

Last splash: Immodest Japanese tradition of mixed bathing may be on the verge of extinction

[James Hadfield](#) Dec 10, 2016



Sukayu Onsen, Aomori Prefecture | COURTESY OF SUKAYU ONSEN

In June last year, visitors to the Shiobara hot-spring resort in Tochigi Prefecture were greeted by a notice informing them that one of the area's top attractions was now off-limits. Fudo no Yu, an outdoor bath nestled alongside a secluded forest trail, had been closed indefinitely "due to repeated offenses against public morals."

Shigeki Tashiro, head of the neighborhood organization responsible for managing Shiobara's public *onsen* (hot-spring) baths, confirmed that Fudo no Yu had been drawing a bad crowd.

"Groups of like-minded people would get together there on a regular basis, and watch men and women engage in indecent acts," he says. "It seems that adult videos were being filmed there, too."

In retrospect, it isn't hard to understand how such problems arose. Fudo no Yu was a community bath, meaning anyone was free to use it, and until last year it was left unsupervised. It was also one of a dwindling number of onsen in the Kanto region that allow traditional mixed bathing, known in Japanese as *konyoku*. Men and women bathed together, and using a towel or swimsuit to protect one's modesty was strictly forbidden.

"The older bathers would tell you off for doing that," Tashiro says.

Although Fudo no Yu ended up reopening a couple of months later, any opportunity for licentiousness has been strictly curtailed. While it's still mixed, an attendant is now present during opening hours, and women — not men — are required to wear a towel, or *yugi*, a special bathing suit.

The problems seen in Shiobara fit in with a wider trend that has seen a precipitous decline in the number of konyoku around Japan. In 2013, the inaugural issue of *Onsen Hihyo* (Hot-spring Critique) dedicated its cover feature to the plight of mixed bathing.

"Nobody else was writing about it," says the magazine's editor, Takashi Ninomiya. "I had a feeling that they weren't as many konyoku as before, but when I actually looked at the figures, there had been a massive drop."

There are no official statistics on the number of mixed baths in Japan, so Ninomiya turned to Keita Oguro, a veteran onsen photographer with an encyclopedic knowledge of konyoku. When Oguro first totted up all such onsen 23 years ago, the total came to more than 1,200. By 2013, that figure had fallen to less than 700.

"There was a 40 percent decline over 20 years," Ninomiya says. "It's only been three years since then, but it's dropped by more than 30 percent again. There are fewer than 500 now."

"This is really unusual, isn't it? They're in total free fall, but hardly anyone is standing up and saying, 'This is weird,' or, 'I want to do something to stop this.'"

However, when you're talking about a fragile social accord that permits men and women to bathe naked in the company of strangers, it's hard to know where to start.





Bathers sit in a bath at Sukayu Onsen, Aomori Prefecture. | COURTESY OF SUKAYU ONSEN

Foreign perceptions

When Japan began to ease restrictions on foreign visitors during the mid-19th century, after more than 200 years of enforced isolation, some of the early arrivals were aghast at what they saw. George Smith, the bishop of Hong Kong, offered a typical account in his 1861 book, "Ten Weeks in Japan."

"Towards the latter part of the afternoon or at an early hour of the evening, all ages and both sexes are intermingled in one shameless throng of bathers without signs of modesty or of any apparent sense of moral indecorum," he wrote.

"Some persons palliate this custom of promiscuous bathing in public by assuming the innocent simplicity of their primitive habits, and dwelling on the wide difference of every country in the conventionalities of moral right and wrong," he continued. "The obvious reply to this charitable theory is that the Japanese are one of the most licentious races in the world."

This view was echoed in the chronicle of Commodore Matthew Perry's expeditions to Japan in 1853 and 1854, penned by an Episcopalian priest named Francis L. Hawks and published in 1856.

"A scene at one of the public baths, where the sexes mingled indiscriminately, unconscious of their nudity," Hawks wrote, "was not calculated to impress the Americans with a very favorable opinion of the morals of the inhabitants."

Such reactions were motivated by more than just religious piety. Mixed sea bathing — with swimsuits — was only just starting to become acceptable in the United States at the time of Perry's mission, and it was prohibited on British beaches until the 1890s. Even Germany, which today is famous for its uninhibited mixed-sex spas, only began to embrace nudism at the end of the 19th century.

Accounts of mixed bathing contributed to Western perceptions of the Japanese as an inferior race, and would become a topic of some political controversy. Worried that it was affecting trade negotiations with Japan, the U.S. government even had the offending description in Perry's chronicle struck from the second edition of the book.

Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Japanese authorities moved

quickly to address their image problem. Mixed bathing was banned at public bathhouses in Tokyo the following year, and the prohibition soon spread to other major cities.

Enforcement, however, was another matter. In “Konyoku to Nihonshi” (“Mixed Bathing and Japanese History”), cultural historian Koshi Shimokawa reports that the rules were regularly ignored.

“The government saw mixed bathing as a national disgrace,” he writes, “but it’s fair to say that the populace didn’t feel the same way.”

The “primitive habits” that Smith described had in fact been in place for centuries. There are references to mixed bathing in the “Izumo Fudoki,” an eighth-century guide covering portions of modern-day Shimane Prefecture, and the tradition is likely far older.

Mayumi Yamazaki, a prolific essayist who has penned multiple books about onsen culture, including 2008’s “Dakara Konyoku O Yamerarenai” (“That’s Why I Can’t Get Enough of Mixed Bathing”), says that people in hot-spring regions would share a single bath as a matter of course: they bathed wherever the spring was.

“The original baths in those areas are konyoku baths,” she says.

It helped that Japan didn’t share the Confucian disapproval of nudity seen in China, nor was it bound by Judeo-Christian morality.



Mayumi Yamazaki | JAMES HADFIELD

Still, the country’s freewheeling bathing culture didn’t come without problems. The first official prohibition on konyoku was issued back in 797, in response to rampant fraternization between Buddhist monks and nuns at temple-run baths in Nara.

Mixed bathing is thought to have become the norm in major cities in the Muromachi Period (1392-1573), though the taint of naughtiness persisted.

During the early Edo Period (1603-1868), the line between public bathhouses and brothels became impossibly blurred. The mixed bathhouses (*hairikomi-yū*) that later proliferated in the capital during the

bathhouses (*kyōzuka*) that later proliferated in the capital during the 18th century were often rife with hanky-panky.

The Tokugawa government first attempted to ban mixed bathing in 1791, but the rule was widely flouted; Shimokawa writes that subsequent bans were issued at a rate of roughly once a decade, to little avail.

Although the Meiji government's prohibition on *konyoku* in 1869 was significant, a more lasting change came in 1948, when a pair of laws — the *Ryokan Gyoho* (Hotel Management Law) and *Koshu Yokujoho* (Public Bath Law) — introduced a requirement that public baths take steps to safeguard public morals.

According to Shimokawa, after the Anti-Prostitution Law was passed in 1956, the Ministry of Health and Welfare decided that this safeguard should involve an explicit ban on mixed bathing. (An exception was made for children; the exact age varies from prefecture to prefecture.)

The law was not applied retroactively, meaning that established *konyoku onsen* were free to carry on as usual, but it made it impossible for any new ones to open. Existing establishments have also faced increasingly strict oversight by public health centers, the local bodies responsible for monitoring hot springs.

Ninomiya explains that such hot springs are unable to perform large-scale modifications, such as relocating a bath. And if they stop allowing mixed bathing, however briefly, there's no going back.

"It's not something that's happened suddenly — there has been a gradual shift," confirms Yamazaki. "However, the rules have definitely become stricter in recent years."





An undated archival photo of Sukayu Onsen | COURTESY OF SUKAYU ONSEN

Questionable behavior

While there are multiple books on the subject, the most comprehensive online guide to konyoku onsen was compiled by a former flight attendant who uses the moniker “Mixed Bath Journalist Mina.” *Succhi no Konyoku Rotenburo Taikenki* (Stewardess’s Outdoor Mixed Bath Diaries; www.food-travel.jp) has exhaustive photo reports on nearly 500 onsen,

each of them rated for overall satisfaction and how potentially embarrassing they are for female bathers.

Mina (who declines to give her surname owing to privacy concerns) is evidently a bit of a completist. She says she was effectively living out of a car while she wrote most of the reports.

Tucked away on the site is a page listing places that have disappeared since she started out. There are more than 160, and while many have closed for business, a significant number have simply taken konyoku off the menu. Some have divided their existing baths between men and women, introduced a rotation system or converted their facilities into private family baths (*kashikiri*). In a few unfortunate cases, a single konyoku bath has been split in two.

“I worry that genuine konyoku may disappear altogether,” Mina says.

Yet she’s clear about where the problem lies.

“The main issue,” she says, “is bad manners amongst bathers.”

The behavior that led to the temporary closure of Fudo no Yu was extreme, but it wasn’t an isolated case. Regular konyoku visitors will be familiar with *wani* (crocodiles), a breed of male bather that lurks in the water for hours, waiting for glimpses of female flesh. (“The ones I’ve encountered never try to strike up a conversation,” Mina says. “They just stare.”)

In most cases, these men are unwelcome nuisances, but when an onsen is ailing, they become like a parasite overwhelming its host organism.

On a recent national holiday, I took the train down the coast to Kanagawa Prefecture to visit a konyoku onsen that had reportedly turned into a bathtub of deplorables. I won’t name it here: The elderly women running the place clearly have enough problems on their hands already.

The onsen was attached to a decrepit inn that seemed on the verge of closure, with squishy flooring, broken toilets and a pervasive odor of damp.

The outdoor bath itself was actually quite pleasant, but it was hard to ignore the way many of the men kept glancing over at the youngish couple bathing at one end of the tub. When the pair got up to leave, the guys sitting around me all turned as one to watch the woman as she got dressed in the open-air changing area.

George Smith, the 19th-century bishop, would have felt vindicated. The experience just left me feeling depressed.

Yamazaki squirms a little when I broach the subject of wani, but she also strikes a more hopeful note.

"At the bath, we're all naked. We're all trying to conceal ourselves — it's embarrassing for everyone," she says. "It's not just a place where men put pressure on women: Sometimes women do the same with men. I've seen a young guy get penned in by a group of older ladies."





Sukayu Onsen's entrance. | COURTESY OF SUKAYU ONSEN

Sense of community

Sukayu Onsen lies an hour's bus ride from Aomori, in a mountain area that's said to receive the heaviest snowfall in all of Japan. When I visited in February 2014, there were 4-meter snowdrifts.

The onsen has been in use for more than 300 years and is famous for its enormous wooden bathhouse, dubbed the *sen-nin buro* (thousand-person bath). It's also the birthplace of the Konyoku O Mamoru Kai (Konyoku Preservation Society), which started life in 2005.

"There had been an increase in bad-mannered customers, and we were getting lots more complaints from women," says Ryosuke Mayama, who works at Sukayu.

When asked what kinds of behavior he means, he says it was mostly men ogling at women, adding that there were particular problems with certain overseas visitors who "didn't have the same kind of bathing culture."

As of early October, the society had 18,218 members. Mayama explains that it's not a pressure group, more a way for fans of mixed bathing to affirm their support.

"We're looking to recruit people who agree that they'd like to see konyoku continue into the future," he says.

Sukayu has also taken a few measures to keep customers happy. The main bathhouse is women-only for two hours each day, and ropes now divide the tubs into male and female sections.

Discussing the changes, Mayama reminisces about earlier, simpler times.

"Families in Aomori and the Tohoku region are especially accustomed to bathing together — it's just the done thing," he says. "It was still very open, even until the early 1970s. Everyone would use the konyoku baths."

The main reason that mixed baths have endured for so long in the face of official opprobrium is that communities have still supported them. When an onsen stops being a gathering place for locals, there's less to stop it

slipping into disrepute.

Ninomiya laments the growing atomization of Japanese society, even in rural areas that until recently were bulwarks of mixed bathing. He describes how it would once be common for agrarian workers to finish a day's labor by piling into the tub together, irrespective of gender.

"There's an amazing sense of community when you decide it's OK to get naked and hang out together, rather than just being 'Me, me, me' all the time," he says. "I think it's one of the good qualities of Japanese people and I'm sad to see it dying out. Those kinds of places are going to

disappear. We're turning increasingly into a world of 'I'll do my thing, you do yours.'"

Yamazaki says she was a late convert to mixed bathing. Although she grew up in Niigata Prefecture, which has more hot springs than almost anywhere else in Japan, her first experience of konyoku didn't come until the age of 27.

Despite her initial reservations, she says that she came to appreciate the social aspect of mixed bathing, and also insists that quality of the water is better in konyoku baths.



Takashi Ninomiya | JAMES HADFIELD

"Being able to take a bath, naked, with a bunch of strangers would be unthinkable in a world that wasn't peaceful," she says. "The number (of konyoku baths) may keep decreasing, but I think this culture is going to survive."

Ninomiya, however, is less convinced.

"I think I'd like to do another feature on the subject for Onsen Hihyo," he says. "But the title next time wouldn't be, 'Are konyoku onsen in trouble?' It would be something more like 'Farewell, mixed bathing.'"

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