Japan: Tradition versus Modernity

centre and Buddhists buy into the illusionary world of the senses, but the Rasta-man blames vanity, and when sat on a Japanese toilet, fiddling with buttons to vary the strength and angle of the jet massaging your anus, it feels very much like that is the case.

Haemorrhoids are so common that they must be a natural consequence of human cognition. Culture and civilisation, the fruits of intelligent apehood, make us so stupid that we don't know which way to sit on a toilet. When only the rich could afford white bread and fancy toilets, a lifetime of poor nutrition and painful digestion was their privilege, but this is no longer the case. The economy of scale made processed foods far cheaper, and today rustic loaves are the overpriced status symbol. Given another generation and increasing demand, the situation may reverse again, but civilisation may prolapse first. In the meantime, start baking your own.

Vanity slows the movement of both food and spirit through the body. We have become literally and spiritually constipated. Fortunately there is an immensely powerful purgative and laxative flowing from the Amazon to our cites. Ayahuasca flushes out compacted shit and habit wherever it lurks. It tackles cancer, depression, hypertension and possession at the root, and it is coming soon to your neighbourhood.

Brace yourself for the purge.

Of course, Luther's battles with the forces of darkness would have landed him in a loony bin today:

'Though man drops his excrements in private, the slanderer does not respect this privacy. He gluts on the pleasure of wallowing in it, and he does not deserve better according to God's righteous judgment. When the slanderer whispers: Look how he has shit on himself, the best answer is: You go eat it.'

Satan regularly mooned him as he crapped, and Luther replied with threats. *'Note this down,'* he wrote in record of a scrap, *'I have shit in the pants, and you can hang them around your neck and wipe your mouth with it.'* The foes flung poo at each other, and one of the devil's turds *'left a foul stench in the chamber for several days afterwards.'*

'My arse has gone bad' wrote a monk who clearly spent far too long on the privy, but his tormented ring-piece and scatological visions catalysed the Reformation. Happily his diary records an improvement: *'I feel much freer now that I am certain the pope is the Antichrist.'* But perhaps it would have all passed more smoothly had he squatted like a layman.

Children learn to enjoy familiar tastes, so Indians begin the day with dahl and rice, Japanese prefer raw eggs and rotten soy beans, and many English tuck into sausages, fried bacon, fried eggs, fried mushrooms, fried tomatoes and fried bread, which would probably make me puke first thing in the morning. Tastes have grown decadent. Seasonal, locally sourced, organic, GM-free wholefood was once normal fare, but only recently is it becoming an option again. Medieval peasants suffered food shortages, mainly because they bred exponentially whilst funding endless feudal wars, but today it is the quality, not the quantity of food that causes health problems.

All over the world, when choice was available, people preferred high status foods to nutritious foods, and sitting when they would have been better off squatting. Our love of convenience has spread unnatural habits and preventable diseases throughout the industrialised world. Why do we make such bad choices? Why are we divorced from our true natures? Catholics blame the world, the flesh, and the Devil, which sound like three of my favourite things, but they refer to societal pressure, earthly desires, and cunning thinking. Taoists veer off your tinkle, and in the Tokyo Hilton you can take the remote control flusher from bogside to bedside, should you so wish. If you leave the WC door open, you can fire a stream of unholy water at whatever fiend might cross the threshold of your room.

In Africa the algorithm is still running. Kenyan families traditionally mix wholemeal home-grown maize flour with water over a fire and eat it with something similar to spinach. Processed, commercially available *ugali* is gluttonous and bland, and much less nutritious. It is, however, a status symbol for the class which can afford it. In Ethiopia too, the privileged choose white sourbread *njira* over wholemeal.

Am I pondering my stools too much? Hey, it's not me who takes a newspaper to the toilet! I'm in and out, knees up by my chin, treating the soles of my feet to a brief massage on the rim of the loo. Besides, it's important! Constipation played a decisive role in the development of European thought.

Chronically constipated, Martin Luther divided his time between prayer and privy, and according to his writings he realised the true nature of God's justice whilst at stool. This new theology freed Christians from titles owed to the church, and was at the heart of the Protestant movement. From that pungent epiphany onwards, individual piety alone would earn God's forgiveness.

From antiquity in Europe, white bread was a labour (or windmill) intensive status symbol. In 1834, however, the roller mill made posh bread available to the hoi polloi, and today it is cheaper than wholemeal.

Something similar happened in Asia. Brown rice contains nearly everything the body requires; eaten with one of several leafy vegetables, it can sustain a person indefinitely. Polish away the fibre, protein, essential fatty acids, and most of the vitamins and minerals, and you have white rice. This agent of constipation once reserved for sultans and samurai gradually overtook Asia, reaching the Philippines as recently as the post-war American occupation.

Today, a wave of eczema washes over the itchy bodies of 30% of Japanese children. Whilst many Japanese teenagers do not even know the Japanese word for 'brown rice', the toilet has become a multi-media theme-park, with warm-seated, music-making, piss-analysing, jet-spurting, bum-cleaning robots. Some sound a pre-recorded flush at the touch of a button to mask

Luther: My arse has gone bad

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CLASSIFIED

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PILES OF REFINEMENT

The Victorian library in Manchester had a fine collection of musty apocalyptic tracts, where the pope was the Antichrist and London's final judgement was never more than a comet away. I always looked forward to taking a distinguished crap in a hand-crafted earthenware toilet, where generations of inquisitive rumps had paused from the rigors of research. Perched upon such cultured hardwood, one could not help but feel like a gentleman and a scholar.

Queen Elizabeth sat at office on a lace-trimmed velvet seat, but her subjects squatted over chamber pots and flung their turds out of the window with a shout of *'Garday-loo!'* (a corruption of the French *'guardez l'eaux!'*, and thought to be the origin of our slang word 'loo'.) The flush was perfected in the 1770s, and sit-down toilets spread on the back of the Industrial Revolution. The 1848 Public Health Act made flush toilets mandatory in every English house, and the pot gradually faded into malodorous obscurity.

The squat is favoured by all primates, all infants, and the vast majority of humans on the planet. Although the seated position is dignified and easy on the legs, the extra stress on the rectum contributes to constipation, piles, polyps, inflammatory bowel disease and colon cancer. The new toilets improved hygiene, but they also forced the English into a difficult position over the toilet, in more ways than one. The poor inherited the seated habit of the ruling classes, and with it their bum problems. Victorian gentlefolk, ever conscious of their breeding, distinguished themselves from the lower classes with beautifully sculpted, hand-painted crappers of fine ceramic.

Another malignant custom plugging the bowels of the civilised world is white bread. It is easier to chew because the fibre has been ground away, along with the vitamins, the oils, and half of the protein. The lump of starch which remains frequently becomes compacted in the colon, and makes the use of the sit-down toilet a more pressing matter, so to speak.