Geophagia (Geophagy) and Pica (Pagophagy)

29th November 1870 — Suzani is the name of the disease of clay or earth eating, at Zanzibar, it affects slaves, and the clay is said to have a pleasant odour to the eaters, but it is not confined to slaves, nor do slaves eat in order to kill themselves, it is a diseased appetite, and rich men who have plenty to eat are often subject to it. The feet swell, flesh is lost, and the face looks haggard; the patient can scarcely walk for shortness of breath and weakness, and he continues eating until he dies.

This extract from the last journals of Dr David Livingstone describes geophagia (geophagy), earth or clay eating. It may also fall under the rubric of pica, or pagophagia, a morbid craving for unusual or unsuitable food. Another example may be found in the novel One hundred years of solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, first published in 1967, concerning an eleven year old girl, Rebeca, who arrives in the town of Macondo carrying a canvas sack which contains her dead parents’ bones: “Rebeca only liked to eat the damp earth of the courtyard”. The behaviour recurs later in her life when she experiences the passion of unrequited love.

Although one might possibly dismiss the latter account as nothing more than “magic realism”, pica is a recognised symptom in childhood, sometimes associated with brain damage, learning disability, and emotional disturbances. Other inedible items which are sometimes eaten include paper and paint. Sufferers are obviously at risk of infection from contaminated foods, such as soil. An association of pica with iron deficiency is well recognised, as is a link with pregnancy. Livingstone noted that “clay built in walls is preferred, and Manyuema women when pregnant often eat it”. Reports of geophagia have been found dating back to Hippocrates.

Geophagia may be associated with neurological complications. Cases have been reported of flaccid quadriparesis and of proximal myopathy associated with profound hypokalaemia in the context of geophagia. Livingstone mentioned weakness associated with clay eating (see above); he also mentioned “A Banyamwezi carrier, who bore an enormous load of copper, is now by safura scarcely able to walk.”

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Neurological signs:

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