

Victorian Views of Meiji Japanese Bathing Practices:
An examination of the differences in bathing practices between Japan and the
West and observations of Japanese bathing as seen through travel accounts
written by late 19th to early 20th century Western visitors to Japan
By

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“Now, why is it that Japanese bathing arrangements excite foreigners more than anything else in the national life?” Anna Hartshorne asks in her two-volume book titled *Japan and Her People* published in the United States in 1902 (p.247). The opening of Japan to the world in the second half of the 19th century, coinciding with a boom in leisure travel in the United States and Europe and an expansion in business and commercial interests all over the world, invited an increasing influx of visitors from the West, eager to see and experience for themselves this exotic country. And for those who could not travel to Japan themselves, dozens of English language travel accounts and introductions to the culture and customs of the country were published during this period, from the second half of the 1800s to the early 1900s. These books were filled with detailed descriptions of the land and its people, including many aspects of the culture and customs of Japan at the time.

Among other curious aspects of the daily lives of Japanese of this period, their bathing habits were of great interest to Westerners who traveled there. That bathing became a topic of interest to visitors was perhaps unavoidable because of the frequent, open and obvious way the Japanese went about getting themselves clean, making it hard for travelers to go about their travels without not only noticing people in the bath but also having to share bathing facilities with them.

Another reason for their curiosity was the great contrast between Westerners’ own habits and beliefs concerning cleanliness, as well as because of what it showed them about Japanese ideas of modesty and morality, which clearly differed from their own. That the Japanese also bathed for health, relaxation and enjoyment, particularly in the curative waters of the natural hot springs, became an object of fascination for foreign visitors since many tourist destinations were located at hot spring resorts or included hot spring bathing facilities.

Because the act of cleansing the body and the state of nudity were things not to be discussed let alone witnessed in the prudish Victorian age society of Europe and America, it must have come as quite a shock to these people to arrive in Japan and be

confronted with the custom of frequent public, communal bathing without any stigma or self-consciousness, which was flourishing by the end of the Edo period. Edward de Fonblanque, who traveled to Japan and Northern China in 1859-60, was one of the earliest 19th century travelers to Japan and yet had heard beforehand of Japanese bathing habits and wanted to see for himself:

On the principle that seeing is believing, which, indeed, is nowhere more true than in Japan, I also visited the public bath-houses¹. All that I had heard on this subject proved to be perfectly true; there were men, women, and children of all ages, and in complete nudity, performing their ablutions in common, and as little discomposed by the entrance of several foreigners as by one another. They all appeared to me simply unconscious of shame.

(1863:46)

Even after reforms were enacted prohibiting the practice of mixed bathing it was evident that the edicts were only loosely obeyed, not only in the countryside but in the cities as well. Henry P. Blanchard writes that, “until very recently, both sexes bathed together, but now it is forbidden by law. So now the bath room is divided through the center by a low rail and lattice of bamboo, which in no manner obstructs the vision” (1878:40). Thomas Woodbine Hinchliff comments that, “in deference to the new civilization this custom is prohibited, but it is evident that the people see no more impropriety in it than Adam and Eve did before the Fall” (1876:353).

In fact, some observers found the practice of public, mixed bathing by the Japanese “the natural result of perfect primitive innocence” (De Fonblanque, 1863:133), while others viewed it as evidence that, “the Japanese are depraved, sensual, and obscene in every sense” (De Fonblanque, 1863:134). As would be understandable for the time, people in the United States and Europe generally viewed the Japanese as being more primitive than so-called civilized Westerners. This in some cases led to disdain or even disgust at the custom, while in others fueled a benevolent sentiment that the Japanese were simply innocent of the rules of morality and needed to be enlightened. Frenchman Maurice Dubard had a perhaps more unbiased view:

Another circumstance that has contributed to give foreigners a very unfavourable opinion of Japanese morals is the indiscriminate assemblage of both sexes at the warm baths. For my part I thought it very strange, passing strange, at first, the promiscuous concourse of human beings disporting, with utter disregard of each other’s nude presence, with all the freedom displayed in a lively frog-pond. Cleanliness, it is true, is felt to be as necessary to the existence of a Japanese as the rice he eats. It is a question of economy and public convenience, and their notions of propriety are not to be judged by European habits, but by their own.

(Conn, 1886:50)

¹ All spelling and punctuation in this paper has been left as found in the original sources, regardless of modern convention.

The public bathhouses which had become ubiquitous and could be found on street corners in neighborhoods all over Tokyo and Osaka by the beginning of the Meiji period were not only places to bathe but also served as the social centers of the communities, where people congregated in the evenings to relax and chat with their neighbors. Because of fire regulations prohibiting the heating of baths in most urban households, people of all walks of life bathed together at the local *sentō*. British Envoy to Japan, Sir Rutherford Alcock observed the integral part the public baths played in the daily lives of the people of the capital:

Toward the close of the day and the early hours after sunset, in passing along the streets of Yeddo on a summer's evening, at every hundred steps a bath-house is visible. You know their vicinity by the steam escaping through open doors and windows, and the hum of many voices, bass and tenor, in full chorus. And here all the gossip of the neighbourhood and town is no doubt ventilated. No one is so poor that he cannot secure a bath- no one so wretched that this luxury, at least, may not be his. Here, if they have any cares, they seem to forget them all in the steamy atmosphere, and forming the very oddest assemblage that can well be conceived.

(1863:357)

Outside the cities wealthier houses often had private baths, but the absence of modesty here as well was observed by Western visitors. William Elliot Griffis writes of his stay with a wealthy family in an outlying province:

The old mansion, like all Japanese houses, was provided with a huge caldron and furnace quite near the house, for heating water for the bath taken daily by every member of every Japanese family. Although somewhat familiar with the sight of Eves, innocent of fig-leaves, I had supposed the presence of the foreigner and stranger would deter any exhibition of female nudity in or about my house in Fukui. Vain thought! The good wife innocently disrobed, unmindful of the cold air, immersed and made her bath and toilet.

(1876:446)

Travelers' accounts are also filled with observations of people bathing openly in front of houses along the roads as they passed through the countryside. Osborn Sherard writes:

Under a porch, and in an angle by the side of their house, a man and his wife are enjoying a tub of warm water in the open air. He is seated on the rim of the tub with his legs in the water; his wife, a fine buxom young woman, is busy with a bundle of flax, instead of a sponge, rubbing down his back; both are just as they came into the world, and evidently as indifferent to their neighbours as

their neighbours are to them. Everyone treats it as a matter of course, yet it is contrary to our ideas of propriety, and we do not like seeing children in the neighborhood.

(1861:101)

Nearly twenty years later, Henry Craven St. John comments: “In passing through villages, I have often found the street dotted over with girls bathing themselves in little tubs, and they do not hesitate to talk to you as if quite unconscious of being undressed... Modesty, as we understand it, is unknown in Nipon” (1880:216-7).

But what was the definition of modesty in late 19th century America and Europe, as regards to public nudity and mixed-sex bathing? According to the current American Heritage Dictionary, modesty can be defined as, “reserve or propriety in speech, dress, or behavior.” The rules of which must then be defined by the etiquette and manners of that particular society during that time. The 1879 *Guide to the manners, etiquette, and deportment of the most refined society* defines these rules of society as having been, “the outgrowth of centuries of civilization, had their foundation in friendship and love of man for his fellow man- the vital principles of Christianity- and are most powerful agents for promoting peace, harmony and good will among all people who are enjoying the blessings of more advanced civilized government” (Young, 2001 reprint:13). The Japanese of the late 1800s, being neither influenced by Christianity nor by what would be considered by Europeans or Americans an advanced civilized government, would then naturally not follow the rules as written in the West.

Another similar book, the 1874 *Ladies' Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness*, concedes that, “etiquette exists in some form in all countries, has existed and will exist in all ages... True politeness will be found, its basis in the human heart, the same in all these varied scenes and situations, but the outward forms of etiquette will vary everywhere” (Hartley, 1874:4). But for people whose Christian ideals of modesty combined with the Victorian ideals of propriety, the Japanese practice of public, mixed bathing must have been difficult to accept.

The custom of frequent bathing itself was new to 19th century Westerners, and “due to a lack of indoor plumbing and the time involved in heating over a fireplace, few Americans in the first half of the century bathed with any regularity. Too, there was a belief that baths- at least in winter- caused colds and other illnesses” (McCutcheon, 1993:159) . But by the latter half of the 1800s practical improvements had combined with changing ideas concerning hygiene. Bathing, which had until this time been something to avoid because of health concerns, became something that was recommended for health purposes. The etiquette manuals of the late 1800s recommended frequent bathing for women:

Cleanliness is the outward sign of inward purity. Cleanliness of the person is health, and health is beauty. The bath is consequently a very important means of preserving the health and enhancing the beauty. It is not to be said that we

bathe simply to become clean, but because we wish to remain clean.

(Young, 2001 reprint:352)

But while the upper classes in the West were apparently in the practice of bathing themselves or at least cleansing themselves every day, “however, the poor must have bathed infrequently, at best. The middle class, although they apparently washed their hands and feet daily, usually made do in the 1860s with one big bath on Saturday night in which the entire household took part, perhaps because it was such a nuisance to boil all that water” (Pool, 1993:202) . In fact, the availability of water and the heating of that water were great hindrances to regular bathing in late 19th century America and Europe. Until plumbing systems facilitated water supply and better heating methods were developed, well water was brought into the home and heated over a fireplace, then brought to a tub for bathing. For the middle and lower classes, “a round, wooden or tin tub was hauled out into the kitchen floor or into a bedroom and filled with hot water from the fireplace or stove” (McCutcheon, 1993:92).

A more convenient way for keeping clean was used on a daily basis in the bedroom: “A washstand with a decorated washbowl and pitcher, a sponge, a towel, and a strip of oilcloth for the floor’s protection constituted the essentials of daily cleansing” (Schlereth, 1991:129). In lesser households the women and children had the burden of carrying and heating the water, and in better houses, maids or watermen might be kept busy all day long carrying “buckets of water up and down the stairs all day long with which the guests (and family) could wash their hands and bathe” (Pool, 1993:202). By the late 1880s, most cities in America had some kind of water supply, and with the spread of plumbing systems came the trend of building rooms in a house specifically for bathing, or bathrooms, with a built-in tub.

The 1874 *Ladies’ Book of Etiquette* advises that, “On rising, all women should use some mode of cold or tepid bath; and, indeed, in this respect the practice of the present day is admirable; there is every facility for the bath” (Hartley, 1874:271). The 1879 *Guide to the Manners, Etiquette, and Deportment* advises the following:

Cold water refreshes and invigorates, but does not cleanse, and persons who daily use a sponge bath in the morning, should frequently use a warm one, of from ninety-six to one hundred degrees Fahrenheit for cleansing purposes. When a plunge bath is taken, the safest temperature is from eighty to ninety degrees, which answers the purposes of both cleansing and refreshing... A douche or hip bath may be taken every morning, with the temperature of the water suited to the endurance of the individual. In summer a sponge bath may be taken upon retiring. Once a week, a warm bath, at from ninety to one hundred degrees, may be taken, with plenty of soap, in order to thoroughly cleanse the pores of the skin.

(Young, 2001 reprint:352-3)

These suggest that while bathing had come into general practice in the late 19th century West, daily or weekly sponge bathing and hip bathing in tepid or warm water in the privacy of one's bed chamber or bathroom were the ideal. The Japanese practice of deep plunging immodestly into the extremely hot waters of the shared baths was not surprisingly a shock. In fact, the temperatures of the waters that the Japanese used for bathing was commented on by travelers with nearly as much interest as the methods of bathing were.

J.F. Campbell, whose impression of Japanese bathing was so strong that he placed a picture of a woman bathing at a hot spring on the cover of his book, noted that , “147° , 113° , 113° [Fahrenheit], are the temperatures taken by my comrade” of outdoor baths he passed while traveling in the interior (1875:339). *Murray's Handbook for Travellers in Japan*, the earliest and most widely used travel guide book during the Meiji period by Westerners in Japan, remarks in a section entitled Miscellaneous Hints that, “the Japanese, whose *grande passion* is bathing, use water at higher temperatures- 110° —120° Fahrenheit- than physicians in Europe consider healthful... (However,) owing to some unexplained peculiarity of the climate, hot baths are found by almost all Europeans in Japan to suit them better than cold” (9th edition, Chamberlain, 1913:14-5) . The abundance and easy availability of water, especially hot water from natural mineral springs, in Japan also undoubtedly contributed to the custom of frequent bathing as well as to the practice of open air bathing.

Warned by books such as Murray's Guide and other accounts, many visitors were still taken aback when they first encountered the Japanese bath, and since many scenic tourist destinations were located at natural hot spring sources bathing naturally became a prominent attraction of their travels. Henry Field describes his experience at a hot spring in Miyanoshita:

This is a favorite resort, for its situation among the mountains, with lovely walks on every side, and for its hot springs. Water is brought into the hotel in pipes of bamboo, so hot that one is able to bear it only after slowly dipping his feet into it, and thus sliding in by degrees, when the sensation is as of being scalded alive. But it takes the soreness out of one's limbs weary with a long day's tramp; and after being steamed and boiled, we stretched ourselves on the clean mats of the tea-house, and slept the sleep of innocence and peace.

(1890:409-10)

In fact, Miyanoshita appears to be the most popular destination outside the urban areas, with accommodations for Western travelers becoming available from an early time at the Fujiya Hotel. Anna Hartshorne describes the baths at this hotel in detail:

The Fujiya Hotel in Miyanoshita is one of the best hotels in Japan, if it is not the very best of all... The bathing arrangements are particularly delightful; there is a big, detached bath-house, containing a dozen or more rooms, each with a

deep wooden tub sunk below the level of the slatted floor, the favorite Japanese arrangement. Into each come two pipes of mountain water, one scalding hot and the other deliciously cold, and you may draw it, and waste it, and paddle in it without stint, for there is always an overflow from the springs far up in the hills.

(1902:41-2)

Other common travel destinations for Westerners in Japan during this period appear to be resort areas like Nikko and Ikaho to the north and Enoshima, Atami, Karuizawa, Miyanoshita, and Hakone to the south. At Enoshima, Henry Craven St. John shared the following account of his first experience at a Japanese inn:

In a village opposite Enoshima, -an island sacred to Buddha,- I put up for the night. Selecting a clean, inviting-looking tea-house, I was at once taken in charge of by two pretty damsels, whose first care was to remove my boots and bathe my feet in warm water. I was almost boiled later in the evening when plunging too hastily into the great wooden bath; and if not for the timely assistance of the two muzumees, who rushed to my rescue, each with a bucket of cold water, I should at least have resembled a boiled lobster for sometime afterwards.

(1880:40-1)

St. John appears to have bathed alone, and in fact accommodations were made for foreign travelers to bathe alone as it was understood by the Japanese that many foreigners were not accustomed to communal bathing. "In the morning tubs of hot water were provided in a bath-room, and thither we went and bathed. The other travelers did their bathing at night with open doors, in the dress of Adam and Eve. My modesty suffered, but I got callous after a few days" (Campbell, 1875:225). At Karuizawa, Charles Taylor describes his first experience of board and lodging in Japan:

I tell the guide that I wish to take a bath, not in the general tub, with other men and women, but by myself. In a few minutes I am informed that the bath is ready. Where is it? What is it? A large tub is placed on the narrow porch in front of my room, exposed to all the rooms that face this part of the inn. It is filled with hot water and I am expected to undress and wash here! Thinking it best to adapt myself to this primitive custom, I finally undress and begin my bath, concealing myself as best I can behind a towel. It is a very embarrassing position. However, I am clean and refreshed by my trying bath, and I feel that I have the best of it.

(1898:210)

While regulations prohibiting where foreigners could travel within Japan existed for some time, gradually people became able to venture beyond the capital to the outlying

areas and into the interior. Isabella Bird was one of the earliest travelers into the interior, venturing north all the way to Yezo (Hokkaido) in 1878. Her detailed commentary on her travels runs from the deeply disdainful to the highest of praise and gives great insight into the lifestyle of the Japanese beyond the cities of the early Meiji period. Along her route heading north, she arrived at Kaminoyama in Yamagata:

This is one of the great routes of Japanese travel, and it is interesting to see watering-places with their habits, amusements, and civilization quite complete, but borrowing nothing from Europe. The hot springs here contain iron, and are strongly impregnated with sulphuretted hydrogen. I tried the temperature of three and found them 100° , 105° , and 107° . They are supposed to be very valuable in rheumatism, and they attract visitors from great distances. The police, who are my frequent informants, tell me that there are nearly 600 people now staying here for the benefit of the baths, of which six daily are usually taken.

(2000 edition:136-7).

Annie Brassey, who traveled around the world with her family by yacht, was strongly impressed by Arima(Hyogo) :

We looked into the public baths, two oblong tanks, into which the mineral springs came bubbling up, thick and yellow, and strongly impregnated with iron, at a temperature of one hundred and twelve degrees. They are covered in, and there is a rough passage round them. Here, in the bathing season, people of both sexes stand in rows, packed as tight as herrings in a barrel, and there are just as many outside waiting their turn to enter.

(1878:269)

Few travelers during this period traveled further south than this. Although Nagasaki held the only foreign trading post during the period of national seclusion during the Edo Period, the roads between Nagasaki and the capital had been only infrequently traveled upon by the Dutch traders. When the Meiji Restoration opened Japan to the world, travelers came to Tokyo, the capital city, where Western contact with Japan came to be focused, and the nearby areas. Murray's guidebook covered the entire nation of Japan (including, in later editions, its colonies), but since travel outside the main cities and off the main highways was difficult and time-consuming few visitors wandered far off the beaten path. As Japan became more accessible, people were more easily able to venture further, and early in the 20th century there were published accounts of travel to Dôgô in Shikoku and further south to Kyushu.

In his account published in 1902, Walter Del Mar writes about visiting Dôgô then taking a small steamer across the Iyo Nada to Beppu to stay at the Hinago Inn. Del Mar traveled all around the world, and among the places he describes in great detail is

Beppu:

The hot baths of Beppu are, or rather were at the time of our visit, more largely patronized than those of Dôgô; but while the latter place is a pleasure resort, the former is almost entirely filled with invalids who take the various baths for rheumatism and cutaneous diseases, as well as for a variety of internal complaints. It is therefore not so pleasant as Dôgô, and we did not avail ourselves of the privileges of the public baths; but enjoyed the luxury of a private bath in the natural hot water².

(1902:202)

Two decades later, when James King Steele visited Beppu, his impression was quite different from Del Mar, showing how the hot spring resort had changed from a center for rehabilitation to one for pleasure. He calls Beppu “the Atlantic City of Japan... Its baths are famous, but so are its teahouses. Its climate is alluring, but so are its other attractions. The city is alive day and night with feverish activity for the pleasure seeker” (1923:87).

In fact, things were changing quite rapidly all over Japan during the years from the end of the Edo period through Meiji to the beginning of the 19th century, and visitors from Europe and America were increasingly surprised and often disappointed at finding Japan to be less exotic than they had hoped. But many fundamental aspects of the culture and lifestyle didn't change, including the Japanese love of the bath. Mixed sex bathing, while still common, became less openly visible, but communal bathhouses and hot spring resorts where people bathed in deep tubs in water at high temperatures continued to be an integral part of the lives of the Japanese. The prudish Victorians may have had different ideas of health and cleanliness and well as modesty and propriety, but it is clear that while many were disdainful of the practice, others were also deeply respectful of the Japanese way and came to enjoy Japanese style bathing themselves. Whether they approved of the custom or not, bathing continued to be an object of fascination wherever Westerners traveled in Japan

Appendix

An excerpt on Beppu from *Around the World through Japan* by Walter Del Mar, 1902:

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The whole of Beppu is situated over volcanic solfataras; and in front of each house

² As Del Mar's description of Beppu is of particular interest to local readers, a longer excerpt is included in the Appendix. — 87 —

small circular holes are dug and banked up with tiny craters of mud to hold the pots and kettles which are heated to the boiling point by the hot air and steam coming up from the ground. The two large bathhouses at Hamawake on the bank of the Asami-gawa were both crowded, and contained about two hundred people each. The hot-water treatment is here combined with sea-water baths. In the Higashi-no-yu there is a long, shallow trough, about five feet wide, containing a deep layer of fine, rounded gravel and sand covered with about six inches of hot water. This form of bath is called *shibuyu*, and in taking it the entirely nude bathers lie by the hour on their backs, packed literally as close as sardines in a box. They stretch themselves across the trough, laying themselves shoulder to shoulder as long as there is room, and when the length of the bath is filled in this way place is found for almost as many more by starting a line facing the other way with feet in the armpits of the first line. When quite filled in this way, the newcomers still loiter along the sides, trying to find somewhere to squeeze in, or waiting until a place is vacated. The heated sand is scooped up and placed, as a plaster or poultice, upon any part of the body where pain is experienced. There were rather more women than men in this bath, where both sexes bathe together, as is the custom in the public baths in Beppu, and there was a constant chatter going on. In the small, first-class bathroom to which I was shewn, the only other occupants were two women, who put towels around their waists when I entered, and smiled in a self-conscious way. This display of modesty was so unusual that I made inquiries about them, and was amused to find that they were professionals of easy virtue.

Three miles from Beppu is Kannawa-mura, more generally known as Asahi-mura, or Sunrise Village, so-called because it faces the east. Here is a regular "Roman bath" surrounded with a stone wall and roofed over. About thirty people were waiting their turn, ticket in hand, in an open shed where, as soon as their number is called, they strip and, tying a towel around their loins, enter through the little mat-covered aperture which admits them to a chamber with a floor surface of about fifty square feet. Under the floor runs a stream of boiling water which fills the chamber with steam; and the bather squats here for ten minutes to an hour before coming out. From the hot chamber the bather walks over to a little pool close by, and stands for a few minutes under the cold water shower pouring into it. The charge for this is ten sen... We were informed that the sulfatara over which this steam bath is placed is called Ishi Jigoku.

(pp. 202-3)

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