"We have a very nice shower in the house," said our prospective landlord, a middle-aged Baghdadi businessman.

"What about a bathtub?" I asked tentatively, still a bit uncertain about this new world that we, as American newlywed graduate students, were entering for the first time: Iraq in the 1950s. Bob had a grant to do his cultural anthropological field research here for a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

The middle-aged man, graying and wearing what today we would call a rumpled leisure suit, sniffed, or more accurately, snorted.

"No bathtub," he replied.

"No bathtub?" I echoed. "Well, then.

I don't care whether I rent these rooms or not," said the Baghdadi gentleman, "so I might as well tell you what I think about bathtubs."

I was startled. Why this diatribe against bathtubs? Didn't every respectable family, in the United States at least, have one? Showers were for gyms. Those who didn't have a tub were considered, well, underprivileged or very poor. How else could one get clean?

"Sitting in dirty water," went on the gentleman, a trifle testily, "Why do you Westerners want to sit in your dirt? What a custom! How do you ever get clean?"

We did not rent the rooms, for various reasons, but our first lesson in multicultural perceptions of cleanliness was soon confirmed by other experiences in Iraq, and by learning what Islam—the major religion of the Middle East—counsels its members. For cleanliness of the body and purity of the soul are related, and are among the religious goals to which the faithful Muslim must aspire, as several verses in the Koran, the basis of Islamic belief, testify. For example, Surah (Chapter) IV Women, Verse 43, states:

Believers, do not approach your prayers when you are drunk, but wait till you can grasp the meaning of your words; nor when you are polluted—unless you are traveling the road—until you have washed yourselves. If you are ill and cannot wash yourselves; or, if you have relieved yourselves or had intercourse with women while traveling and can find no water, take some clean sand and rub your faces and your hands with it. Allah (God) is benignant and forgiving.

(Dawood translation, p. 371)

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This clear admonition to the faithful occurs not once, but twice in the Koran; almost the same phrases are repeated in Surah V, The table, with an additional explanation to the faithful about why cleanliness is so important. “Allah (God) does not wish to burden you; he seeks only to purify you and to perfect his favor to you, so that you may give thanks” (Verse 6). The same prescriptions urging cleanliness are also found, in different forms, in the Hadith, the other great body of guidelines for the faithful. A collection of thousands of the traditions and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, founder of Islam, the Hadith, (with the Koran) are considered together as the Sunna (the straight path), the guide to everyday life as well as to religious life. Different Islamic sects may differ about which hadiths are “valid,” but they do not differ on the validity of the Koran, which Muslims believe to be literally the words of God, revealed to Mohammed. (The Prophet is not divine, but merely the “messenger” of God.)

Cleanliness is identified with purity and good, in contrast to dirt, which is identified with the devil! In Surah XXIV (Light) of the Koran, Verse 21 says

You, that are true believers, do not walk in the footsteps of Satan. He that walks in Satan’s footsteps is incited to indecency and evil. But for Allah’s grace and mercy, none of you would have been cleansed of sin. Allah purifies whom He will: He hears all and knows all. (Dawood translation, p. 215)

These two verses probably sound familiar to a practicing Christian, for whom the Biblical idea of purity is associated with good, and the idea of dirt (“dirty talk, dirty minds”) is associated with evil. Islamic practice goes further, past the association, to legislate the actual cleaning of body as a symbolic cleaning of the soul.

Muslim women, furthermore, are told to purify themselves after menstruation, a custom also prescribed in orthodox Judaism. Milcvah, a ritual bath, is required of Judaic women after the menstrual period has ended and before the resumption of marital sexual relations. The Koran legislates the same requirement, and as a handbook of rules for everyday life, might in many ways be viewed closer in spirit to Judaism than to Christianity. On menstruation, the Koran is clear:

They ask you about menstruation. Say: “It is an indisposition. Keep aloof from women during their menstrual periods and do not touch them until they are clean again. Then have intercourse with them as Allah enjoined you. Allah loves those that turn to Him in repentance and strive to keep themselves clean.” (Surah II The Cow, Verse 222, Dawood translation, p. 356)

Cleanliness is also prescribed before and after eating. The faithful are not just invited “to wash their hands”; the washing place is literally brought to them. During one of the first meals we had in an Iraqi home, Bob and I were sitting stiffly in the living room of a local urban middle class family, who had invited us to lunch. We had brought messages and presents from their son, studying in Washington, D.C. A woman servant glided in, and presented us with a copper basin, a sieved top covering whatever was below, and a fresh bar of white soap gracing the raised middle of the basin.

"Please ..." Our hostess, smiling, gestured at the copper basin.

I peered into it. Where was the water? The servant cleared her throat and I looked up. Ah! She was holding what could only be an old-fashioned pitcher, like those china ones in my grandmother’s guest rooms, except this was in copper to match the proffered basin. She indicated that I was to hold my hands over the basin. I did as I was told, and the servant, her head tied up in a kerchief and her apron tucked into her skirt, dribbled water over my outstretched hands, once to wash and lather, once to rinse. Finally she handed me a towel.

The servant then sidled over to Bob with the basin, who of course manipulated the ceremony perfectly, having observed my trial, I thought! The hostess smiled once more, and said, “How do you do it in America?”

I felt it would be rude to say that we had private sinks for this purpose, but Bob had no such qualms and soon he and the hostess were merrily discussing a medley of American versus Iraqi customs about washing.

“We try to welcome our guests this way," said the hostess-sister.

“Yes, of course," I replied meekly.

“And that way you help them fulfill their religious duty to be clean,” added Bob, a bit obviously, I thought.

“Yes," said the hostess, and translated for her mother, who nodded and cast a sidelong glance at me.

Cleanliness is indeed an ideal condition of the faithful, and any obvious departure from the
stated cultural norm is a matter for discussion and criticism.

Such concern is noted early in the history of relations between the Muslim community and foreigners. Ibn Fadlan, a tenth-century Muslim trader, traveled as far as Europe, and wrote about his experiences with the peoples of the north. His account of Scandinavian merchants on the Volga, published in 972 A.D., includes descriptions of their boats, their marriage customs, their treatment of the sick (they let them die), their death rituals, and their personal ornamentation. He also includes the following acerbic judgment.

They are the filthiest race that God ever created. They do not wipe themselves after going to stool, nor wash themselves after a nocturnal pollution, any more than if they were wild asses.


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Clearly Ibn Fadlan found the Europeans' sanitary customs far from satisfactory.

As late as the nineteenth century, accounts of east-west encounters include cultural judgments based on the valuing of cleanliness. Rif'ah al-Tahtawi, a religious educator, was in the first group of Egyptian leaders to be sent to Paris to learn about the ways of the upcoming superpowers—France and Britain.

Tahtawi published a book about his European adventure, noting many things that he loved and admired in Paris—the wide streets, the parks, the theater. He was particularly interested in French attitudes to cleanliness, and devotes a whole chapter to French health, and the French apparent failure to recognize the importance of regular bathing to stay healthy. He is more polite and circumspect in his remarks than Ibn Fadlan, perhaps reflecting the political and economic realities of the period in which the two men wrote. After all, in the tenth century Ibn Fadlan as a Muslim was a representative of the most powerful and culturally advanced civilization in the world of the time. But by the nineteenth century, the roles were reversed. Britain and France, like the other countries of Europe, had assumed control of much of the then known world, and Tahtawi's country, Egypt, was already part of the European colonial empire. Tahtawi tells his Egyptian readers that Parisian baths are not as good as those in Egypt, because the water is not as hot. But more importantly, not everyone has access to a means of cleanliness; the entire city boasts only thirty public baths!

Paris, thus, according to Tahtawi, was deficient, compared to the Middle East at the time, where public baths, with hot and cold running water, had been taken for granted for centuries in the neighborhoods of all cities and towns. Ecologically, to our modern perceptions, Middle Eastern baths were efficient and catered to the needs of all the people, located accessibly in each quarter of the city or town, and sharing a wall with the neighborhood bakery. This was to save fuel; the fuel used to heat the bakery oven could also heat, at the same time, the water for the neighborhood's public bath. Further, the baths were usually built next to the mosque, so the faithful, coming from a distance, could bathe before fulfilling their prayer duties.

In Marrakech, in 1971 and 1972, we lived in the medina, or traditional section of the city, and our house was exactly opposite the bath, which, according to tradition, was next to the bakery. We actually had a bathtub in our medina house, courtesy of the French family that had lived there before us, so the children and I, being somewhat shy about public bathing, did not use the bath across the street. Bob did, however, visiting with men in the bath whom he often saw on the street or behind the counters of the shops along Rue Trèsor, the small street where we lived. It was a sex-segregated affair, open on alternate days to men and women. The men kept themselves wrapped in towels most of the time, Bob said. Women and children were somewhat less concerned about covering their bodies, we were told, and had a festive time together. I would watch, sometimes, the women and children visiting the bath on family days, carrying bundles of towels and clean clothing in, and coming out with a bundle of presumably soiled clothing, to be taken home and laundered.
In Arab cities and towns, men and women regularly visit the public baths once a week, usually before Friday prayers. A trip to the canal or a wash in a large basin may replace the bath in the countryside, but a bath at least once a week and a change of clothing is usually part of every household routine. Furthermore, dressing the family in clean garments is a matter of pride for the women of the household as much as it is regarded as a necessity by the men. In the smallest village markets, packets of blueing are found today, along with detergents, to help insure dazzling white clothes. The low humidity over most of the Middle East and the loose nature of traditional garments also helps maintain a dry, clean body. Also, the Koran is very clear in specifying that all five daily prayers must be preceded by a washing of the hands, arms, and feet. Though baths may be nearby, mosques regularly provide a fountain or water taps where this ritual cleansing of body (the ablutions) may take place before entering. In the Iraqi community where we lived in the 1950s, communal eating was always preceded and followed by the washing of the right hand, which was used to carry food from the common tray to the individual mouth.

However, while being clean is part of what is expected of a good Muslim adult, most children are not expected to maintain the same standards. The runny noses and flies around the faces of babies and toddlers in Middle Eastern villages often appall Western visitors who know the germ theories of disease. However, the problems of maintaining washed faces in the midst of many Middle Eastern neighborhoods are far different from those of middle-class Western suburbs. No matter how clean the interior of urban or village homes may be, the streets are where children play. Animal droppings, garbage, and waste water accumulate in an economic setting where a high standard of public hygiene is still a luxury. Furthermore, a clean, well-dressed baby invites envious glances and in traditional terms, the evil eye. Bad luck brought by the “eye,” is taken seriously in the Middle East as in many other societies, including our own. Many Americans today wear religious medals or carry a rabbit’s foot charm to help protect them. The possibility that the evil eye would be drawn out of envy to an attractive baby is seen by some Muslims as a greater danger than a runny nose and dirty clothes. Further, young children are not yet fully practicing Muslims, and personal cleanliness is partly embedded in the same maturation that brings with it the duties of daily worship.

Traditionally in the Middle East, the left hand is reserved for cleaning oneself after going to the toilet. In upper class urban homes, toilet paper is used for drying one’s private parts only after they have been cleansed with running water; Arab friends visiting the United States have found the practice of using toilet paper for a dry wipe quite disgusting, just as the middle-aged Baghdadi businessman found sitting in the bathtub full of dirty water offensive. Indeed, the bathrooms of most modern Middle Eastern homes more often than not include a bidet and, lacking this, most toilet bowls (including so-called Turkish toilets) have a flexible built-in water pipe to sit over that directs a stream of water upwards to do much the same cleaning job as a bidet. Even the most humble country toilet, a hole in the ground over which one squats, always has a can of water placed alongside to be used for cleaning oneself after defecation. Many Arabs coming to the United States find American toilets seriously lacking in this regard.

As in many societies, the degree of cleanliness one can maintain in the Arab world frequently reflects social status. Thus, young children are not as clean as older ones, women may not be able to dress as well as their immaculately attired husbands whose clothes they wash, nor are working class urbanites and peasant farmers likely to stay as clean as merchants and other white collar workers. Above all, accumulated filth is a reflection of the powerlessness of the poor; the richer the neighborhoods, the cleaner the streets. Being clean and staying that way in clean surroundings is a condition widely admired and sought after by practically all adults in the Middle East, as in the Western world, but this is not available to all.

Cleanliness certainly was one of the characteristics the women always remarked upon in discussing other women’s housekeeping habits. Aisha, who worked for us in Marrakech, and who lived in a tiny apartment across the street, was proud of the immaculate way she kept her place. And she tried to do the same for us. Washing the floor every day was expected, and when I once suggested that she did not need to do it every day, she straightened up from her labors, and said, in some astonishment, “Why not? How else can we keep ourselves clean if the house isn’t clean?”

This was true in our Cairo household, as well, where the daily routine involved hanging out all the bedclothes every morning to be aired, beating all the rugs, and washing all the surfaces in the apartment, including the floors. The city had taken
over responsibility for sweeping the streets twice a day, at least in upper class neighborhoods. However, private individuals collected the garbage daily, sorting and recycling materials of any value as a way of earning a modest living.

In Western societies, cleanliness has become justified by science and commercialized by billion dollar businesses who promise to kill germs, prevent diseases, and improve our social standing if only we will use their many hygienic and cosmetic commodities. Though the notion "cleanliness is next to Godliness" may linger in the homes of the more religiously minded Americans, we are warned far more often on TV and other media that we must wash not to be religiously pure but to stay well. Further, we are told we must smell sweet (or not at all) to remain socially acceptable.

Middle Eastern societies have acquired many of these secular ideas through the expansion of Western capitalism. Today, in cities like Cairo or Damascus the media are full of ads for soaps, deodorants, and shampoos. Undoubtedly these newly hyped commodities are finding customers, attracted by the same promises of social success that have beguiled the public in other settings. However, for many millions of Middle Easterners, washing the body is also an ablution, a ritual that remains part of religious discourse, even as promoters of "science" and "beauty" assert the claims about cleanliness now so commonplace in the Western world. Thus though both Middle Eastern and Western peoples share the desire for personal cleanliness, our reasons why and our ways of being clean are likely to vary for many years to come.

REFERENCES

Tahtawi's book was published in Turkish in 1832, and used in Egyptian schools in the 1830s. The Arabic translation was published first in 1847.