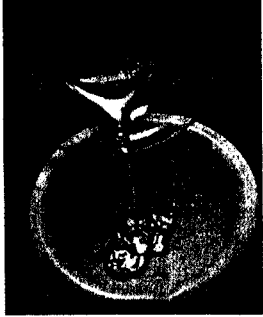


# Mercury Rising

Could spiritual practices be a source of mercury contamination?



## THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UNEXPECTED

A recent study led by the New York Academy of Sciences on mercury in New York's harbor indicates that the amount of contamination may have been grossly overestimated by earlier surveys and that industrial

emissions of the toxic heavy metal have declined in recent years. Against both that good news and the bad (the area is still heavily contaminated from decades of pollution, particularly from coal-burning power plants and trash incineration) is set the unexpected: a surprising but comparatively minor source of mercury contamination may be a result of local spiritual and cultural practices.

## A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

Even without new sources of contamination, mercury remains a danger. When it settles to the bottom of bodies of water, bacteria convert the metal into the neurotoxin methylmercury through a process that has just begun to be investigated. This altered form more readily passes through cell membranes than mercury itself and becomes more and more concentrated as it works its way up the food chain. Last month, the Environmental Protection Agency recommended that mercury contamination be measured in terms of the concentration in fish flesh rather than its presence in water and cautioned pregnant women and women of childbearing age to abstain from consuming four kinds of fish: tilefish, king mackerel, swordfish and shark. It is sometimes called Minamata disease for the bay in Japan that became known for its mercury contamination in the 1950's. In England, the cliché "mad as a hatter" was coined for workers who suffered slurred speech, irritability and memory loss after long exposure to mercury salts.

## CASTING A HEAVY-METAL SPELL

Thirty-five New York-area botanicas, or stores offering herbal products and religious items used in the Afro-Caribbean and Latin American traditions of Santeria, voodoo and Espiritismo, as well as revived Wiccan practices, reported selling 100 to 300 capsules per day. (No federal law prohibits the sale of mercury; only warning labels are required.) The mercury is carried in pouches as amulets, sprinkled in homes to ward off evil or fed by Mexican-Americans to their children for gastroenteritis. It has been estimated that 506 to 3,080 pounds of mercury per year for the last 30 years has been bought for religious purposes. Most surveyed users disposed of the mercury in the garbage; a quarter of them flushed it down the toilet.

— Erik Beard