (When I had a husband he gave me perfumed soap, now I do not have any, who will bring me soap.) "Cheleme nei, anie de keda, shami bura" (I have no children and my husband is old so who will bring it?).

Because of the nature of justifications offered instead of a simple "no" to the question of having soap it is evident that soap is viewed as more than a dirt-dissolving detergent. Besides its instrumental value, it seems to be expressing somehting of vital concern for its potential users - women. Their tendency to conceal the fact that they have no soap and their embarrasment about it made this apparent.

The inquiry about the frequency of the use of soap in bathing showed that out of the 202 surveyed, 48 admitted to never using any soap, while 125 had no soap at home at that time. 59 women reported using it once or twice a month, 45 respondents claimed to have a soap bath 3 - 4 times a month and 32 more frequently (no data obtained for 16 households).

Contrary to the possession of soap the answers regarding its use for bathing were not possible to verify. Added to it, the villagers are not used to exactly enumerating the frequency of activities of daily character. Therefore all the answers diverging from once a week, once a month or daily, have doubtful credibility. The value of the answers therefore does not rest as much in that they provide objective information

about soap bathing, as in the fact that they suggest what is the cultural requirement.

The use of the soap in Gameranga is inevitable for people passing through three major live circle rituals - birth, wedding and funeral - and those who render their services in some of these rites, namely the midwives (dhoruni) and those who undertake the task of washing the body of a dead relative (dhouani beta or biti)[30].

For the subjects of the rites - the newborn, the newlyweds and the dead - the soap used in ablution is a symbol demarcating the passage to a new stage of life or afterlife.[31] For the ritual executives, soap is the purificatory requisite to abrogate the pollution and danger in which they got involved by touching the subject of ritualization.

In Gameranga entering and the leaving of the world and the rites accompanying these passages are particularly loaded with danger and pollution and therefore soap - the maximally effective and luxurious detergent (obtained for cash and from the outside) is a necessary ingredient of ablution.

Other rituals attendant on the acquisition of new status, like the circumcision ceremony for the boys (musulmani) and a wedding (bie) are less dangerous and can be administered with locally available turmeric, henna and water as sole purifying agents. Soap is absent in musulmani and its use is optional for the bride and the groom in wedding ablution.

In the case of birth and death however, even the 48 poorest of my informants (who reported no use of soap) have probably experienced it on the sixth day of their life and will definitely have a warm soapy bath during their funeral (the responsibility to provide soap will then be on a more affluent relative). Once, I saw a poor widow taking a soap bath in the canal. As I remembered her reporting "no soap" and "never have a soap bath", I asked her how she managed to get soap. She answered "do you not know that my khala (mother's sister) died!" Later I heard that it was the day of the funeral for which she was summoned to wash the corpse.

Apart from the major life cycle rites, the soap bath is also prescribed for regular states of major pollution such as menstruation, sexual intercourse and delivery. Menstrual blood, sex and parturition fluids are extremely dangerous and contagious. So also are the women from the onset of their menarche until menopause. In their state of menstrual impurity women are to abstain from sex and prayers and for the first three days also from the customary midday dip in a tank. During these days they have to wash their arms, legs and head - not where the blood flows. On the 4th and the 7th day they are supposed to take a soap bath and remove pubic hair to gradually purify themselves. Inside their hut they apply soap and mud on their moistened arms and head and then walk to the canal or the tank to take a proper immersion bath. Most women substitute soap with mud. Whatever they apply before bathing the emphasis is on the head and other visible parts; the parts covered by the sari get only casual attention.

The majority of women in Gameranga - 104 out of 198 - reported using soap 1 to 5 times a month. No women ever used it daily. Both the survey and casual observation shows that the main consumers of soap for culturally motivated bathing are women in their fertile years.

For the men the day to day use of soap is limited to the ablutions after sexual intercourse and to the most holy day of the week - Friday. Madrasa career is also associated with soap consumption. The reason that the soap was found in some very poor households was clear when one housewife declared "it is not for me, I am old, but my sons go to madrasa, they should be clean".

Children. With the exception of the first bath on the 6th day after delivery when the newborn is washed of its womb impurities, soap is never used for bathing the infants until they can crawl. Infants are conceived of as clean because they are kept inside. Some mothers attribute to soap a cooling effect which can harm their children. Mothers who give their young children a soap bath do it habitually on the occasion of their post-menstrual bathing.

Discussion. It is evident that the current use of soap for baths is linked with the removal of impurities associated with woman's reproductive functions. The main consumers are women in their sexually active years. Actual impurities like dust (to which the women are constantly exposed in rice processing), infected wounds, scabies, boils and bruises are never washed with soap.

Soap is conceived of as an object of desire and luxury, not only for its nominal price of 4 Taka but also for its symbolic value as a significant, culturally prescribed component in the rituals

1) which control the most dramatic and anxiety-filled of lifestages - the birth and the death,

2) which ensure the purity of women after their passages through unclean periods related to their reproductive functions - menarche, sexual intercourse and parturition.

As a carrier of her husband's line she is expected to play an incompatible role as mother (accomplished through defiling acts and processes) and as guardian of lineage purity[32] and prestige. To comply to this ambiguous, culturally created image of maternal purity she has to observe numerous precautions and restrictions. One way of ensuring it is to use soap in ablutions which follow major defilements inherent in procreation. Her value is expressed in the frequency with which her husband supplies her with all these items. Like other luxurious items - jewellery and bright printed saris - a women ceases using soap after bereavement.

Possession of soap, contrary to common purifying materials (ash, mud, oil) is related to male prerogatives - the use of money and the access to the outside world. Its use, however, is mainly associated with the liability of major pollution by females.

Soap besides its instrumental value as antiseptic medium is one of the symbols conveying both contradictions in the current sexual ideology as well as complementarity of male/female roles.

Mud

All the women who reported never using soap, all those who were too embarrassed to admit that fact, and others whose husbands forgot to buy one, mentioned mud (mati) as the most frequently used detergent.

In the holy books earth or mud is an approved substitute when water is scarce or unavailable for ozu. Such dry ablution is called tayammum. Dust is not regarded as a dirty substance. Mud is considered sacred and auspicious by Hindus. Women in Gameranga recognize its cooling effect and poor women who cannot afford coconut oil use it when their head gets too hot or dizzy. The use of mud for day to day bathing is so generalized that many women refer to it as matir shaban (earth soap). It is not only a convenient substitute for soap, it is used additionally with it. One old poor widow when asked what she uses to remove dirt expressed the sacredness of mati by the following statement "Ja mati dia, toyer hoye achi, sei mati shorire dai" - I give to my body the earth of which it was made. As will be noted further, mud is also the proper cleanser for men after urination. For both women and men the dry ablution tayammum is performed as an immediate substitute bath after sexual intercourse.

6.3 Bathing

When the people of Gameranga inquire about the identity of an outsider a question regarding the frequency of bathing or the technique of cleansing after defecation is as pertinent as asking whether and how many times a day he eats rice. From the answers given they assume certain facts about foreign lifestyle and try to determine from this knowledge the religion, family background and the position in assumed social hierarchy of the newcomer.

Technique, frequency and symbolic meaning

Proper timing and techniques are important aspects of effective purification. Islamic scriptures distinguish between major ritual ablution (ghosol) which the law ordains for a person who is in a state of major ritual impurity (e.g. woman after menstruation or parturition) and minor ritual ablution (ozu) which should follow minor impurities but in fact precedes all prayers.

Ghosol involves washing of the whole body - water is to moisten every part including head and hair. The requirements are so rigorous that if a woman has nailpolished hands the act is invalid because nailpolish is waterproof. Henna or alta (red lac) are acceptable decorations because these materials can be dissolved in water.

Ozu consists of 1) washing hands up to the wrists 2) rinsing the mouth and clearing the nose 3) washing of face 4) washing

the arms up to the elbow 5) rubbing the wet hands on the head, stroking through the beard with the wet fingers 6) rubbing the ears and the neck and 7) washing the feet up to the ankle. It is essential that the procedure follows the prescribed sequence. It is estimated that two minutes are sufficient to take ozu. For ozu, if water is not available, substitution can be made with sand or dust. In Gameranga, every prayer, either individual or congregational, is preceded by ozu and every mosque has facilities for prayer ablutions - a water pool and an earthen pitcher (bodna).

Major sin, such as sexual intercourse, women tell me, is to be instantly followed by dry ablution (tayammum) inside the house. They mimick gestures or apply dry mud which is being stored up for this purpose in the corner of the hut. In the early morning the couple concerned discretely complete their cleansing by an obligatory bath (phoroj ghosol) in the canal or a tank or just by pouring water from a bucket over the head and body.

In Gameranga people are aware of the requirements of ritual purification and relate the performance of ghosol and ozu to their official religion. Other types of bathing performed by the villagers derive from non-Islamic traditions. The daily major bath for example, is viewed as a cooling and dirt eliminating procedure and not as an Islamic religious obligation.

The essential for the midday bath is the cooling one's head, so that the hair gets moistened. Without head immersion (dup) the rite is invalid - one's head remains hot and the body unclean. People would often watch me applying soap and swimming afterwards for a considerable time in the canal but as I never dived in the canal and washed my hair only once a week (without oiling it) I was considered unclean and succeptible to aches and dizziness.

Daily procedure

In Gameranga people begin their day by a bath. Men usually wash their face and clean their throat and nose in a canal or a pond. "During washing a handful of water is repeatedly taken into the mouth" and "the nose and mouth are irrigated and rinsed, a procedure accompanied by vigorous hawking and spitting" (ICDDR report no. 6). Women use water poured from a pitcher in some secluded space in the yard. Occasionally morning washing is followed by cleaning the teeth by scrubbing with a forefinger or a twig of a tree. Children up to age 4 are exempted from morning washing.

The daily bath which involves all men, women[33] and children is taken before the midday meal. A man takes it individually, but a woman goes to the canal or ablution tank in the company of another woman, keeping considerable distance from men. She never goes emptyhanded to the canal, there is always an empty vessel to be filled with water, a basket with soiled clothes, or a child to be washed. A woman always bathes wearing a sari (and blouse and petticoat if she has one) - the dress she slept and worked in. The end of her sari (achol) which serves variably as a screen to cover her face (as a sign of withdrawal and shyness) as a permanent headcover, handkerchief or

a towel, is used to wipe her face and arms and is rinsed at the end of the bath. Sometimes, if soap is applied a natural fibre sponge (titkoralar khosha) is used for rubbing the body. She returns in her wet sari to the house where she changes into a dry sari if she has one; if not, she has to wait wrapped in a rug inside her house until the wet sari dries outside in the sun. A man bathes in his lungi and changes into a dry lungi or gamsa (gause-like cotton towel) on the shore. After the bath, women dry themselves with wet rinsed saris, men with a gamsa. Rinsed saris and lungis are hung over fences, roofs or bamboo poles to dry in the sun. A secondary benefit of the sun rays as a disinfectant is therefore obtained.

After the midday ablution and oil treatment of the hair and the body, women let their hair hang loose and indulge in delousing for a time. They hasten to twist it into a knot (khopa) again before nightfall because loose hair is a temptation for any malevolent spirit that might try to catch her.

Traditionally, a bath involving immersion of head - e g ghosol or midday ablution should not be taken in the evening after dark because to do so may attract spirits[34]. Therefore, an attempt is made to terminate all the tasks which are considered dirty before the daily ablution which precedes the meal. Those afflicted with a fever or a cold or menstruating women postpone their bathing, combing and oiling their hair because it is believed that moistening the head can aggravate their ailment. Also insanity is a legitimate excuse to abstain from bathing.

Cosmetization

A water ablution is however not complete without an oil treatment. The hair is smeared with coconut oil to enhance the cooling effect of water and the hair's dark color. The face, forearms and legs are treated with mustard oil. Oiling (malish kora) is an indispensable part of the ritual, though not explicitly prescribed by any religion or medical system. It is believed that oil closing the pores of the skin prevents entering of water and its potentially harmful side-effects on the inside of the body, as "jhor", "shordi" or "thanda" (fever, cold). It makes the skin waterproof[35].

Body-washing procedures

Midday ablution. This ablution before the midday meal - a Brahmanical prerequisite for performance of daily worship to the gods - is the dominant purification ritual for everybody in Gameranga. For the majority, who do not observe the five daily prayers, this rite which is derived from Hinduism remains the only daily religious ritual performance[35]. A housewife in Gameranga would not serve the midday meal without taking a dip in water. When she abstains from the immersion because of menstruation she washes herself by pouring water over forearms and legs before the meal. Children go to the ablution tank or canal from the age of 3 - 4. Accompanied by mothers or elder siblings they learn at this age to dive, some of them even to swim.

Feast bathing. Another Hindu-inspired purification ritual which is widely observed by the Muslims in Gameranga is gashir din. On the eve of the day, women collect leaves of various trees an mash them together with raw turmeric using a stone pestle. The night, accompanied by child singing and beating metal objects in imitation of drums, is followed by an early morning bath. Before sunrise, small boys and women of all ages rub the leaf-paste-turmeric mixture on their bodies and take a submersion bath. This bath is viewed primarily as a skin cleansing rite and coincides with the month in which the scabies epidemic is to be expected (October).

Head bath. Only a head bath is usually given for medical purposes - to decrease the fever or dizziness when the "body is too hot". It is administered with the sick one lying with his head declining backwards over a pillow with a banana leaf to drain away the water while water is poured from a pitcher over his forehead. Implicit in this cure is an exaggerated preoccupation with the head and a concern with hot/cold categories. Both concepts derive from Ayurveda.

Handwashing before the meal and after defecation was described previously[37]. Apart from this, occasional washing of hands does not exist. If a hand is soiled by soot or smudges it is cleaned by rubbing it through oily hair. Kerosene oil and sand are used to remove stains of anything which cannot be dissolved in water, e.g. tar used to seal the seams of boats.

Feet being the lowest part of the body are regarded as dirty. It is considered impolite to sit with one's feet pointing towards another person and extremely insulting to knock them with your foot, even may it be unintentionally. In fact the only instance for a mother to reprimand a small child is when he happens to playfully kick an adult or touch him otherwise with his feet.

Feet are also included in ritual ozu ablution and implicit in ghosol. Before entering a house after a long journey or in muddy weather feet must be throughly cleaned. The host would welcome a newcomer with a pitcher of water (bodna) and direct him to a place which is convenient for washing. Customarily one steps on a brick or a wooden platform (phiri) and washes the feet and toes with the left hand as the host's wife or a female servant pours water over them. Shoes should be removed before stepping on a mat or the floor inside the hut and obviously before entering a mosque or other holy places.

In winter, women scrape off the hardened skin of the soles of their heels on the bark of a tree.

Infant bathing. The daily midday ablution for infants follows a pattern similar to adult bathing. In winter, however, water for the child is warmed in the sunshine prior to the bath. Children up to age 3 or 4 are bathed by their mothers. The infant's body and head is first smeared with mustad oil and then water is hastily poured from the pitcher over his head and body. The mother firmly grasps her child with one hand on her knees while squatting and holds the pitcher in the other hand. Some children are bathed while sitting in a bowl with water, the mother sprinkling water with her fingers over the

head. The head and face receive more attention than other parts of the body and the skin creases around the neck, wrists and armpits tend to remain dirty after such a bath. The child is dried with the end of the mother's sari, or any rag which happens to be at hand, and then put in the sun. Oiling and cosmetic follow-up are administered in a sunny place.

When a child is born the newborn is first wrapped in old clean rags. Unlike the mother, the newborn is first bathed on the day of delivery after the placenta has been buried and the floor on which the delivery took place mudwashed. During the next six consecutive days the infant's body is massaged with heated mustard oil, the head getting the most attention.

Still in attur ghor, from the very first bath a magic make-up is an indispensable part of the child's body care. Black coal (kajol) or soot from burnt vegetable stems is used to draw thick eyelines and a round spot is applied assymetrically on the infant's forehead. Only in a disguise can the child face the world which is populated by bad spirits and charged with the evil eye. Mothers are not explicit about their protective strategies and do not specify the dangers openly. They justify the infants's make-up by inversion, saying "bhalo dekha jai" (it looks nice).

6.4 Toilet habits and toilet training

It is assumed in Gameranga that the feaces of a lactating infant are less dangerous (polluting). As soon as he starts eating rice - the adult food - the process of eating as well as defecating becomes gradually more polluting potentially. It is subjected to strict regulations. Toilet training and after toilet cleaning are important in the view of ritual purity. Water is used for washing after defecation. It is always done only by the left hand while food is eaten only with the right hand. The dichotomy right/left thus correlates with the symbolic categories of pure/polluted, which in its turn connotates other sets of binary oppositions such as dominance/submission, birth/death, outside/inside, public/private, male/female.

Although contact with feaces is extremely polluting, far more than the urine, mothers in Gameranga are very relaxed about toilet training of their children. Before crawling age, diapers (katha) made of old saris are placed under the child. When they get soiled with urine they are put out in the sun to dry while diapers soiled by stool are washed in cold soapless water. As the infant children start crawling some mothers may occasionally, in the morning or after the meal, encourage their child to defecate by holding him sitting on the top of her feet. Or, when the mother feels that the infant is about to urinate, she stretches him out from her lap, holds him in the air and lets him pass urine on the ground. To encourage urination on demand she may make a hissing sound until the infant spontaneously micturates. In times the sound becomes associated with the act and the risk of accidents is decreased. Accidents with urine are tolerated if not ignored. Four-year old children are expected to go to the garden but call their mothers to be washed off.

The mother bends her child and cleans him using her left hand by pouring water from the pitcher. Up to four years of age a child is permitted to defecate anywhere in the open, provided that his mother cleans it. She cleans it with rice straw and pours water over the spot and then smears it with her heel.

Feaces of adults are equally polluting irrespective of sex, therefore the rules are unique for both men and women. As mentioned in the chapter on domestic hygiene[38] each household is equipped with a bamboo construction or an outhouse beside the dwelling area, to provide privacy for defecation. A pitcher of water with a spout is taken for cleaning after defecation. The hem of the garment - lungi or petticoat - is used for drying off. The dirtied left hand is then rubbed on the mud ground and thoroughly washed.

Urination is not bound strictly to determined place. It is always done in the undergrowth behind the huts but not as far away as the latrine. The scriptures (Al Hadiz 1:507) indicate that female urine is more polluting than urine of men. This belief has consequence for different cleansing techniques employed by men and women. A woman always uses water to clean herself after urination while a man scraps a bit of soil to dry himself. When I inquired about the widespread custom among women of depilating pubic hair one women told me, that besides the fact that the husbands find it repulsive, there is the question of contamination. The urine is inherently only mildly polluting she said, but the contact with female pubic hair makes it extremely dirty and the passed urine defiles the earth.

Away from home, men sqat down, preferably facing a tree or a wall, to relieve themselves. If water is not available mud or sand can be used instead; both are approved by the scriptures. In a squating position, nobody should ever turn his private parts westwards, the direction of Mecca.

There is no question of women relieving themselves when travelling, but even in their own homes, they do so extremely surreptitiously. The fact that they have to lift their sari and uncover the most profane part of the body augments their pollution. Even if they retreat to a secluded place where nobody can see them, "the Allah is omnipresent", they told me.

There is an awareness, albeit vague, among some villagers that to step on human or dog's feace is dangerous to one's health. Nobody seems to link it explicitely with the widespread worm infestation or to be aware of the risk of general contamination and disease transmission from feaces to mouth via fingers or insect.

6.5 Nasal and oral hygiene

As mentioned earlier, the morning toilet starts with face washing and clearing the throat (gelala kora).

This may be done by gargling with water. To release as much phelgm as possible the two forefingers of the right hand are placed on the back of the tongue. Vigorous rubbing causes

retching and salivation if not vomiting. The procedure is accompanied by loud noises. Men tend to clean the throat more thoroughly than women.

The belief that the excess of phelgm in the body causes ailments, mainly cold, is responsible for another popular habit of expelling mucus from the nose in a public manner. Adults clear their nose by blowing into the fingers and then flicking the contents on the floor, or, by pressing one finger to a nostril and leaning to one side and letting the mucus from the other nostril fall on the ground. The clearing of a child's nose is done exclusively by the mother. She would only do this when the mucus is hanging from the nose or when she is called to do so by another adult. The mother uses her finger and wipes it on a wall or a mat.

The unspat saliva is believed to have power to cause harm, particularly, if the salivation is "induced" by an organic smell as flatulance or a mere vision of organic impurities as feaces, animal or human corpses: Therefore a funeral (specially in the hot season), passing by a latrine or passing by a floating corpse of a dead cow in the river, is accompanied by vigorous spitting.

Copious spitting also accompanied the fasting month of Ramadan because the entering of the body of any material substance, including saliva, between sunrise and sunset, invalidates the fast.

By spitting the villagers also express moral condemnation. Hearing that the foreigners eat ritually unclean pork or that the anthropologist's handbag is made of pig skin some people in Gameranga would react by spitting.

It seems that any dirt which may penetrate, albeit symbolically, the body orifices may it be a smell or a dirt merely perceived auduovisually, has a potential to harm one's body and is therefore symbolically rejected by spitting saliva.

Chewing betel after a meal is also viewed as a cleansing or freshening of one's mouth and teeth from the aftertaste of food and the bulk of pan ingredients is ultimately spat off.

The corners and edges are the preferred areas for spitting. Earthen spitoons are occasionally made for sick people who are bound to bed.

Dental care. Numerous methods are employed to clean the teeth in the morning. The twig of the neem tree shredded at one end is used as a tooth brush by the men. Every morning, one sees men roaming about or squatting, spending considerable time rubbing their teeth in vertical or circular movements. If such a brush is not available the forefinger of the right hand does the job.

There is a wide range of locally obtainable substances to be used as tooth paste. The most readily available and the cheapest is pora mati - a piece of burnt clay, a crust broken off the inside wall of the oven - or tusher chai - the ash of burn rice husk. Another popular agent is coila - a piece of charcoal preferably of mango, tamarind or jack fruit wood.

Teeth can also be cleaned with plain salt or a mixture of salt and mustard oil. Monjol is a more elaborate cleanser - a mixture of charcoal, phitkiri (ground crystal of alum, effervescent in water), salt and black pepper which is sold in small bottles in the local market. For teethcleaning after a meal a piece of fiber is broken off from the broom and used as a toothpick.

6.6 Cleaning of eyes and ears

Eyes. Tears induced by emotion are dried by the end of the sari. Tears accompanying eye infections are drained off with any piece of old rag available, without regard to previous use.

Ears are cleaned with ear-swabs made of a small piece of rag wrapped around a match-like piece of wood or grass. In the case of a child's ear infection the mother would squeeze her breastmilk into the child's ear believing that this will cleanse it of pus.

6.7 Hair, nails and general grooming

The importance of hair and nails is manifested on the 6th day after the birth when the infant is deprived of both. Its head is shaved and nails cut with a razor blade.

Throughout childhood the hair of children is regularly shaved off. It is believed that frequent shaving makes hair strong and black. It is also considered easier to keep a child's or an adult male's head cool when hair is shaved off. Lastly, it is the solution to heavy infestation if manual delousing failed.

Contrary to the boys, the habit of head shaving terminates when girls reach about 9 years of age. It coincides with her gradual preparation for womanhood. Hair together with skin colour are the only aesthetic criteria considered in marriage negotiations. The skin colour can hardly be lightened except occasionally with powder but the hair can be grown long and blackened.

The ideal hair is black, shiny and long. Regular oiling with coconut oil and occasional smearing with crushed "shimir pata" (leaves of sim tree) is practised to enhance the blackness. The importance of oiling is recognized far beyond mere cosmetic considerations. Women say that if they do not oil their hair they will go mad, their head will spin (ghurai) or they will go blind (chokhor dai). They always wondered how I could stay alert without oiling my hair and they approved when my unwashed hair became greasy.

Oil-less hair in women always denotes the lowest social status, the absence of a male guardian, or insanity. Poverty is frequently expressed by a hand gesture pointing at one's oil-less hair. One women told me that she became "pagol" (crazy) on the day of her daughter's wedding and remained so for one year. At this time she stopped bathing, combing and oiling her hair and eating the usual quantity of rice. The feeling of having acquired a mental disorder is usually

expressed in terms of refusal of food and neglect of grooming.

When ailed or in attur ghor, women stop combing their hair and tend to look dishevelled.

Women care for their hair by combing, delousing, moistening and washing. They moisten their hair daily as a part of the ritual midday immersion in the water tank or canal. A thorough hair wash with application of soap or mud is taken once a month.

Delousing (ukun mara) is the most enjoyable and collectivistic of cleansing rituals among women. Habitually, after the midday meal before they tie their hair into a knot a woman will spread a mat on the ground of her veranda or the yard and ask her neighbour (younger or of equal age) to come and kill lice. Often other women will join them in the removing of lice from each other's head with remarkable skill. They will sit in a chain one in front of another forming a circle. The one who catches the lice holds it between the nails of her forefinger and thumb and pulls it along the hair strand towards its end. Thereafter she places the insect on the palm of her "client" who quickly squeezes it between the nails of her thumbs. A sight of 4 - 5 women of all ages, sitting in the chain and indulging in this simple physical pleasure is very common. It is open to all females who happen to pass by. Contrary to men, it is the only occasion they touch each other and for the widows, abandoned and divorced the only source of physical pleasure. This unique occasion for prolonged physical contact between women is always accompanied by the exchange of intimate news and secrets. The words are uttered without hardly moving their lips so that anyone who does not participate can decipher them. In fact, vigorous delousing serves often as a pretense for exchange of information liable to strict censorship. Men are excluded from this pastime but if a man wants his head to be cleaned from lice he can ask any woman in his household with whom he has not an avoidance relationship (as with a daughter-in-law e.g.). Children have it done by their mothers or older sisters.

The length is a further parameter of beautiful hair. Mothers stop cutting their daughters' hair at the age of 9 - 10 to allow them to reach an adequate length before the onset of marriage negotiations. When a young man, accompanied by his relatives and friends, returns from the viewing of a girl as a prospective wife and is interviewed by the neigbours about the outcome of it, the impression he is first apt to communicate is about the length of the girl's hair. In the beginning of my fieldwork, women would inccessantly comment on my shoulder-length hair and fringe. They untied their own or their daughter's knot and then displayed the length to emphasize my shortcoming and set an example for emulation.

Hair should be parted in the center over the forehead, tied and twisted into a knot. It should always be covered by the end of the sari, particularly outside of the compound, on the arrival of an outsider or in the presence of the husband, his father or elder brother. In the company of other women,

indulging in gossip, teasing or quarrel (jhogra), some women may leave their hair uncovered. But whenever an older woman or the anthropologist introduced some challenging topics into the conversation (e.g. family planning or the pleasures of conjugal life), the young girls would promptly draw the end of their sari over their hair as a token of embarrassment (lojja). They also withdrew a bit but continued listening from askance. Sudden veiling would also follow the sight of a mere shadow of an approaching man particularly if his head were covered with tupi[39]. When I stopped covering my head in the beginning of the hot season, the punishment to follow my death, women predicted, would be the transfiguration of each hair strand into a voracious snake.

The only licensed occasion for a women to untie and display her hair is for her intended husband on marriage negotiations and after the marriage inside the sleeping hut, at night in front of her husband. If she does it outside this boundary after the dusk she is at great risk to call the attention of a malevolent spirit. Bhut in particular is attracted by loose hair of sinful women. Another opportunity to untie one's hair is an event of illness or insanity.

After menopause which is usually preceded by widowhood, women tend to give less attention to their hair.

Hair, like jewellery, sari and soap are symbolic expressions of a woman's worth as exchange goods, her premarital virginity and her marital fidelity. The bundle into which she twists it every day, the veil and her seclusion, denotes controlled sexuality, purity and culture, whereas loose hair, uncovered head, tresspassing of compound boundaries are all associated with uncontrolled sex, pollution and wild nature.

Pubic hair on the contrary is inherently dirty, the source of shame and selfcontempt. It attracts the devil (shoytan) and unshaved women have to abstain from prayers and sexual contact. There is no scope for display in sexual context. Women remove their pubic hair regularly, after menstruation, by hand or with razor blade.

Male concern with appearance centers too around hair. The regular hair and beard cutting is administered by hindu barbers (napit) from Napit para, on each market day. A haircut is only one Taka.

Men are frequently seen sitting in the yeard ostentatively preening themselves in the mirror, combing their moustache, beard[40] and hair and depilating the excess growth. In Gameranga men do not practice depilation of pubic hair.

It is of utmost importance for a man to look well-groomed, clean and impeccably dressed when he goes out to attend public gatherings like market, prayers, bichars (village council), hadudu-games (wrestling) or to contact authorities like the upazila office, a bank or a doctor.

Nails are cut with razor blades. Additionel care is given to nails on ritualistic occasions inspired by both religions. On Ramadan, gashir din[40], wedding, nails are decorated with

crushed henna leaves (mendi) or alta (red lack). Henna-leafpaste is applied to each nail of the left hand (the lucky hand for women) and when washed off after 1 - 2 hours, it leaves orange design. Women tend to decorate each others' hands. Housewives who find it inconvenient to abstain from domestic duties for a prolonged time (while henna is stuck on the nails) decorate at least the little finger of their left hand. So do the men. Children who usually take initiative to provide the leaves decorate whole palms.

It is believed that if henna is applied in this manner three days before Sob-i-Borat, on the day of Judgement it will be credited to the believer as a good deed (punno hobe, soab hobe). Henna must never be applied on the toe nails. Its sacredness was institutionalized by the Prophet[42] who used it to beautify his beard. To decorate with it the lowest, most profane part of the body is disrespectful towards the official religion.

Notes

1 An upazila is an administrative district in Bangladesh with an average population about 200 000 people.

2 Clustered households.

3 An Islamic school with more than one teacher provides boarding for students of the distant villages.
For an outline description of village topography, economy, social organization and status of women, see my report nr II. SIDA Archives 1.BAN.200 Dnr 16 000 A/83.

4 The problems related to each research method will be discussed in a separate paper.

5 The 202 families (total 1 903 persons) surveyed were tentatively classified into the same socio-economic classes as used by Arens/van Beurden in Jhagrapur. Under this system, there were
1 landlord
7 rich peasants
70 middle peasants
34 small peasants (own some land or animal besides homestead)
90 poor peasants (daily labourers who own only homestead land or no land)

6 The list is identical to information given by the health officer from the subdivisional government hospital in Gopalganj.

7 Bhut - spiritual being.

8 Not all members in the household drink it.

9 When there is a cholera epidemic or if diarrhoea breaks out in the family.

10 Data were not obtained for 12 families.

11 Bari - localized patrilineage,

12 Out of the 31 households of this bari, 13 close-by utilize the well regularly, 8 occasionally, 10 never.

13 About 3 m deep, 6 m wide.

14 Water over which they say a spell or submerge in it a scroll of paper with arabic inscriptions for the client to drink.

15 When I refused to drink water in a bari where tubewell water was not available, the hostess, eager to please me, sent a child to cut a papaya down for me, then cut it in small pieces and finally washed it throughly in canal water.

16 The report goes on to say that the "(cholera) attack rate for tank water drinkers is significantly lower than that for users of any other source".

17 "Health, Economy, Education, Development" - a Christian organisation involving various missions who provide funding and personnel.

18 It is important to keep it cleared because grass is regarded as dirty.

19 Though the female urine is believed to be more polluting than the urine of men.

20 Two clay stoves: a long one with 2 holes which holds 2 pots and a small one with 1 hole, usually for cooking rice.

21 During the first three days of menstruation however, her bath is limited to washing her forearms and legs only.

22 Two to three times a month the floors of the huts are given a fresh coating of mud.

23 Another instance of contamination of originally safe food with water is the widespread habit of washing the peeled pieces of fruit in canal water.

24 Picking up food which falls on the ground is done as a matter of course and children are encouraged to do so by their parents and guardians.

25 M Douglas "Purity and Danger".

26 See my report no II. SIDA's Archive 1.BAN.200, Dnr 16 000 A/83.

27 I.e. from anything which endangers the status quo of society and God.

28 See page 27.

29 Note that the questions focusing on hygiene were directed to householders' wives only.

30 The friends and relatives who assist in bathing the bride and the groom do not purify themselves with soap because the subjects of the rite are not liable to pass pollution.

31 About the danger universally associated with such transitions - 'rites de passage' - Van Gennep noted: "Danger lies in transitional states; simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others. The danger is controlled by ritual which precisely separates him from his old status, segregates him for a time and then publically declares his entry to his new status."
Quoted by M Douglas in "Purity and Danger" p. 116.

32 Her father's lineage purity and prestige is vested in her prenuptial chastity while the purity of her husband's households is ensured through her sexual fidelity and submission, through the food she cooks, purdah she observes etc.
The following quote on a Hindu community holds true for the Muslims in Gameranga:

"The status of the male members in the house is directly reflected and determined by the women's statuses, roles and codes for conduct. If the women break the line and household's rules and regulations, if they are the cause of pollution then the whole group loses status and purity."
L Fruzzetti "Conch Shells Banles, Iron Bangles", p. 22.

33 With the exception of the first three days of menstruation.

34 There are two exceptions to the custom of foregoing nighttime bathing. Twice yearly there is ritual optional fasting on the days called Shab-i-Barat (when all actions of men are predestined for the ensuing year) and Shab-i-Kadir (the allocation made by God on Shab-i-Barat is finalized and the night when the Koran descended) when all-night prayers should be preceded by late evening ghosol and anointment.

35 "Poshumer gura dia tel dhoke, pani kono khoti korte pare na"

36 Immersion in water before the midday meal is not an Islamic prerequisite. Islamic ghosol prescribes moistening of all parts of the body including the head but is not explicit about the technique of how to accomplish it and therefore pouring water over the body is sufficient; while villagers are always explicit about immersion and the timing of it before the midday meal.

37 See pages 14, 29.

38 See page 12.

39 Male head cover - a cap - denotes observation by the user of the doings of the Prophet (shonnat). Obligatory for madrasa teachers and students.

40 Like application of henna, wearing a "tupi" and the beard growth has a religious implication. See note 38.

41 Although decorating the body with henna is a wide-spread Hindu custom as well.

42 See page 27.

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