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Ben Iboshi
Grant High School

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The History of Bathing: a Cross-Cultural Tradition

Ben Iboshi

History 105: World Civilizations

Mr. Gavitte

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Although society often treats bathing (the process of cleaning one's body with water) as a personal matter, people have influenced each other and how we bathe since the beginning of human history. Tracking the spread of bathing rituals as a unit of analysis can reveal important cultural interactions and influences. The history of bathing relates to the spread of major world religions.¹ It can bring our attention to regime changes and how they affect the daily lives of citizens.² It can show us how the cultures of individual areas shift over time.³ The way bathing practices have spread and evolved through different cultures over time shows how interconnected we are as a species.

Ancient History of Bathing

Some of the earliest bathing routines were practiced in ancient India as part of the Hindu religion. *The Grihya Sutras*, a Hindu text that describes all domestic ceremonies regularly observed by Hindus, recorded these practices.⁴ Hindus were required to bathe at their homes three times a day, as well as before any religious rituals.⁵ *The Grihya Sutras* further describes how materials like aromatic soap were to be used as shampoo, and how to mix cold and heated water to make warm water for bathing.⁶

Buddhism also facilitated the spread of bathing rituals throughout ancient India. Buddhist religious texts outline accepted bathing practices. Unlike Hindu practices, where bathing at home was expected, some Buddhist monasteries had built-in bathhouses. Bathing was still seen as a private ritual, though, as bathhouses were to be constructed in screened-off corners in the monasteries, and people were generally

¹ Heirman, Ann, and Torck, Mathieu. "Bathing facilities in the monastic compound." *A Pure Mind in a Clean Body : Bodily Care in the Buddhist Monasteries of Ancient India and China*. Academia Press, 2012. This book chapter discusses how bathing practices spread with Buddhism across Asia because there were built-in bathhouses in Buddhist monasteries.

² Walsh, Casey. "Bathing and Domination in the Early Modern Atlantic World." In *Virtuous Waters: Mineral Springs, Bathing, and Infrastructure in Mexico*, 15-33. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018. This article discusses how the conquest of Central America by Conquistadors in the 16th century changed the region's bathing habits.

³ Adams, Jane M. *Healing with Water: English Spas and the Water Cure, 1840–1960*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015. This book discusses the rise of spas in England, and how they differed from previous bathing habits in the region.

⁴ Oldenberg, Hermann, and Müller, F. Max. *The Grihya-sutras : Rules of Vedic Domestic Ceremonies. Sacred Books of the East* ; v. 29, 30. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886.

⁵ Knott, Kim. "Hinduism in Leeds." Leeds: University of Leeds, 1986.

⁶ Oldenberg and Müller, *The Grihya-sutras*

forbidden from bathing together.⁷ Bathhouses in Buddhist monasteries became increasingly common in ancient India as rulers built more monasteries in an attempt to make the region a center for Buddhism in the first half of the first century CE.⁸ However, Buddhists in ancient India generally were not permitted to bathe as often as Hindus. According to the Buddhist text, *The Dharmaguptakavinaya*, followers of the religion could only bathe bi-monthly, unless they were subject to bad weather or illness, or had been working or traveling.⁹

The spread of Buddhism across Asia eventually brought these bathing practices to ancient China. Although Buddhism gained traction in China after its arrival via traveling missionaries in the first centuries CE,¹⁰ it was not until around the fifth century CE that Buddhist bathing habits were widely adopted. This was because disciplinary texts, which includes details of bathing practices, were in less demand than more strictly ideological texts, and less frequently translated into Chinese as a result.¹¹ *The Vinaya*, a central Buddhist disciplinary text, extensively outlined accepted bathing practices, including the need for “disciples” to prepare baths for their “preceptors,” more specifically when *The Dharmaguptakvinaya* says, “[The disciples] should bring in more water if necessary. He should bring in more firewood if necessary,” and complete other tasks like cleaning the bathhouse before the preceptor enters.¹²

Bathhouses became commonplace in China through the fifth century. *The Great (Sūtra) of Three Thousand Dignified Observances of a Monk*, a Chinese disciplinary book, provides instructions on how to behave in bathhouses. Among those instructions, many of which are practical advice still followed in modern times, are that “One should not use too much water” and “When leaving, one should change one’s clothes and wash the bathing towel.”¹³

Bathing practices also developed independently in Ancient Greece. The earliest known public bath from ancient Greece, the Dipylon baths in Athens, dates back to the

⁷ Heirman and Torck, “Bathing facilities in the monastic compound.” *A Pure Mind in a Clean Body*.

⁸ Singh, Upinder. 2015. *The Idea of Ancient India : Essays on Religion, Politics, and Archaeology*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

⁹ Heirman and Torck, “Bathing practices in vinaya texts.” *A Pure Mind in a Clean Body*.

¹⁰ Liu, Xinru. “A Silk Road Legacy: The Spread of Buddhism and Islam.” *Journal of World History* 22, no. 1 (2011): 55-81.

¹¹ Heirman and Torck, “From India to China.” *A Pure Mind in a Clean Body*.

¹² *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*. Bodhi Foundation for Culture and Education, 2015.

¹³ Heirman and Torck, “Bathing facilities in Chinese.” *A Pure Mind in a Clean Body*.

early 5th century BCE. The large number of baths discovered in Athens, coupled with the volume of descriptions and illustrations of bathing that have been found, suggests the city played a role in designing the Greek bath. The first Greek baths were large rooms with individual baths cells made of stone or terracotta. It took until the Hellenistic period, in the mid-4th century BCE and onward, for public baths located in urban cities to become more common. During this period, community baths with larger rectangular pools of water, rather than individual baths, became the standard.¹⁴ The number of bathing facilities eventually fell with the collapse of the Mycenaean kingdoms at the end of the Bronze Age.¹⁵

Greek architecture heavily influenced ancient Roman baths, which date back to the first century BCE. Greek and Roman bathhouses shared similar layouts, with central rectangular pools and slanted floors for drainage.¹⁶ One major innovation in bathing brought about by the Romans was the use of aqueduct systems to transport water. Although Roman aqueducts were not the first aqueducts ever developed (that would be the system of canals developed in 7th century BCE Assyria), Roman aqueducts were some of the most efficient. The Romans first built aqueducts in the late 4th century BCE, but the aqueducts were not fully utilized until Emperor Augustus built on the system in the 1st century BCE. Supplying bathhouses with water was the primary purpose of these aqueducts.¹⁷ This was a significant improvement over the Greek system, in which bathhouses had to be located by wells, and filling the pools with water was a more strenuous process.¹⁸

Medieval History of Bathing

Public bathhouses in late antiquity to medieval Europe were on the decline, but that doesn't necessarily equate to a decrease in bathing. Diseases like the black death and syphilis were spread in bathhouses during their respective epidemics, so it is possible they created a stigma around public baths. For example, bathhouses in Vienna

¹⁴ "Greek Baths." *A Companion to Greek Architecture*, 2016.

¹⁵ Cook, J. M. "Bath-Tubs in Ancient Greece." *Greece & Rome* 6, no. 1 (1959): 31-41.

¹⁶ Fagan, Garrett G. "The Genesis of the Roman Public Bath: Recent Approaches and Future Directions." *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 3 (2001): 403-26.

¹⁷ Deming, David. "The Aqueducts and Water Supply of Ancient Rome." *Ground water*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, January 2020. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7004096/>.

¹⁸ Cook, J. M. "Bath-Tubs in Ancient Greece." *Greece & Rome* 6, no. 1 (1959): 31-41.

were temporarily closed four separate instances in late medieval Austria to avoid spreading disease during these epidemics.¹⁹ This also coincided with more private baths being built. Despite the decline, public bathhouses were still a valued commodity. The presence of bathhouses even motivated some aristocrats to move to the city, rather than live in castles, for the improved hygiene associated with baths.²⁰

Richer villas in late antiquity North Africa and Southern Europe moved to the construction of more semi-private bathhouses. These bathhouses would be built into a side of the houses of upperclassmen and would include a separate street entrance. The proprietors of these bathhouses would allow groups of the public, sometimes even entire neighborhoods, to bathe in them. The owners' motivations were mostly social prestige, not profit, as evident by the tremendous cost to run these bathhouses. Some of the bathhouses were made of colorful stone and ornately decorated with mosaics to impress patrons. The bathhouses also incorporated many elements of the Roman public bath, including (for the more costly bathhouses) a hypocaust heating system in which a fire was kept underneath the house to warm the floors and walls.²¹

In addition to being used in health and class contexts, religious bathing rituals continued to spread in the medieval period. Bathing gained cultural significance in medieval Japan following the introduction of Buddhist bathing practices, especially in the Nara and Heian period in the 8th to 12th century.²² This may have a geographical basis, as hot springs were plentiful on the island. Bathing practices existed in Japan before the introduction of Buddhism, but it was rare in ancient times. Even in early medieval Japan (still before the spread of Buddhism), steam baths and large bathtubs were not as common. But the cultural importance of bathing in Japan grew when Buddhist monasteries with built-in bathhouses were constructed in the late medieval

¹⁹ Adam, Birgit. "Die Strafe Der Venus: Eine Kulturgeschichte Der Geschlechtskrankheiten." *Orbis*, 2001, pp. 42–44.

²⁰ Classen, Albrecht. *Bodily and Spiritual Hygiene in Medieval and Early Modern Literature. Vol. 19. Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2017.

²¹ Maréchal S., (2016) "Public and Private Bathing in Late Antique North Africa. Changing Habits in a Changing Society?", *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* (2015). p.125–140.

²² Schafer, Edward H. "The Development of Bathing Customs in Ancient and Medieval China and the History of the Floriate Clear Palace." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 76, no. 2 (1956): 57-82.

period.²³ The story of Empress Kōmyō in the Nara period provides an example of the cultural significance of bathing in Japan. Empress Kōmyōthe famously gave beggars and members of lower classes “healing baths.”²⁴ This is consistent with Buddhists’ general view of bathing as a spiritually cleansing experience.²⁵

Therapeutic bathing was an innovation developed in late medieval Japan. It was a thorough process engaged in by the elite (such as Emperor Go-Tsuchimikado) who, for a period of time ranging from a week to a little over a month, would regularly bathe with different water temperatures and herbs. It was customary to either travel to Arima or Yase for the therapeutic bathing, or to have water from one of the cities transported to the participant’s home.²⁶

Religious bathing rituals were also a feature of Islam, which had developed 7th century. The Qur’an instructs muslims, “*if ye are unclean, purify yourselves.*”²⁷ Minor ablutions, washing various parts of the body, are required before prayer and take place at the home or at mosques. Major ablutions called *Ghusl*, which involves washing the whole body, is regularly required as well.²⁸ Similar to Buddhism, his focus on cleanliness and purity translated into bathing habits.

The first recorded Islamic baths, also called Turkish baths or hammams, were built in Syria and Jordan under the Umayyad caliphate in the 8th century. Similar baths were later built in Egypt, North Africa, and some parts of Asia with the spread of Islam. The baths are similar in design to 3rd century Roman baths and 4th-6th century baths in Christian and Pagan communities in Northern Syria. Like its classic Roman predecessors, Islamic baths were characterized by a large unheated entrance area, then an unheated corridor which leads to heated bathing rooms. Also similarities to Roman and Byzantine baths include how some higher-end structures featured paintings or mosaics, and how many were heated with hypocaust floor systems.²⁹

²³ Butler, Lee. “Washing off the Dust’: Baths and Bathing in Late Medieval Japan.” *Monumenta Nipponica* 60, no. 1 (2005): 1-41.

²⁴ Schafer, “The Development of Bathing Customs in Ancient.”

²⁵ Heirman and Torck, “Bathing facilities in the monastic compound.” *A Pure Mind in a Clean Body*.

²⁶ Butler, “Washing off the Dust.”

²⁷ The Qur’an 5:6

²⁸ Sibley, Magda, and Iain Jackson. “The Architecture of Islamic Public Baths of North Africa and the Middle East: an Analysis of Their Internal Spatial Configurations.” *Architectural Research Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2012): 155–70.

²⁹ “Bath.” In *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*, edited by Bloom, Jonathan M., and

In contrast to the close tie between religion and bathing in Islamic and Buddhist regions, bathing practices in Christian medieval Europe conflicted with religious beliefs. Officially, the Christian Church saw bathing and nakedness as shameful. However, Church officials did not always practice what they preached. The Church made an effort to restore Roman public baths, sometimes for charity and sometimes for profit through entrance fees. Monks, who were only technically allowed to bathe twice a year, would regularly break that rule, including making frequent spa visits. In addition, more powerful religious officials often built private bath suites.³⁰

Modern History of Bathing

The bathing practices of early modern Mesoamericans were well documented and heavily scrutinized by Spanish conquistadors when they invaded in the 16th century. Most of the indigenous people bathed in cold rivers. There's no mention in any conquistador records of Mesoamericans bathing in hot water. This is unusual considering the wealth of hot springs in the region, but could be explained by indigenous people potentially fearing powerful bodies of water, like thermal hot springs or strong currents. Many mothers bathed their children in cold water every morning. The conquistadors approved of this practice because the ritual had coincidentally been endorsed by Aristotlian philosophy in ancient Greece (Aristotle had said the practice built strength in the child), which was studied in Europe.

The Europeans who came from the medieval Christian tradition of hiding nudity criticised how women more freely bathed in rivers naked beside men. In some areas of Mesoamerica, indigenous people would take steam baths in adobe structures by pouring water on heated rocks. Conquistadors frowned upon any sexual intercourse that occurred between indigenous people in these sweat lodges. This was documented in a transcription of a royal hearing at the time, in which an opponent of the sweat lodges described the activities that took place in them, mentioning "huge sins such as

Sheila S. Blair. : Oxford University Press, 2009.

³⁰ Archibald, Elizabeth. "Bathing, Beauty and Christianity in the Middle Ages." Insights 5 (2012): 1-16.

sodomy.”³¹ In fact, by 1725, they outright banned the structure, thereby changing the bathing habits of the region.³²

Although people often think of public bathing as a thing of the past, preferring private bathing facilities or fearing public bathing is unsanitary, there have been uses for public bathing facilities in modern world history. Health scientists in mid-19th century Britain pressured the government to encourage the construction of public bathing houses, for washing clothes and people, as a public health concern. The lower class in Britain, without plumbing, often collected water in containers to wash their clothes. Without a proper way to dry their clothes afterwards, their clothes were damp and they were prone to sickness. The very poorest citizens didn't have a second pair of clothes to wear when they did laundry, which disincentivized them from washing. A reputation that the poor were “unclean” spread. So, organizations like the Association for the Establishment of Baths and Washhouses for the Labouring Poor lobbied for a solution. They succeeded when the Public Baths and Washhouses Acts of 1846 and 1847 permitted the construction of public washhouses to combat the health concern, which brought the previously neglected system of public bathing into the modern era.³³

This focus on public health policy wouldn't have been possible without developments in health sciences. Scientists and doctors in Britain pushed for public health policy as early as the 1840's as a response to increased urbanization. But, even larger developments for our modern understanding of health science came with the Crimean War from 1853–1856.³⁴ An example is the developments brought by military surgeon Edmund Alexander Parkes, who published what would later become the standard textbook for army surgery practices, *Manual of Practical Hygiene*, in 1864 based on her experience in the Crimean War.³⁵

³¹ Silva Prada, Natalia. 2002. “El uso de los baños temascales en la visión de dos Médicos novohispanos: Estudio introductorio y transcripción documental de los informes de 1689.”

³² Walsh, "Bathing and Domination." *In Virtuous Waters*.

³³ Sheard, Sally. "Profit is a dirty word: the development of public baths and wash-houses in Britain 1847–1915." 13, no. 1 (2000): 63-86.

³⁴ "The Evolution of Public Health during the Crimean War." *Bylye Gody* 54, no. 4 (2019): Bylye Gody, 2019-12-05, Vol.54 (4).

³⁵ Buxton, Hilary. "Health by Design: Teaching Cleanliness and Assembling Hygiene at the Nineteenth-century Sanitation Museum." *The British Journal for the History of Science* 51, no. 3 (2018): 457-85.

In light of this new science, public education of hygiene practices became a worthy goal. The Parkes Museum of Hygiene, opened in central London in 1878, is a testament to this change. It was created by a group of sanitary scientists and reformers to educate the lower class public about sanitation, in the hopes that it would make London a cleaner place. Donors of the museum included Queen Victoria and Prince Leopold, which shows how relevant the issue of public cleanliness was at the time. Businessmen were incentivised to contribute solely on the basis that improved public health helped the economy overall, as argued by London's lord mayor Robert Fowler when he spoke in support of the museum in 1885. The Parkes Museum of Hygiene didn't just have a lasting effect on Britain, either. The institution inspired other, similar museums like the Technological, Industrial, and Sanitary Museum of New South Wales, opened in 1880, and Argentina's Scientific Anatomical-Pathological Museum, opened in 1885, that spread knowledge of public hygiene including healthy bathing practices worldwide.³⁶

Especially today, when we're more connected than ever with improved transportation and communication technology, bathing practices have continued to evolve cross-culturally. A popular contemporary example is the spread from Japan to the US of the bidet, which shoots a stream of water to wash private areas after one uses the toilet, eliminating the need for toilet paper. Although the bidet was originally invented in 17th century France, modern electrical bidets were first developed in Japan in the 1980's. Japanese companies have attempted to penetrate the U.S. market for decades, and have only found moderate success. However, the Covid-19 pandemic might end up contributing to its spread, as Japanese bidet companies like Tushy began shipping bidet toilets directly to the U.S. from China following increased sales after the American toilet-paper crisis of 2020.³⁷

³⁶ Buxton, "Health by Design: Teaching Cleanliness and Assembling Hygiene at the Nineteenth-century Sanitation Museum." *The British Journal for the History of Science*.

³⁷ Christopher Mims. "Bidet Makers See Their Moment and Scramble to Make a Splash; A Global Toilet-paper Shortage Has Broken American Cultural Taboos, but with Sudden Growth Comes New Hazards." *The Wall Street Journal*. Eastern Edition (New York, N.Y), 2020. "America's great toilet-paper crisis of 2020" (as *The Wall Street Journal* article characterizes it) was the period at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 in which there were widespread toilet paper shortages in the US as a result of people rushing to purchase supplies in bulk.

From ancient India to present day America, the ways in which people bathe have been influenced by other cultures. Bathing practices will continue changing and evolving through cross-cultural interaction into the future. For such a commonly private activity, it can be surprising to think of how many aspects of our daily bathing practices originate from vastly different environments, in vastly different places around the world, and in vastly different time periods.

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Abstract

This essay discusses how bathing practices worldwide have evolved throughout history through cultural interaction. While there is much literature on how bathing practices in specific regions have changed over time, few take a global perspective and track where bathing rituals originate and how they spread. Using bathing as a unit of analysis can reveal interactions and influences between cultures. The essay is divided into three periods in which bathing practices are analyzed: ancient, medieval, and modern. In the ancient period, the spread of Hindu and Buddhist bathing practices is discussed, as well as how Greek bathing practices went on to influence Roman bathing in Europe. The Medieval section discusses private vs public bathing in Europe and North Africa, how the spread of Buddhism to Japan affected bathing rituals, and the rise of Islamic bathing rituals, influenced by earlier Roman practices. The modern section discusses how Spanish Conquistadors impacted Central American bathing habits, the application of public bathing in modern Britain, as well as developments in health science and education.