

April 16th, 2020

## Pee Pot

My lips move as I silently mouth the words that are so familiar to me after hundreds of experiences sitting here, killing time and boredom in an era before my iPhone would solve that issue forever. “P-Pot. It assists to enjoy your life.” The white vessel, the *paata*, inscribed with these words is perched on the bathroom sink next to me, as it always is, waiting to be used. There is a variant of it in every bathroom in our house. This one, the P-Pot, has become my favorite because it is so clearly a watering can that has been repurposed. Next to the text on the *paata* is even a little icon of a flower. Whenever my school friends came over, most of them either didn’t notice or purposely ignored the *paata* in the bathroom. I have uncomfortably handled a few questions thrown my way, however. After one friend used my bathroom, she came out to wash her hands with a crease between her eyebrows.

“What?” I asked, although I was pretty sure what was coming.

“Why do you have that pot thing in your bathroom?”

Even with the closest of friends, it was embarrassing to explain. I wasn’t ashamed of using one per se, but rather of the possibility of any negative connotations creeping into my explanation. That is - I was afraid of accidentally letting on that I was embarrassed for *her*. Using only toilet paper was (and still is) considered quite an unhygienic and primitive process among *paata*-users, myself included.

The *paata* has other names and personifications, too. It is a *lota* in South Asia, a *tabo* in the Philippines, and a *gayung* in Indonesia (Smyth 2017). Some people call it a mug, others really do use a mug or a cup. In its simplest definition, a *paata* is an instrument filled with water

used to cleanse your private parts after relieving yourself. The P-Pot *paata* is just one embodiment. The process is simple regardless of the *paata* you use: you fill it up with water, either from the sink or the faucet in the bathtub, pour, and use your hand to clean yourself.

When I set out to find scholarly information on *paatas*, I was met with very few search results. The only key word in English that I could think to type in was “bidets”—these have gotten a small amount of attention in journals and articles, but the term usually only refers to a hand-held triggered nozzle rather than the manual *paatas* in my home (Naftulin,2019). Nevertheless, I found the history of the bidet to be an illuminating (albeit the only) option to understanding the heritage of *paatas* because both share the driving purpose of water cleansing in the bathroom. Considering that all the *paata* users I have ever met have been Asian, I was surprised to find that the bidet had its not-so-humble beginnings with the French royalty of the early eighteenth century. The Marquise de Prie, Jeanne Agnes Berthelot de Pleneuf, is the first documented user of a bidet. The new technology caught the public’s attention in the mid 1700s; advertisements for bidets were common in newspapers all around Europe. Francois Boucher even painted a portrait of a woman mid-cleansing. Interestingly, one historian of toilet paper, in a chapter about bidets, notes that “the instrument in use [in Boucher’s painting] looks more like a gravy-boat than a bidet.” (Smyth, 2017) Upon further inspection of the painting, I noted, with some amusement, that the “gravy-boat” that the woman’s maid is filling up with water looks remarkably similar to many of the *paatas* I’ve seen.

The *paata* is not just a simple bathroom fixture or a throwaway choice. It comes from a sacred and firm belief in what constitutes the proper way of cleansing yourself after relieving yourself. In my family, this belief is religiously derived. Islam teaches its followers about the life

of Prophet Muhammad, who practiced *istinja* after committing *najis* (relieving yourself). *Istinja* is the act of cleaning your private parts with water and considered fundamental to cleanliness. In the days of Muhammad, it sometimes involved paper or rocks as well, although I try not to think about how that would possibly factor into the process (Ali 2012).

Cleanliness is a very significant and strict commandment for the life of a Muslim, so much that there is a mandated routine washing of your hands, face, mouth, feet, and nose before every one of the five daily prayers. The *paata* is an extension of that theme, a signifier that physical purity and spiritual purity are tied and that the *paata* is essential to achieving both. When using the *paata*, Muslims are also required to hold it in their right hands and use the left hand to wash themselves. This comes from an Islamic principle that dictates that the left hand is to be used for all unclean matters, as the right hand is more sacred. Just as it would be Islamically improper to serve someone food using your left hand, so it would be to wash your private areas with your right hand.

Toilet paper might rule the North American hemisphere, but cleansing processes varied before the invention of toilet paper. In the Late Neolithic Era, people used seaweed that they draped over driftwood. Ancient Greco-Romans attached sponges to wooden sticks and dipped the contraption into buckets of salt- or vinegar- water. Ancient Egyptians used sand. Medieval monks cut up old robes (Horan, 1996). Some evidence points to French royalty using the necks of geese to wipe. The Chinese began to use paper shortly before the ninth century, and by the early fourteenth century, toilet-paper packets were fixtures in every Chinese household. Toilet paper only found its foothold in Western countries in the late 1800s. Before that, many rural Americans had used scrap paper or corn cobs (Smyth, 2017).

Washing with water is a given in many countries and cultures today, including much of continental Europe (with the bidet capital being Italy) and South America. In Japan, *washlets* are common, the electrically powered toilet seats that are constantly updated with newer technological features. Interestingly, *washlets* were only introduced in 1980, before which paper was the norm in Japan, too (Smyth, 2017). It seems that toilet paper is becoming less and less relevant in many countries around the world.

There has been some recent buzz about bidets; excited news headlines by white Americans who offer wide-eyed hypotheses that cleaning with water might be a more sanitary solution. The environmentally-friendly aspect of water-cleansing as well as its cost-effectiveness are appealing too. And then, of course, there is the current toilet paper situation. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Americans rushed to hoard supplies from local grocery stores, supplies that they feared would be in low supply as the pandemic wore on. Bread, flour, and, somewhat incongruously, *toilet paper* flew off American grocery store shelves in bulk. What would it mean if Americans had less of a dependency on toilet paper as their sole bathroom cleansing material?

There is expert advice that shows that using a *paata* is more hygienic, despite the fact that little scientific research has been done on the health benefits of water versus paper. Several doctors have publicly asserted that water is the healthiest way to clean, despite what big toilet paper companies may market. Still, some risks are possible with bidet usage that may carry over to *paata* usage as well; for example, one study concluded that one type of anal fissure improved when participants stopped bidet usage. Another found that habitual use could negatively affect vaginal bacteria (Stieg, 2018). Yet for Muslims, South Asians, Italians, some Africans, some South Americans, and others, *paatas* are still the way to go. One Muslim friend laughingly joked

about it like so: if you had feces on your arm, would you just wipe it off with a tissue? Or would you wash your arm?

Before I moved to the United States, I had no idea that there was a life in which a *paata*, or some variation of it, did not exist. Indian bathrooms usually had bidets attached to the wall next to the toilet, a convenient silver contraption that was only sometimes prone to leaking. When I lived in Japan, many toilets had a fancy remote control attached to their sides. These toilets, the aforementioned *washlets*, had built-in sprays inside the bowl, so that all the user needed to do was hit the right button on the remote. Other buttons would toggle the temperature and pressure of the water, and some toilets even included a heat dryer, all for the ultimate bathroom experience. The bathrooms in our apartment in Japan had *paatas*. It was at a one-yen store in Japan that the P-Pot, the white watering can that is still in my home in Dallas, was bought and stripped of its original purpose. The only times I remember struggling to find a *paata* was when we travelled. Hotel rooms, airport bathrooms, lavatories in trains—these were the only spaces where we had to bring our own cup, mug, or *paata* before we went to relieve ourselves.

Some have scratched their heads at the chaos-fueled stockpiling of toilet paper during the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shortage. Yet it seems clear to me why the frenzy ensued: going to the bathroom is a human, ordinary experience that we all want to be comfortable engaging in. I have tried to wrap my head around how stressed I might be if TP was a necessity for me, too. Maybe it's akin to the panic I felt on occasions I was trapped in a 5x5 bathroom stall in middle school with no *paata* in sight.

I arrived at my college dorm freshman year, wide-eyed and nervous. I was sharing a room and a bathroom with a Bengali-American Muslim girl who I had spoken to only through

Instagram. In the small, tiled dorm room, I opened my suitcase and hesitated. There was a roll of toilet paper hung up already. I wasn't sure what my new roommate was used to. But there was no other option—I waited for her to turn her back and carefully placed the gold watering can by the toilet, where it would remain for the next eight months. She never mentioned it.

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