The bath in Japan. Alan Macfarlane

Part of the solution lay in the mixture of private and public baths and their patterns of construction and use. The private Japanese bath combined maximum depth and coverage of the body, with minimum use of water, space and heating fuel. This made it possible for many even relatively poor people in crowded houses to have baths. One kind of 'bath' is the steam bath. Kaempfer in the 1690's provided an early description of the sweating house or steam bath. 'The bagnio, or bathing place, is commonly built on the backside of the garden. They build it of cypress-wood.'[1] He described how 'their Froo, or hot-house, which they go into only to sweat, is an almost cubical trunk, or stove, rais'd about three or four foot above the ground and built close to the wall of the bathing place, on the outside.'[2] Alongside the steam bath was the ordinary bath.[3]

The actual bath in the bathing place or in the house was a deep one. 'There are many forms of bathing-tubs, all of them being large and deep. Means for applying the heat direct, which is of course the most economical, is attained in various ways. In the common form a small chamber of copper is introduced at one end near the bottom of the tub - the mouth having a frame of stone, or of clay or plaster. In this chamber, a fire is built, and the water can be brought, if necessary, to the boiling-point.'[4] Morse describes how 'A very common form of bath in the country consists of a large and shallow iron kettle, upon the top of which is secured a wooden extension, so as to give sufficient depth to the water within.'[5] The nature and advantages of the tub are described by Alcock. 'A hot tub and a cold douche after it, soon refreshed us all. I say a tub, for such it is, and I began to admire the economy of space and other advantages it possesses over the long slipper-bath. About four feet deep, oval in shape, and just long enough to let an adult sit down with his knees very close to his chest, as is the Japanese habitual mode - less water is required to warm the whole body, and less space for the bath. In many, a copper tube is fixed in at the end, with a grating at the bottom, into which a handful of charcoal is thrown, and in an hour a hot bath is ready.'[6] A similar description is given by Scidmore. 'The Japanese wooden tub is

[1] Kaempfer, History, 2, p.324

[2] Kaempfer, History, 2, p.324

[3] Hanley, Cambs.History 4, p.679

[4] Morse, Homes, p.203

[5] Morse, Homes, p.205

[6] Alcock, Tycoon, 1, p.422

vastly better than the zinc coffins and marble sarcophagi in which we bathe. The wood keeps the ater hotter and is pleasanter to the touch. One kind of tub has a tiny stove with a long pipe in one end, and with a mere handful of charcoal such a tub is filled with boiling water in the briefest time.'[7]

Morse described how in the 1870's 'nearly every house among the higher and middle classes possesses the most ample arrangements for hot baths; and even among the poorer classes, in the country as well as in the city, this convenience is not wanting, with the added convenience of public baths everywhere attainable if desired.'[8] Griffis wrote that 'The old mansion, like all Japanese houses, was provided with a huge cauldron and furnace quite near the house, for heating water for the bath taken daily by every member of every Japanese family.'[9] In the middle of the twentieth century, Maraini described how 'In my Japanese travels I have seen dwellings of every conceivable type; even the huts of the most poverty-stricken peasants or labourers had their **o-furo** (honourable bath); in the worst cases there would be a big basin in which you washed as best you could. But there was never a complete lack of facilities.'[10]

Alongside the very widely distributed private baths were the 'added convenience' of innumerable public baths. The ubiquity of these bathing houses was described by most travellers. Thunberg observed that 'In all towns and villages, inns and private houses, therefore, there are baths. The poorer sort of people pay a trifle only for bathing...'[11] Pompe described how 'On almost every street public baths are found, where large bathtubs and hot water are available to everyone for a few pennies.'[12] Morse noted that 'Every town and village has its bathhouse, and it is hot-water bathing always.'[13] He elaborated on this: 'every village and every town, and in the city nearly every square, possesses public baths where for the price of a cent or two one may find conveniences for a hot bath.'[14]

[7]Scidmore, Jinrikisha,170.

[8] Morse, Homes, p.203

[9] Griffis, Mikado, p.446

[10]Maraini, Meeting, 25

[11]Thunberg, Travels, iii, 124

[12] Wittermans, Pompe (xerox) p.99

[13] Morse, Day i, p.42

[14] Morse, Homes, p.202

The fact that small villages and towns had bathing houses suggests their importance, as does their prevalence in the great cities. It was calculated in the later nineteenth century that 'There are over eleven hundred public baths in the city of Tokyo in which it is calculated that five hundred thousand persons bathe daily, the usual charge being two and a half sen (under three farthings of English money) for adults, two sen for children and one and a half sen for infants in arms.'[15] Alcock described how 'Mile after mile of streets has to be traversed, shops and tea houses and bathing establishments meeting the eye at every step along the route.'[16] Isabella Bird wrote that 'In the most crowded part, where four streets meet, there are bathing sheds, which were full of people of both sexes, splashing loudly and the **yadoya** close to it had about forty rooms.'[17]

In order for even this large number of bathing establishments to cope with the huge number of clients and to provide them with a cleansing and satisfying experience, several conventions were developed. The first, which applied to the private baths as well, was that washing off dirt was done **outside** the bath. The bath was the social and spiritual cleansing. Chamberlain described how 'It must be understood that each bather first cleans himself outside the bath by ladling water over the body...Thus each one enters the bath already clean, to enjoy the luxury of a good boiling.'[18] 'The bather always washes himself on the flooring and gets into the bath only to warm himself.'[19]It was recognized that just pouring water over oneself would not get rid of deep grime.

It might be thought that in the absence of soap, the Japanese could not deal with this problem. Soap traditionally required animal fat; with the absence of domestic animals, combined with the absence of knowledge about its manufacture soap was out of reach of the majority of the Japanese population until the later nineteenth century.

Isabella Bird noted the absence of soap [20]and Griffis notes that 'the Japanese have no word for soap,

---

[15] Chamberlain, Things p.60

[16] Alcock, Tycoon, 1, p.255

[17] Bird, p.139

[18] Chamberlain, Things, p.61

[19] Inouye, Home, p.54

[20]Bird, Tracks, p.198

and have never until these late days used it.' He believed that their outstanding cleanliness is due to the fact that 'Hot water is the detergent and the normal Japanese gets under it at least once a day.'[21] But they also had an alternative to soap. Oliphant during a procession noticed the 'bathers of both sexes, regardless of the fact that they had nothing on but soap, or the Japanese substitute for it, crowding the doorways.'[22] As Inouye notes 'Soap is a foreign innovation; and the same purpose was served by the use of fine bran-powder obtained by sifting rice after its final cleaning in a mortar. A handful of this powder is put into a little cloth bag, which is then wetted and rubbed against the skin; and the turbid water which exudes through the texture of the bag is very efficacious in cleaning the skin. It is now used together with soap.'[23] Chamberlain describes the same material. 'The original national cleanser was the bran bag (**nuka-bukuro**) made by sewing a handful of bran into a small piece of linen, which furnishes a deliciously soft washing material...'[24] For washing clothing, other substances were used. Thunberg for example noted that 'For washing linen they neither use soft or hard soap, but in its stead the meal or flour of a species of Bean, which when ground very fine, yields an extremely white powder.'[25]

Thus there is an initial washing, then the deep immersion for a period in almost boiling water, then a further washing to rid oneself of any remaining 'dirt'. In a part of the bathing house 'the bather scrubs himself with a separate bucket of water, after having literally parboiled himself in water the temperature of which is so great that it is impossible for a foreigner to endure it.'[26] All this ensures that the body is spotlessly clean.

The first washing also helps to keep the water in the bath as clean as possible. It was evidently of great importance that this water be as pure as possible. The concern with the purity of the water, taken to its extreme amongst the aristocracy, is revealed by Siebold. 'Colonel Van Sturler and his party were permitted to bathe in the Prince of Fizen's own bath, and were much struck by the superlative

---

[21] Griffis, Mikado, p.356

[22] Elgin, Mission, 112

[23] Inouye, Home, p.120

[24] Chamberlain, Things, p.61. Scidmore, Jinrikisha,p.173, also alludes to these bran-rice bags.

[25] Thunberg, Travels, iii, 69

[26] Morse, Homes, p.204/205

cleanliness observed here; as an instance of which, Siebold states that the water, although clear as crystal, was made to pass through hair sieves into the bath, to guard against the possible introduction of any impurity'.[27]

The other main obstacles to the effective use of public bathing are human conventions about nudity and decency. The solution to this problem ran right against Victorian European convention and hence we have some interesting descriptions and musing on the subject. The problem is that if people are too aware of their nakedness, not only will they be forced to bathe one at a time, or at least divided by sex, or they may be forced, as in the public bathing at the English spa towns, to wear clothes in company - which destroys much of the cleansing effect of the water. The more that privacy and decency has to be protected, the more expensive it becomes to build walls, separate dressing rooms and the other necessities to keep up standards. Public bathing may well soon move out of reach of the mass of the populace as too expensive or too embarrassing.

The difference in attitude towards nakedness and bodily privacy and the consequent possibility of crowded and mixed bathing is described by Pompe in the middle of the nineteenth century. 'One can really see some strange things in these public baths. Here, men, women and children bathe in the same tubs, all together and at the same time, and yet this does not give rise to the slightest impropriety; indeed, I would almost say without their even paying attention to the difference in sex.'[28] This last point is echoed by Chamberlain. "As the editor of the Japan Mail has well said, the nude is seen in Japan, but not looked at.'[29] Even Alcock saw that there was something different about the perception of modesty. Coming from that most inhibited of civilizations, upper middle class Victorian Britain, he encountered some 'shocking' sights as he walked around the cities. 'Men and women steaming in the bathing houses, raise themselves to the open bars of the lattice fronts to look out...'[30] 'As we approached, an elderly matron stepped out onto the margin, leaving half a dozen of the other sex behind her, to continue their soaking process. The freedom of the lady from all self-consciousness or embarrassment was so perfect of its kind...'[31] He concluded that one really needed to re-think one's idea of decency. 'I cannot help feeling there is some danger of doing great injustice to the womanhood of Japan, if we judge them by our rules of decency and modesty. Where there is no sense of immodesty, no consciousness of wrong

---

[27] Siebold, Manners, p.73

[28] Wittermans, Pompe (xerox) p.99

[29] Chamberlain, Things, p.60

[30] Alcock, Tycoon, 1, p.253

[31] Alcock, Tycoon, 2, p.73

doing, there is, or may be, a like absence of any sinful or depraving feeling.'[32]

It is, however, Edward Morse who gives us both the most detailed descriptions of the inside of the public bathing houses and of the entirely different cultural premises upon which they were based. Morse describes the baths in one village thus: 'The baths are stretched along the side of the streets; rude wooden sheds open in front, within which are the tanks, which are eight feet long and five feet wide, the water pouring out from a wooden pipe at the inner side of the tank, or simply running over the edge of the tank from the spring just behind.' He then described the bathers. 'In one, six or seven persons were bathing, in a crouching position, with the water up to their shoulders, at times dipping up water and pouring it over their heads.'[33] He noted that all ages and both sexes were bathing together. 'But the most striking sight was to see both sexes in the bath, young and old, and the whole affair open to the street along which many were passing, though a low screen partially intervened.'[34] There were 'several baths along the road; some open to the sky; others with a shed-like covering...'[35]

Morse tried to inject some cultural relativism into all this. Addressing his American audience he wished to 'express some plain truths about the subject of nakedness, which in Japan for centuries has not been looked upon as immodest, while we have been brought up to regard it as immodest. The exposure of the body in Japan is only when bathing and everybody minds his own business. On the streets of the city or country I never saw a man looking at the ankles or legs of a girl...the Japanese, as well as other Eastern people, have for centuries been accustomed to see nakedness, without its provoking among them the slightest attention, or in any way suggesting immodesty.'[36] Elaborating on this he wrote that, 'The missionary should remember that clothes-morality is climatic, and that a certain degree of covering of the body has gradually become in the Northwest associated with morality and piety, the traditions of tropical countries may have equally connected elaborate dress rather with the sensualities of Solomon in his glory than with the purity of the lily as clothed by Nature.'[37] Thus, as all observers noted, there was no prurience, no indecency; bodily privacy was just different. 'In Japan, among the lower classes, the

[32] Alcock, Tycoon, 1, p.253

[33] Morse, i, p.97

[34] Morse, i, p,97

[35] Morse, i, p.99

[36] Morse, Homes, p.200

[37] Morse, Homes, p.200

sexes bathe together, but with a modesty and propriety that are inconceivable to a foreigner until he has witnesses it. Though naked, there is no indecent exposure of the person. While in the bath they are absorbed in their work, and though chatting and laughing seem utterly unmindful of each other.'[38]

Morse then contrasted the position with the provocative dressing of Europeans and Americans, in their low-cut dresses and clinging swim suits. He could 'positively avow that we seem infinitely more immodest to the Japanese than they do to us.' 'The sight of our people in low-necked dresses dancing together in the waltz...kissing in public places...and many other acts cause the Japanese to regard us as barbarians...There are a few acts of theirs that seem very immodest to them.'(Repeat XXX) The same point was made by a woman, Alice Bacon, a few years later. She noted the 'open bath-houses, the naked laborers, the exposure of the lower limbs in wet weather by the turning up of the kimono, the entirely nude condition of the country children in summer, and the very slight clothing that even adults regard as necessary about the house or in the country during the hot season.'[39] She observed in contrast that 'the horror with which many Japanese ladies regard that style of foreign dress which, while covering the person completely, reveals every detail of the form above the waist, and, as we say, shows off to advantage a pretty figure. To the Japanese mind it is immodest to want to show off a pretty figure.'[40] 'As for the ball-room costumes, where neck and arms are freely exposed to the gaze of multitudes, the Japanese woman, who would with entire composure take her bath in the presence of others, would be in an agony of shame at the thought of appearing in public in a costume so indecent as that worm by many respectable American and European women.'[41] She summarized the difference with great succinctness, 'A careful study of the Japanese ideas of decency, and frequent subject, has led me to the following conclusion. According to the Japanese standard, any exposure of the person that is merely incidental to health, cleanliness, or convenience in doing necessary work, is perfectly modest and allowable; but an exposure, no matter how slight, that is simply for show, is in the highest degree indelicate.'[42] Maraini, among others, has explained the different Japanese and western notions to modesty.[43]

[38] Morse, Homes, p.201

[39]Bacon, Japanese Girls, 217

[40]Bacon, Japanese Girls, 217

[41]Bacon, Japanese Girls, 217

[42]Bacon, Japanese Girls, 217

[43]Maraini, Meeting, 107

Turning back to bathing, how often and with what intensity did the Japanese bathe? Pompe wrote that 'Wealthy Japanese bathe everyday.'[44] Ordinary people also bathed daily. 'Japan is famed for the cleanliness of her people whose invariable custom is to take a hot bath daily...'[45] To bathe daily in hot water, if spread over the majority of the population, would be surprising enough. Yet it would appear that, if possible, people would bathe several times a day - and for long periods. Geoffrey noted that '...as life is not supportable in Japan unless one has a hot bath once at least, sometimes twice a day,' the tub was perpetually being heated, used, and renewed.'[46] Morse observed bathing more often than this among the ordinary population - 'the Japanese working classes - such as the carpenters, masons, and others - often bathe two or three times a day.'[47] Chamberlain recounts how 'In another case, some of the inhabitants of a certain village famed for its hot springs excused themselves to the present writer for the dirtiness during the busy summer months: "For", said they," we have only time to bathe twice a day". "How often, then, do you bathe in winter?" "Oh about four or five times daily. The children go into the bath whenever they feel cold."'[48] In such a village Isabella Bird noted that the people bathed "four times a day and remain for an hour at a time".[49]

This takes us to another important feature, namely that the bath was meant to be a long, soothing experience. Pompe suggested that 'Often a person remains in these baths for a quarter to a half hour...'[50] Sometimes it was much bnger. Chamberlain reported cases where in a mineral spring '...the bathers stay in the water for a month on end, with a stone on their lap to prevent them from floating in their sleep.'[51] The bath was an ideal place to keep warm throughout the winter. At one mineral spring 'When

[44] Pompe (xerox) p.99

[45] Geoffrey, Immigrant, p.51

[46] Geoffrey, Immigrant, p.256

[47] Morse, Homes, p.202

[48] Chamberlain, Things, p.62

[49] Bird, Tracks, p.94

[50] Pompe, (xerox) p.99

[51] Chamberlain, Things, p.62

we were there some years ago, the caretaker of the establishment, a hale old man of eighty, used to stay in the bath during the entire winter.'[52] These were obviously the extremes. A soak of fifteen to sixty minutes, if possible several times a day, seems to have been closer to the norm.

The general effects, as well as the length of time one could stay in the bath, was affected by the heat. The Japanese liked their baths extraordinarily hot. Hearn noted that 'the Japanese hot bath is very hot (not less than 110oF as a general rule) and even the adult foreigner must learn slowly to bear it, and to appreciate its hygienic value'.[53] Alcock mused how 'I suppose it is the force of habit, but they certainly bear par-boiling, both men and women, better than any people I ever met with.'[54]As Pompe wrote, 'The temperature is sometimes so high that we would not be able to keep our XXX in the water.'[55] It was a favourite test of foreigners to drop an egg into the water and see how long it took to boil. Von Siebold in his study of Japanese volcanic spas 'dropped eggs into the waters, and when he retrieved them in a few minutes they were boiled.'[56] Morse saw people bathing in a boiling spring which was 'so hot one could not bear the hand in it for a second.' In one spring 'we lowered an egg for ten minutes and it was thoroughly cooked.'[57]Grilli writes that 'Japanese people like their baths hot - very hot - and their volcanic land obliges them. In many hot springs the water flows out of the ground at temperatures well above the boiling point of 212oF (100oC). The average temperature of hot springs in Oita Prefecture where Beppu is located, is 136oF.'[58] Where the water flows out at a temperature of only 107oF (42oC) 'it usually must be heated artificially to suit the tastes of Japanese clientele, who prefer to bathe at temperatures between 110 and 120oF.'[59]

[52] Chamberlain, Things, p.62

[53] Hearn, Glimpses, p.339

[54] Alcock, Tycoon, 2, p.74

[55] Pompe, (xerox) p.99

[56] Bowers, Pioneers, p.118

[57] Morse, i, p.99

[58] Grilli, Bath, p.140

[59] Grilli, Bath, p.140

The way in which the Japanese became used to such scorching temperatures also reveals another important aspect, namely that while all adults bathed, so did all children and even tiny infants. Hearn observed that 'Japanese children, as well as Japanese adults, must take a hot bath every day.'[60] But it was not just children, but also very small infants. Pompe noted that 'Shortly after birth children are bathed - indeed, three times a week in warm water and later, when they are a little older, often even more frequently. The body gets so used to this that every Japanese needs his warm bath as much as his food.'[61] Bacon noted that 'among the lower classes, where there are few bathing facilities in the houses, babies of a few weeks old are often taken to the public bath house and put into the hot bath.'[62] The same author writes that 'To a baby's delicate skin, the first bath or two is usually a severe trial, but it soon becomes accustomed to a high temperature, and takes its bath, as it does everything else, placidly and in public'[63] As we have seen, the Tokyo bath houses charged one and a half sen 'for infants in arms.' Drawings of bath houses often show mothers sitting accompanied by their tiny infants, who would go with them into the boiling water like everyone else.[64]

[60] Hearn, Glimpses, p.338

[61] Wittermans, Pompe (xerox) p.98

[62] Bacon, Japanese Girls, 8

[63] Bacon, Japanese Girls, 9

[64] Tames, Encounters, xxx