

COUNTERPOINT

Age-old 'naked friendships' lay bare new bathhouse concerns

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I do it about three times a week, but I tell you I would double that frequency if I could. It is surely one of life's great pleasures, and it takes on average (for me) 45 to 50 minutes. Some people smoke afterward, but I just like to cool down and think about things -- you know, life, the human body, that sort of stuff.

You will certainly have guessed by now that I am talking about a visit to the *sentō* (public bathhouse). I lived for two years in Kamata, a chiefly working-class district in southern Tokyo's Ota Ward. Kamata boasts around a dozen *sentō* fed by natural hot springs. The one I went to most often has a *rotenburo* (open-air bath). What a luxury in the middle of such an immense city!

But times are a-changin' for *sentō*. To begin with, the metropolitan government, which sets admission prices across the capital, has raised the entry fee from 400 yen to 420 yen for adults. (In Kanagawa Prefecture, where I now live, the price is, thankfully, still only 400 yen.) And now a row has broken out over what has always been an accepted feature of public bathing: the *kazokuburo* (family bath), a term that signifies "mixed bathing."

In this case, "mixed" refers to the practice of a parent taking a child of the opposite sex into the bathing area. The Asahi Shinbun reported on Sept. 16 that Hyogo Prefecture was banning children aged 6 or over from such bathing. But *sentō* in Hyogo and adjoining prefectures have rebelled, saying they see "no diminishing of public morals" in this time-honored practice. In Shiga Prefecture, children under 8 are allowed to bathe at a *sentō* with a parent of the opposite sex.

Let's look at the morality of this.

The Japanese established their first *sentō* in the 13th century, but it

was in the Edo Period (1603-1867) that the culture of bathing as we know it today took root. No matter how poor people were, they put a premium on personal cleanliness and hygiene -- something that was noted, with puzzlement, by the first European missionaries who came here at that time.

Trousers trauma

Even as late as the Meiji Era, which began in 1868, Western visitors, particularly the British, couldn't get over how often and thoroughly Japanese people bathed. After all, many Britons back then considered bathing something you did grudgingly once a month. By God, why would anyone want to take the plunge more often than that?

U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry and his men were shocked out of their trousers when they sailed their Black Ships to Japan for the first time in 1853 and encountered the practice of mixed bathing. Perry's botanist, James Morrow, was repulsed at Shimoda (in present-day Shizuoka Prefecture) by "the licentiousness and degradation of these cultivated heathen." (At least he had the decency to call them "cultivated.")

The Japanese government responded to Western consternation by banning adult mixed bathing, though the practice persisted in more remote rural regions. Then, in 1890, they restricted children of 8 and over from bathing at a sento with a parent of the opposite sex -- hence the Shiga Prefecture regulation.

Westerners such as Perry and his crew, steeped as they were in the prudish morality of their time, rather sensationalized the public bathing they encountered. In fact, Edo Period sento were so dark that people cleared their throats as a matter of course so as not to be stepped on. Moreover, at most places men and women wore some sort of garment. But to Westerners back then, virtually all Christians, this institution of bathing was akin to people in Africa walking around half-naked: a primitive custom that went against all sense of human decency.

If that's the background, then why all the fuss now going on in Hyogo Prefecture?

The fuss is that there has been, in the past decade or so, a public outcry against the sexual abuse of children. It is now being increasingly seen as improper for a man to bathe publicly with his little daughter or, for that matter, a mother to take her little boy into the women's section of the sento.

I say "publicly" because it is still the custom in many Japanese families for fathers to bathe with daughters and mothers with sons. While it is a rather extreme case, I know one mother who bathed with her son until he was 11.

In a more innocent age it might appear that such mixed bathing at home was, at worst, an innocuous custom and, at best, a wholesome aspect of family bonding and "skinship." But we are no longer living in innocent times, and Japanese popular culture is rife with images and stories of adult love for preadolescents. Many a manga exploits this theme as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Strangers' stares

This is what makes the news item in the Asahi Shinbun significant. We are not dealing, as they were a century and a half ago, with a clash of religion-based ethics. We are being asked to redefine the relationship between parent and child, to protect the latter not only from the stares of strangers but also from a skinship that can deteriorate into something so sinister that it festers inside the young victim for life.

The institution of the public bath in Japan is a major part of the fabric of this country. Not only do sento give people a true sense of community, a rarity in today's urban sprawl, but a sento was the center of the bizarre world portrayed in Hayao Miyazaki's stunning 2001 *anime* classic, "Spirited Away." Whether old, young or in-between, however, a sento is a place where people from all walks of life have what is called *hakada no tsukiai* (literally, "naked friendships," but really meaning, "natural friendships"). If the definition of "natural" changes to exclude children 6 or older of the opposite sex, as in Hyogo, then the regulations must be revised accordingly.

Youngsters in Japan seem to retain their innocence longer than they do in the West. NHK began broadcasting its wonderful series of children's songs, "Minna no Uta (Songs for Everyone)," in April 1961. I love the old "Ofuro no Uta (Bath Song)," where a boy, in a cute little voice, sings:

*When I get into the bath with Mum
I begin to suspect she isn't a boy
So ... so ... tonight ...
I'm NOT GOING in!*

(At least it was better than getting in with Granny. She made him count to 100 and he nearly boiled to death. The boy is actually making excuses not to have a bath.)

It was a different era. Now we need new rules that throw out the baby . . . to save the bath water.

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