

An Insight into an Egyptian Intangible Cultural Heritage Tradition: *The Hammām*

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Abstract

Looking after one's health and personal hygiene is crucial for the sanity of our minds and souls. Egyptians have always been fastidious about their health and cleanliness since the dawn of history. This fact can be traced as far back as the Pharaonic, through the Graeco-Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, Modern and Contemporary eras. This paper sheds the light on one of the most favourable Egyptian traditions that is still currently in practice, which is "visiting the public bathhouse "*Hammām*". Bathhouses have always been considered as a social hub for the Egyptians, not only for body care and beautification but also for meeting up with friends. The *Hammām* provides us with extremely rich material for our Egyptian intangible cultural heritage. On a final note, it is rational to extrapolate that traditional *Hammāms* are the nucleus for the contemporary luxurious spas and health clubs.

Keywords

Public Bath - Hammām - Intangible Cultural Heritage - Egypt - Hygiene

Introduction

Personal hygiene is a key component of human well-being regardless of religion, culture or place of origin. It is defined as the healthy practices and lifestyle, which helps in the maintenance and promotion of individual health; physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. Undoubtedly, it has a significant role in every society as an essential-health need. Throughout the history, it has been an integral part of the religion and health-culture of any community around the world. Poor personal hygiene or self-neglect behavior is regarded by many cultures as an offensive conduct or an indication for specific illness, particularly mental disorders. Thus, personal hygiene is not only limited to maintain the cleanliness of the body, but it is strongly connected with the mental and spiritual aspects as well.¹

Every culture develops its own standards and methods of maintaining personal hygiene that are associated with different personal factors including bathing, clothing, washing hands, grooming the hair, caring for various body parts including the hands, feet, nails, nose, ears, teeth and mouth.²

Ancient Egyptian Culture

Some cultures equated cleanliness and self-caring with godliness and associated hygiene with diverse religious beliefs and practices. For instance, personal hygiene and cleanliness in the ancient Egyptian culture were highly emphasized. They were common features of the religious practices and essential parts of the whole culture. The ancient Egyptians were aware of the diseases that might occur as a result of the lack of self-cleaning and consequently they paid great attention to self-caring and bathed frequently, almost twice daily, to avoid any infection or illness. Priests, in particular, were fixated with cleanliness to the extent that they used to shave their whole bodies every three days and bathed twice a day and twice during the night.³

Regarding the ancient Egyptian religion and its relevance to personal hygiene, the Egyptian Book of the Dead entailed a collection of magical and religious spells which stipulate that one cannot speak in the afterlife unless they are pure, clean and presentable.⁴ For example, Spell 125, which deals with the Egyptian ethical standards, prohibits anyone from speaking in the judgment hall unless they are clean, dressed in fresh clothes, shod in white sandals, adorned with eye-paint, and anointed with

1 I Clement, Manual of Community Health Nursing (London: Jaypee Brothers Medical Publishers, 2012), 70.

2 Clement, Manual, 70.

3 John Wilkinson, Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Vol. 3, 358.

4 John Taylor, Journey Through the Afterlife: Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead (London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 205.

the finest oil of myrrh.⁵

This strongly reflects the fact of how cleanliness matters in the life and afterlife of the ancient Egyptians. According to Herodotus, 5th century B.C, the ancient Egyptians were the most hygienic and healthy of all nations at that time and they were easily distinguished from other peoples by their manners and customs.⁶ They adopted many of the personal hygiene habits including bathing, washing, and laundering since they were very concerned with cleanliness and bathed frequently. They used to wash their cups, glasses, and plates before and after eating and drinking. Moreover, they exploited the waters of the Nile river, especially in the hot climate days, to bathe and to wash their clothes. They wore freshly washed garments made of linen, which was by far the most common textile. These different daily life practices may refer to the strong bond created between the ancient Egyptians and water through their appreciation for the Nile and their relevant deities. It is worth here to mention that the practices of clothes laundry and bathing in the waters of the Nile river and its canals are ancient Egyptian habits that continue to be existing and are still sighted frequently in some of the rural areas in Egypt till our present day.⁷

Pointing to the importance of self-care and personal hygiene, the ancient Egyptians were aware of the value of bathing to keep them clean, happy and satisfy their gods. The lower social class used to bathe in pools, rivers or canals, but wealthier ancient Egyptians had private baths within their homes with large tubs or basins. Servants would bring waters from the Nile river, carried by hand in clay jars or animal skin containers, to fill the basins since even the Egyptians of the higher social class did not have running water in their homes. In the royal palaces and the private houses of the wealthy, there were private baths with basins or stone shower stalls where the bather would stand on a limestone slab with raised edges and a drain cut in it to dispose of sewage. Running water would have been poured over the head and body through a shower, and stoves were used to heat the water, while lined towels were used for drying.⁸ Some indoor bathing facilities have been revealed in ancient sites such as Tell El-Amarna. An example of an elaborate bath with innovative water-supply system can be found inside the house of one of the high officials of the 18th dynasty at Tell El-Amarna.⁹

The ancient Egyptians bathed nearly on daily basis and they used perfumes or scented water to stay clean and fragrant. Scented natron soaps were used, and their ingredients had antibacterial, anti-fungal and whitening properties as well. This cleansing agent is substantially a mineral salt consisting of hydrated sodium carbonate or sodium sesquicarbonate with small quantities of sodium chloride and sodium sulphate. Undiluted, natron salt was used as a mouthwash and natural cleanser for the teeth, besides chewing parsley and similar herbs to provide fresh breath. Natron was also an important ingredient in the mummification process as it absorbs water and behaves as a drying agent.¹⁰

Other ingredients for cleanliness purposes, described in Ebers Medical Papyrus,¹¹ were also used including animal fat and vegetable oils, which were beneficial for moisturizing the skin and fight against different skin diseases.¹²

Deodorants were invented and widely used as mentioned in Ebers Medical Papyrus¹³ that recommends placing a cake of bread mixed with scent under the arms after bathing. Ground carob beans and porridge were used as deodorant.¹⁴ The mixture of an ostrich egg, a shell of a tortoise and a gallnut of tamarisk is roasted and rubbed to the body of both men and women to expel stinky smell is also highlighted.¹⁵ Women often had cones of perfumed wax on their heads that would slowly melt throughout the day spreading pleasant scent.¹⁶ Aside from the use of deodorants, the ancient Egyptians were famous for their superior scents and perfumes that their use was mentioned in ancient texts and referred to by several Greek and Roman writers.

5 Raymond Faulkner and Carol Andrews, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London: British Museum Publications, 1985) 29. See also, Mariam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A book of Reading: The New Kingdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), Vol. 2, 119.

6 David Childress, *Technology of the Gods: The Incredible Sciences of the Ancients* (Illinois: Adventurers Unlimited Press, 2000), 17.

7 William Peck, *The Material World of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 111.

8 Peter Lacovara, *The World of Ancient Egypt: A Daily Life Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2017), Vol. 1, 176. See also, Piers Crocker, "Status Symbols in the Architecture of El-Amarna", *Journal of the Egyptian Archaeology* 71, (1985): 52-65.

9 Childress, *Technology of the Gods*, 17. See also, Leonard Woolley, "Excavations at Tell el-Amarna", *Journal of the Egyptian Archaeology* 8, no. 1/2, (1922): 48-82.

10 Wadi Natron, in the western desert of northern Egypt, is regarded as the main source of natron where large quantities of this alkaline salt were harvested. The surface of the seasonally dry watercourses confirmed the use of mineral salt in several locations in Egypt and Sudan as well. See Peck, *The Material World of Ancient Egypt*, 111.

11 Cyril Bryan, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine: The Papyrus Ebers* (Chicago: Ares Publishers, 1974).

12 Lacovara, *The Material World of Ancient Egypt*, 176.

13 Carl Klein, *The Medical Features of the Papyrus Ebers* (Chicago: American Medical Association, 1905), 1-20. See also, Bendix Ebbell, *Ebers Papyrus: The Greatest Egyptian Medical Document* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

14 Lisa Amstutz, *Ancient Civilizations: Ancient Egypt* (North Mankato: Abdo Publishing, 2015) 50.

15 Joyce Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis: Women of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1994), 148.

16 Roja Dove, *The Essence of Perfume* (London: Black Dog, 2008), 21.

Religiously, it was believed that fragrances were created by the gods in most of the ancient cultures. Consequently, scented offerings or incense formed an important part of ceremonies and rituals along with worship, prayers, and sacrifices.¹⁷ The ancient Egyptians discovered that any aromatic plant if soaked in oil or melted fat, its scent will transfer to the oil and this process is known as "maceration". The scented oil would retain its odour longer than fragrance smokes or incense do. Thus, fragrant oils were used for skin application, personal and medicinal use and sacred purposes. They were usually applied on skin and hair to enjoy their lingering fragrance long after bathing and during attending ceremonies. These unguents or oily-based perfumes were stored in ceramic, glass and alabaster containers. It should be mentioned that Nefertum was considered to be the god of perfumes, known as the aromatherapist in ancient Egypt, who had healing properties and was believed to smell as fragrant as the blue lotus flower.¹⁸

Ancient Egyptian women were concerned with their personal hygiene, cleanliness, and beauty. They used perfumes and unguents not only to mask their body odours but also to enhance their personal care routines. Myrrh was the favoured fragrance of queen Hatshepsut as it reminded her of the scent of god Amun-Re. She used to rub myrrh at the bottom of her feet so that she would continuously emit pleasant fragrance for herself and others surrounding her wherever she went. Myrrh oil was proved to stimulate the immune system to create white blood cells, when absorbed by the skin and enter the bloodstream. Moreover, it was used as an antiseptic ointment that prevented the heels of the queen from cracking in the hot weather days and provided vitality to her mind and body.¹⁹ At that time, the Egyptians used opaque glass coloured with metallic oxides in addition to containers made out of granite, diorite and especially alabaster carved in adorable animal or lotus shapes to hold the scented oils and keep them cool.²⁰ An alabaster container in the form of a flacon, measuring 4.7 cm., carved with the name of Hatshepsut is currently displayed at the Bonn University Egyptian Museum. It was examined by the German Egyptologist Michael Hoveler-Müller, who was looking for a perfume residue since the shape of the flacon is that of the well-known perfume bottles, as depicted on the walls of Deir el-Bahari Temple, Thebes. After two years of research, he announced that the container did not include a perfume and the substance inside is a kind of skin care lotion or a medication used by the queen for treating eczema.²¹

Ancient Egyptian women knew depilation to get rid of the unwanted body hair and to stay clean and smooth. Shaving body hair was mainly facilitated by applying scented oil to the skin. Beeswax, special oils or cream depilatories made with an alkali, such as quicklime, were also effective in body hair removal and were used as shaving lotions.²² Aside from being fashionable, some of the Egyptian women, especially the wealthy, shaved their heads using razors of flint or metal and wore wigs made of human hair to protect the scalp mainly from the sun's heat and to avoid the infestation of head lice. Women who kept their natural hair used hair extensions or wigs that were carefully woven and knotted to their own hair with beeswax and resin.²³

As for the males, they paid great attention to their personal hygiene and self-care as well. Upper-class men also shaved their bodies and heads to keep cool and prevent lice infestation.²⁴ They used different hair removal tools including tweezers, knives, razors of flint or metal and whetstones. In ceremonial occasions, wealthy men and women wore elaborate wigs made of human hairs, while the worst were made of coarse red date palm fibers. Furthermore, tomb reliefs and paintings show that not only females but also males adorn their heads with perfumed cones to release sweet aroma during the feasts and celebrations.²⁵

The performance of male circumcision in ancient Egypt was common among the upper classes and recognised as a puberty rite for the sake of cleanliness. This practice dates back to 6th dynasty when the boys were routinely circumcised between the age of six and twelve. Thus, it marked the transition from boyhood to adulthood and therefore it was not performed in infancy. A male circumcision scene is illustrated on the walls of the tomb of the royal architect Ankhmahor at Saqqara showing details of

17 Jennifer Rhind, *Fragrance and Wellbeing: Plant Aromatics and their Influence on the Psyche* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publisher, 2014), 90. See also, Lise Manniche, *Sacred Luxuries: Fragrances, Aromatherapy and Cosmetics in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 43-45.

18 Rhind, *Fragrance and Wellbeing*, 90. See also, Donald Redford, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), Vol. 2, 514-515.

19 Elizabeth Jones, *Awaken to Healing Fragrance: The Power of Essential Oil Therapy* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 8.

20 Jones, *Awaken to Healing Fragrance*, 6.

21 University of Bonn, "Deadly medication? Scientists shed light on the dark secret of Queen Hatshepsut's flacon," *PHYS. ORG*, August 19, 2011. <https://phys.org/news/2011-08-deadly-medication-scientists-dark-secret.html> (retrieved on September 16, 2019).

22 Victoria Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History* (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), 180.

23 Donald Redford, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 73.

24 Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair*, 180.

25 Joyce Salisbury, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Ancient World* (Santa Barbara: Library of Congress, 2001), 95-96.

this process and the importance attached to this ceremony.²⁶ It should be mentioned that circumcision was primarily enclosed to the priests appealing further purification and cleanliness, and then it was adopted by the nobles and the higher warriors as a hygienic precaution. There is no direct evidence that circumcision was performed for girls. According to the historical records of Herodotus in the 5th century B.C, the majority of the Egyptian upper-class males adopted circumcision for hygienic reasons, and it was conducted by a priest and not a doctor which may indicate that it had more ritual than practical significance.²⁷

Graeco-Roman Culture

Practices of personal hygiene and cleanliness of the Greeks were similar to those adopted by the ancient Egyptians. It is noteworthy here to mention that the Latin word “hygiene” is originally derived from the ancient Greek word “hygieia” (Υγιεία or Υγιεία)²⁸ in reference to the Greek goddess of health, cleanliness, and sanitation, who is depicted in the classical sculptures as a woman holding a large serpent in her arms.²⁹ The Greek hygiene emerged as a specialised medical discipline that attempted to control every aspect of the human environment from air, diet, sleep, works, exercises, daily practices to the passions of the mind and incorporates them into a sanitary lifestyle. Generally, early Greek hygiene included four mental and physical disciplines, balneology, religion, sport, and medicine. Hippocrates, the founder of medicine and the greatest physician of his time, recommended daily bathing and massaging different oils on the body for good health and optimal relaxation. Moreover, he advised the Greeks on a healthy program known as the Greek Regimen of health, which affirms that the ordinary should focus on both careful diet and regular exercise to acquire a healthy body and healthy mind.³⁰

According to the Greek culture, shaving was considered as an aesthetic approach for personal hygiene. The removal of body hair may have been practiced by both ancient Greek men and women as seen through their nude artistic depictions. Ancient Greek women removed their pubic hair because it was thought to be uncivilised to appear in public baths with pubic hair. Shaving body and face hair was also adopted by the Greek rulers especially Alexander the Great who was fixated on shaving and appeared in many scenes and depictions beardless. He even ordered his warriors to shave their faces and bodies before battles so that their enemies fail to grab them by the beard.³¹

The ancient Greeks used different cleansing tools such as the “strigil”, which was a Graeco-roman tool used to scrape oil, sand, dirt or perspiration off the skin before bathing. This tool was made out of bronze, shaped like the letter “J” with a looped handle and sometimes inscribed with the name of its owner. Strigil is principally associated with athletes as they used to coat themselves with olive oil before practicing athletic activities. Nevertheless, tomb excavations in an early Ptolemaic grave at Naucratis revealed the discovery of such a tool among women’s possessions which indicates that strigil might have been used by Greek women as well for cleaning purposes.³²

Ancient Greek women were obsessed with their skincare routines and beauty. Olive oil was a necessity for daily personal hygiene and body care. It was used as a beautifying face cleanser, after-bath moisturizer, and a personal lotion. The combination of honey and olive oil was used as an anti-ageing cosmetic product as well. Moreover, wealthy women were famous for having night milk and honey baths for extra soft and hydrated skin. For instance, queen Cleopatra used to wrap herself with mud from the Dead Sea,³³ and bathe daily in donkey milk to preserve the vitality and beauty of her skin. It was said that around 700 donkeys were needed to provide enough milk for her daily use. Unsurprisingly, the lactic acid in the milk was proved to prevent face and body wrinkles, soften and whiten the skin. Almond oil and honey were also added to her bath to achieve radiant and smoother skin. Even today milk and honey are still effective ingredients in cosmetic products used for different skincare practices.³⁴

One of the most important innovations that marked the advent of the Greeks into Egypt, was the introduction of “Bathhouses”.

26 Naguib Kanawati and Ali Hassan, “The Teti Cemetery at Saqqara, II: Tomb of Ankhmahor”, *Journal of the Egyptian Archaeology* 90 (2004): 231-233. For the depiction of the scene see Mohamed Megahed and Hana Vymazalova, “Ancient Egyptian Royal Circumcision from the Pyramid Complex of Djedkare”, *Anthropologie* 49, no. 2, (2011): 157-166.

27 Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis*, 185.

28 James Donnegan, *A New Greek and English Lexicon; Principally on the Plan of the Greek and German Lexicon of Schneider* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray and Co., 1839), 1018.

29 Paul Stephenson, *The Serpent Column: A Cultural Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016), 201.

30 Virginia Smith, *Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), 96.

31 Geof Knight, *Cosmetic Procedures* (London: Raintree Publishers, 2011), 10.

32 Ross Thomas, “Tools and Weapons”, in *Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt*, eds. Alexandra Villing et al. (London: The British Museum, 2017), 14. https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Thomas_Tools_and_Weapons.pdf (full article pp. 2-27). See also, Mark Golden, *Sports and Society in Ancient Greece* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 125.

33 Serena Gianfaldoni, “History of the Baths and Thermal Medicine”, *Journal of medical Sciences* 5, no. 4, (2017): 566.

34 Anita Croy, *Baffling Bathing Customs: The Bizarre History of Beauty* (New York: Gareth Stevens Publishing, 2019), 6.

Under the rule of the Ptolemies, a substantial number of Greek public baths were built in Egypt following the original Greek style which includes circular bathing rooms (tholoi), separating men from women, with individual large hip-bathtubs where water was poured directly from jars over the bathers sitting in the tubs. For the earlier Greek baths, water was heated on portable braziers through coal burning or heating up rocks. Later on, the baths consisted of two main sections; a hygienic section fitted with hip-bathtubs, and a relaxation section equipped with individual tubs filled with hot water used after cleansing in hip-bathtubs.³⁵ The relaxing section was primarily added to the typical Greek bathhouse to provide its visitors with leisure, pleasure, and indulgence.³⁶ Surrounding rooms used for storing personal belongings, waiting areas with benches, alternative forms of bathing at fountains or stand basins and other amenities, such as massage, are proved to be existing.³⁷ Evaristo Breccia discovered the earliest Greek baths of Egypt in 1905 at Taposiris Magna.³⁸

With the decline of the Greek society and the rise of the Roman empire in Egypt, the Romans adopted much of the Greek philosophy and experience related to health and personal hygiene. They added their own innovations and achievements to the field of public health so that the ordinary people, and not just the rich, could keep clean and hygienic.³⁹ They were extremely skilled in the engineering of water supply, particularly the invention of lead or bronze water pipes that brought filtered water into and around the town, good sewage and drainage systems, public baths, latrines, and medical care. The Romans were particularly famous for their precision in choosing the most appropriate sites for their towns or settlements to be located away from mosquito-infested swamps and marshes.⁴⁰

The ancient Romans were fastidious about their personal hygiene, appearance, and health. It was crucial to obtain the needed facilities to ensure their ability to bathe and clean themselves. Ancient Romans sometimes bathed several times a day.⁴¹ The Roman baths were not only places for cleanliness and self-caring, but also for social and business interactions in addition to their leisure and health aspects. Sometimes, they served as state propaganda used as a physical reminder for the emperor’s beneficence, power, wealth and influence.⁴² Thus, in Roman Egypt, most of the baths were named after Roman emperors such as Tiberius, Nero, Trajan, Hadrian, and Antoninus, seeking for the emperors’ honour and satisfaction. Meanwhile, examples of Roman baths were constructed to mark Roman emperors’ significant events such as the bath which was built especially for Nero’s intended visit to Alexandria.⁴³

Roman baths varied in their design, size, decorations, function, and arrangement. By constructing aqueducts, fresh and clean water was easily supplied to baths and fountains. There were special baths for men and women. Mixed bathing was an unusual feature of the Roman culture, however, it happened on a very limited scale.⁴⁴ Other baths allocated specific hours or days for women to bathe and enjoy the existing facilities. Plutarch warned Roman men from bathing with women or using their baths believing that women’s body releases effluvia and excretions that are defiling when absorbed by men.⁴⁵ Archaeological excavations revealed the discovery of a wide variety of jewellery, tweezers and other personal and public items suggesting that the Roman baths were lively and busy social centres.⁴⁶

Both ancient Greeks and Romans used abrasive materials, including pumice stones, for hair removal.⁴⁷ They also used tweezer-like tools and the metal strigil to get rid of the unwanted body hair through applying a depilatory paste made of pitch, she-goat gall, donkey fat, bat blood, and powdered viper. Slaves were required to shave their heads as a mark of their lesser class. Roman emperors paid particular attention to their appearance and personal hygiene. It was said that Emperor Augustus used red-hot nutshells on his legs as a form of depilation and to make the hair grow soft.⁴⁸

35 Thibaud Fournet and Bérangère Redon, “Bathing in the Shadow of the Pyramids: Greek Baths in Egypt, Back to an Original Bath Model”, in *Collective Baths in Egypt 2: New Discoveries and Perspectives*, *Etudes Urbaines* 10, ed. Bérangère Redon (Cairo: Presses de L’IFAEO, 2017), 100.

36 Monika Trumper, “Greek Baths and Bathing Culture”, in *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, eds. Claire Smith, et al. (New York: Springer, 2014), 789.

37 Michael Cagarain, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011), Vol. 2, 374.

38 Fournet and Redon, *Bathing in the Shadow of the Pyramids*, 102.

39 Francois Retief and Louise Cilliers, “Medical Practices in Graeco-roman Antiquity”, *Curatonia* 29, no. 2 (2006): 36.

40 Sarah McNeil, *Ancient Romans at A Glance* (London: Peter Bedrick Books, 1998), 24.

41 James Ermatinger, *The World of Ancient Rome: A Daily Life Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2015), 256.

42 James Tschen-Emmons, *Artifacts from Ancient Rome* (London: Greenwood Press, 2014), 143.

43 Hussein Youssef, “Some Aspects of Public Baths in Ptolemaic and Roman Baths in Egypt”, *Bulletin of Center of Papyrological studies* 20, no. 1 (2003): 8.

44 Tschen-Emmons, *Artifacts from Ancient Rome*, 143.

45 Youssef, “Some Aspects of Public Baths”, 8.

46 Tschen-Emmons, *Artifacts from Ancient Rome*, 143.

47 Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair*, 180.

48 Kelly Olson, *Masculinity and Dress in Roman Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 159.

With the beginning of the Roman period in Egypt, the small Greek baths, “tholos” baths, disappeared. The Roman bathhouses were a continuation of the Greek baths and shared a lot of its significant characteristics while following a new layout that differs from the classical Graeco-Egyptian baths.⁴⁹ The new generation of the Roman baths in Egypt, that can be called “Graeco-Roman-Egyptian”, are hybrid baths sharing specific features of the Graeco-Egyptian baths integrated with the Roman ones. The classical Roman baths commonly include only one or two multifunctional entrance rooms for all activities relevant to bathing “apodyterium, tepidarium” and a single bathing room with a collective heated immersion pool “caldarium”.⁵⁰ The best-known hybrid example of the Graeco-Egyptian-Roman baths is located at Tell El-Herr, north Sinai. It combines the traditional elements of the Graeco-Egyptian-Roman architecture represented in hip-bathtubs, individual immersion baths in relaxation rooms, furnace system heating waters and the neighbouring rooms by radiation, possible heating walls and finally baths are organised in two parallel circuits, as a romanisation feature.⁵¹ Other examples of the hybrid baths dating back to the Late Ptolemaic and Early Roman Period can be found at Karm El-Barassi, Xios, Hermopolis and possibly the large baths at Luxor.⁵²

According to the finds of the archaeological excavations and the documental evidence, it can be concluded that the majority of the Graeco-roman baths in Egypt were similar in their structure that fundamentally contained four principal rooms: cold water room “Frigidarium”, hot air room “Tepidarium”, hot water room “Caldarium”, and vapor/ Sauna room “Faconicum”. The heating system used to warm up the water and air in baths is known as “Hypocaust”. Holes where boiled water flows through pipes, under the hot air and the hot water room grounds, to warm them up “Suppressor” were also added. Other rooms were attached to the baths including room for changing clothes with niches “Opodyterium”, waiting room “Ante”, and toilets “Fatrine/Latrine”. Additionally, several baths’ attachments existed including stores for fuel, oven, water tanks, cleansing and adorning tools and towels. Luxurious baths were painted, decorated with wall paintings, pediments, and columns, on the contrary to poor baths, which lack the presence of these elements.⁵³

It is worth here to mention that around forty-six typical Greek baths have been discovered in Egypt and around forty-nine Roman baths were revealed between the 1st and the 6th century A.D. The majority of these baths are distributed between Syene, Kom Wasit, Athribis, Bi’r Samut, Buto, Dakhla Oasis, Tell el-Herr, Marina El-‘Alamein, and others.⁵⁴

During the Late Roman/Byzantine Period, the construction of public baths continued to be a significant feature of the public architecture. The great public bath of Kom El-Dikka in Alexandria, dating back to the second half of the 4th century, is considered to be the best existing example of baths constructed on imperial standards. The interior design follows the classical Roman bath models except for the Sudatorium or “steam room”, which was originally a preferred Greek feature. Almost half of the complex’s heated rooms survived together with the underground service systems.⁵⁵

Starting from the 5th Century onwards, the conventional heating techniques developed quite gradually with the installation of steam diffusion devices in the heated rooms. This evolution in the heating techniques helped in reducing the size of tubs and consequently the volume of the hot rooms. The innovation of the steam diffusion devices marked the birth of *Hammām* in Egypt, whose main characteristic is heating through steam rather than through the hypocaust’s dry heat.⁵⁶

Islamic Culture

49 Fournet and Redon, “Bathing in the Shadow of the Pyramids”, 111.

50 Trumper, Greek Baths, 793.

51 Fournet and Redon, “Bathing in the Shadow of the Pyramids”, 112.

52 Fournet and Redon, “Bathing in the Shadow of the Pyramids”, 116.

53 Youssef, “Some Aspects of Public Baths”, 9.

54 Thibaud Fournet and Bérangère Redon, “Bathing in the Shadow of the Pyramids: Greek Baths in Egypt, Back to an Original Bath Model”, in *Collective Baths in Egypt 2: New Discoveries and Perspectives, Études Urbaines 10*, ed. Bérangère Redon (Cairo: Presses de L’IFAO, 2017) 103. See also, Grażyna Błkowaska-Czerner and Rafal Czerner, “Graeco-Roman Cities at the Crossroads of Cultures: The 20th Anniversary of the Polish-Egyptian Conservation Mission Marina el-Alamein”, *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture* 3 (2016): 133-142.

55 Roger Bagnall, *Egypt in the Byzantine World 300-700* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 127.

56 Thibaud Fournet, “The Ancient Baths of Southern Syrian in the Near Eastern Context: Introduction to Balneorient Project”, in *Spa Sanitas Per Aquam, Proceedings of the International Frontinus-Symposium on the Technical and Cultural History of Ancient Baths*, eds. Ralf Kreiner and Wolfram Letzner (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2009), 335.

Hammām (or Public Bath) was a key element of the Egyptian urban fabric during the Islamic era. It constituted an integral part of a network of social buildings e.g. Kuttāb (school for young children), Madrasa (religious school) and Zāwya (small prayer hall). The Egyptian community thought of it as a place for social activity e.g. meetings, celebrations and networking as well as somewhere to maintain their well-being and personal hygiene by relaxing and bathing.⁵⁷ Controversially, *hammāms* were also noted for being used as discreet locations for political negotiations and discussions, not to mention being linked to evil conspiracies for example the murder of the famous Shagar el Durr during the Mamluk Period.⁵⁸

As a matter of fact, *hammāms* were integrated as one of the main components of the Mamluk’s socio-economic life in Egypt spanning the period from the 13th to the 16th centuries and continued to be so till at least the 19th century. Arguably, they began to lose their value by the 1950s and definitely after the 1960s, especially with the rising westernisation and exposure of the Egyptians to international cultures. Better sanitisation and more efficient water systems reaching almost every home, highly contributed to the decrease of public bath users in favour of using their own private facilities. Accordingly, the maintenance for public baths became a burden on their owners instead of being a good economic source. Moreover, the discontinuation of awqāf (religious endowments) had a massive impact, as around 95% of the historic public baths were waqf properties. Furthermore, harsh operational regulations imposed by governmental bodies on public baths limited their sustainability and negatively affected their role in the community.⁵⁹

Subsequent to their introduction to Egypt by the Greeks, bathhouses sustained a rather abundant use throughout the Islamic timeline, especially in Cairo. In fact, it has been recounted by Abdel-Latif al-Baghdadi⁶⁰, that the bathhouses of Cairo were said to be the most “beautiful, spacious and well-planned of the Orient”.⁶¹ Although, they are still being favoured in some North African and Mediterranean countries, for instance Morocco, their existence in Egypt has suffered a great decline. Undoubtedly, the *hammāms* popular in Islamic cities evolved from the Roman and Byzantine public baths, as these were integrated when the Umayyad dynasty conquered Byzantine territories in the Middle East between 661 - 750 AD. The period subsequent to the rise of Islam is associated with a prompt development in the architecture of baths and the consequent adaptation from Roman to Islamic bathing habits.⁶² The only exception was the heating system which was hypocaust or underfloor heating system, that was prevailing during the Greek period, was substituted by using hot water plunge pools “maghtas” as a source of heating in the later eras.⁶³ It is worthy to mention that, the tradition of separating the two sexes was initiated by the Greeks, much earlier than the advent of Islam. Unnecessary to say that this arrangement was totally appreciated and respected during the Islamic era.

The oldest Egyptian *hammāms* of the Islamic era were located in the city of al-Fustāt⁶⁴, typically adjacent to places of prayer; relating to their cleansing function for wudu (partial ablution) or ghoṣl (full body ablution) performed before prayers.⁶⁵ It is said that the very first one built in the city was dubbed by the Egyptians as the bath of the mouse or “*hammām al-far*” and it was located in the area known as suwaiqat al-magariba. The reason for this peculiar name was that when the locals compared it to earlier Roman baths, it was much smaller, so they considered it only fit for a mouse.⁶⁶ The earliest discovered bath dates back to the Tulinide Era, in the “Askar” area.⁶⁷ They were also located near other secular establishments such as suqs (market) or caravanserais (hotels for traders). One of the main reasons for their proximity to the capital, was related to being near adequate

57 Heidi Dumreicher, “The Hammam: Scenarios for a Sustainable Future”. In *Cultural Heritage and Development in the Arab World*, ed. Fekri Hassan, Aloisia de Trafford, and Youssef Mohsen (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2008), 229.

58 Heba Youssef, “La Toilette Feminine a l’Epoque Fatimide en Egypte”, (MSc. thesis, Helwan University, 1995), 26.

59 Fodil Fadli and Magda Sibley, “The Historic Hammāms of Cairo”, *Journal of Architectural Conservation* 14, no 3, (2008): 69.

60 A physician from Baghdad who wrote an account on Cairo after visiting it in AD 1231.

61 Nicholas Warner, “Taking the Plunge: The Development and Use of the Cairene Bathhouse”. In *Historians in Cairo: Essays in Honor of George Scanlon*, ed. Jill Edwards (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2002). p. 49-50.

62 Magda Sibley and Iain Jackson, “The Architecture of Islamic Public Baths of North Africa and the Middle East: An Analysis of their Internal Spatial Configurations”, *Architectural Research Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (June 2012): 155.

63 Sarab Atassi and Roula Abou Khater, “The Hammam in the Mediterranean Region: Architectural, Urban and Social Dimensions - A Multidimensional Approach”. In *An Urban Space, Hammam Rehabilitation Reader*, eds. Heidi Dumreicher, Richard S. Levine and Magda Sibley-Behloul (Austria: Sonderrzahl Verlag, 2013), 25.

64 First Islamic capital established by General Amr ibn El-As after the Arab Conquest to Egypt in 641 A.D.

65 Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 49-50.

66 Youssef, “La Toilette Feminine”, 31.

67 Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 69.

urban water distribution system, where saqqas (water carriers) followed a specific pre-set route. Even though, most of the *hammāms* had their own bi'r (well), but it was not sufficient for the overall usage to fill their cisterns and tanks, especially during the hot summer months⁶⁸. Hence the water supply system was dependent on the water carriers “saqqas” who would store the water in adjacent water cisterns or fountains “sabils”, which formed beautiful architectural fundamental components of the city.⁶⁹ Looking after one’s personal hygiene was an important issue for the Egyptians during the Ottoman Period, as it had been reported that the number of daily visitors to a modestly sized bathhouse was around fifty to sixty users. This was deduced from the number of towels used per day.⁷⁰

Unfortunately, the surviving *hammāms* in Cairo are in all in a bad condition. Five of them were either restored during the past decade or still under restoration by the MoA⁷¹. However, even after their restoration, they remain closed. The question now is how they will be used. According to the MoA inspectors supervising the restoration work, the restored baths will most likely be used as a ‘mazar’, a type of small museum probably dedicated to recounting the *hammāms* traditions. The reason for this, is that there is still a fear that using water inside a restored building is a threat to its existence⁷², which implies the reluctance to re-use it as its original function. Fodil and Sibley have a different argument; “However, hammāms are dedicated to using water and were originally conceived and built to cope with varying levels of heat and humidity. The fact is, they cannot survive without water.” As a matter of fact, the restoration of hammāms cannot be successful unless their adaptive re-use is an intrinsic part of the restoration process.⁷³

Regarding the numbers of *hammāms* recorded in Cairo over the last few centuries. According to El Kerdany, Al-Maqrīzī (early 15th Century AD) identified 52 *hammāms* which increased to 80 during the 18th century. Whilst the scientists of the French Expedition observed 72 baths in the early 19th century. The Tawfiqī plans “khitat tawfiqīa” of Ali Pasha Mubarak counted 62 *hammāms*.⁷⁴ At the time of writing his book (1860), Edward William Lane recognised the number of 60 or 70 functioning *hammāms*. They ranged between male-only baths, female-only baths or both male/female baths with special times being allocated for each sex, the latter type being the most common⁷⁵. Subsequently, in 1933, Edmond Pauty stated, in MIFAO Vol. 64 on Cairo *hammāms* ⁷⁶, that there were around 47 buildings. Andre Raymond recorded 33 *hammāms* in use in 1969⁷⁷. In 2004, Nicholas Warner documented 17 *hammāms* within the area of Historic Cairo⁷⁸. Two other *hammāms* were identified by Mimar Group as part of their EC-funded research entitled “HAMMAM”⁷⁹, outside the area studied by Warner. These are known as: *hammām* al-Tanbālī, and Bāb al-Bāhr, both located in Bāb al-Shareyah. Four other *hammāms* in Bulāq Abu el-Elā, were recognised as part of the study prepared by Magda Abdul-Moneim in 2007⁸⁰. The total number of *hammāms* still existent in 2007 mounted up to 23, each at a different state of deterioration or collapse, only 6 of which were still being used.⁸¹ The surviving historic *hammāms*⁸² are in a seriously deteriorated state of preservation threatening to completely disintegrate in a

68 Fadli and Sibley, “Historic Hammāms”, 62.

69 Atassi and Abou Khater, “Hamman in the Mediterranean Region”, 28.

70 Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 51-52.

71 The restored ones are: Ināl, al-Mu’ayyad, al-Sukkariya, al-Sinaniya and al-Gammaliya. They are located within the Darb al-Ahmar/al-Gammaliya district close to al-Mu’iz Street. (MoA: Ministry of Antiquities)

72 Fadli and Sibley, “Historic Hammāms”, 72-76.

73 Fadli and Sibley, “Historic Hammāms”, 76, 78.

74 Dalila El-Kerdany, “Hammām Folklore Dynamics in Cairo: Lessons from Operation to Regeneration”, International Journal of Architectural Research 2, no 3 (2008): 29-30.

75 At the times when females used the bath, a special piece of cloth or linen was hung over the entrance, as a sign that men should keep off. Lane, Edward William Lane, An Account on the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, The Definitive 1860 Edition, (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2003), 336.

76 Edmond Pauty, “Les bains publics du Caire”, MIFAO 64, (1933).

77 Andre Raymond, “Les bains publics au Caire à la fin du XVIII siècle”, Annales Islamologiques 8, (1969): 129-165.

78 Nicholas Warner, The Monuments of Historic Cairo: A Map and Descriptive Catalogue, (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

79 Supra. Footnote no 57.

80 El-Kerdany, “Hammām Folklore Dynamics”, 29-30.

81 Fadli and Sibley, “Historic Hammāms”, 6.

82 al-Tanbali [Monument number 564, 18th century] in Bāb al-Shareyah, al-Malātily (Margoush) [The only surviving example of a double bath in Cairo, monument number 592, 1780] in al-NaHāseen, Bāb el Bāhr (18th century) in Bab al-Shareyah, Meshmesh (el-Talat?) and el-Arbaa (Owkal) in Bulaq Abu el-Elā. Personal observations and communications with the local community.

short period of time. Even the ones that have been recently restored by the MoA are not re-used as their original function, but are used for cultural activities e.g. *hammām* Ināl and al-Mu’ayyad.⁸³

On the other hand, the prevalence of private baths in Cairo is debatable. The distribution of *hammāms* could hint at the social and economic class of the district. Moreover, their quantity and commonness were a clear indication of the city’s development and civilisation.⁸⁴ However, it seemed that the higher social class had the privilege of owning their own private baths within the premises of their homes, some dignitaries even had more than one. Even some privately owned baths of wealthy people were later opened to the public. Nevertheless, sometimes they could go there on special occasions or for the sake of meeting up with their friends. It could be speculated that Middle class constituted the main portion of public bath users, while the poor or lower social class who could not afford the expenses, often bathed in the Nile. On some occasions, well-to-do people also preferred to bathe in the Nile especially during the summer months⁸⁵ due to the hot weather as well as for the well-known therapeutic value of the Nile’s flowing waters. It is even said that the viceroy of Egypt during the mid-nineteenth century, Saeed Pasha, had a bathing kiosk constructed on the Nile, into which a bath suspended on a chain could be lowered.⁸⁶

Well-to-do women went less frequently than men, but on special occasions the baths were hired for all-female private celebrations e.g., pre-wedding parties or a “khillwa”, where one of the inner chambers will be specified. Female singers or dancers may also be hired to accompany the festivities. Women were often accompanied by young children, either boys or girls. Occasionally, they take with them all needed snacks, drinks and even their personal towels, soap and water. Rich ladies might choose to be accompanied by their own personal-care maids, known as “bellāneh” or “māshṭah” for washing and massaging them. Women often displayed their jewellery and preferred accessories as they considered going to the bath an occasion for showing off. Some girls could even be lucky enough to be chosen as brides for the sons of wealthy women during their visits to the baths.⁸⁷

An interesting superstitious belief linked bathhouses with “djinn” (genies or even devils). Al-Qalaqashandi⁸⁸ claimed that the first *hammām* was created by prophet Sulaiman/Solomon’s genies for his wedding with Balquees, where she was supposed to be prepared for marriage.⁸⁹ A common belief linked genies with bathrooms, bath houses, rivers and latrines, thus it was customary to utter a small prayer “do’aa” before entering any of those areas (by passing over the threshold preferably with the left foot). Once they are in, they should refrain from reciting Qura’n or praying unless absolutely necessary.⁹⁰ A rather interesting concept is cited by Nicholas Warner, he states: “A late sixteenth-century treatise on bathing practice by al-Minawi- The Book of the Gloriously Pure Way Concerning Legal and Medical Regulations that Govern the Bath- contains ample references that liken the bath to hell, with its scalding waters, darkness and naked bodies (“as naked as on the day of resurrection”)⁹¹

The *hammam* provides us with an extremely rich material for Egyptian intangible cultural heritage ranging from the traditional wooden slippers “qubqāb” worn at the bath to avoid slipping, the songs, poems and sayings related to going to and emerging from the *hammām*, its association with ceremonies e.g., pre-wedding party “lillet el-Henna” and special rituals for cleaning and beautifying the body. The reception room “maslakh” was not only used for undressing but also for socialising and exchanging all sort of neighbourhood gossip or even for matchmaking process for women and for informal business or social or even political chatter for men after a long day of work. Thus, the *hammām* has been considered as an important social hub for the Egyptians over an extended period of time.⁹²

To fully understand the importance of the bathing culture of the Egyptians, it is important to contemplate on the frequency of going to the *hammāms*. In addition to the usual weekly routine (or bi-weekly), they were required to go with every “passage to life/new life” ritual. For example, converts to Islam straight after their conversion, expectant mothers once to facilitate giving

83 El-Kerdany, “Hammām Folklore Dynamics”, 30.

84 Atassi and Abou Khater, “Hamman in the Mediterranean Region”, 24.

85 Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 52. Also Lane, Manners and Customs, 336.

86 Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 75 (note 26).

87 Lane, Manners and Customs, 343.

88 Born in a village in the Nile Delta, al-Qalaqashandi was scribe of the scroll “katib al-darj” in the Mamluk chancery in Cairo. He is the author of Subh al-a’sha, completed in fourteen volumes in 1412.

89 Youssef, “La Toilette Feminine”, 27.

90 Lane, Manners and Customs, 337.

91 Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 56.

92 Sibley and Jackson, “Architecture of Islamic Public Baths”, 155.

birth then forty days later after delivery for purification, circumcised boys a week after their circumcision. However, the most important event par excellence was marriage. As mentioned before, girls might even get chosen as prospective wives as a result of being observed in the *hammām*⁹³. Wedding rituals start, for both sexes, by a glamorous parade to the baths (accompanied by family and friends), where the bride was transported there in a special carriage “maHmal”. Sometimes, female singers/dancers “aalemas” were appointed to complete the all-female celebration. This parade was known as “Zaffet al-hammām”. In most of the cases, the *hammām* would be fully hired for the occasion.⁹⁴ Thus the visit to the *hammāms* formed a rather important part of women’s lives, as their outings were normally limited except for these special visits that were mainly linked with happy occasions and festivities⁹⁵. It could be concluded that a substantial array of local customs and traditions were performed at the bathhouses, thus highly contributing to our intangible cultural heritage.

The frequency of visiting the bathhouse was a clear indication of how the Egyptians living in the capital during the Middle Ages highly regarded cleanliness and personal hygiene. Al-Makrizi recounts his bathing experience during the Ninth Century AD. He was visiting the city of al-Fustāt and could not find any *hammām* with vacancy until his fourth attempt, where he was even served by a “novice”. He explains that in the first *hammām* that he visited, there were no less than seventy bathers.⁹⁶ It is obvious that all social classes looked after their personal hygiene, bathing for at least once a week (in the Nile for the poorer categories), while the higher social class could use the baths twice per week. The distribution of *hammāms* around the more elevated Cairene districts, suggests that they were predominantly used by the Middle class.⁹⁷

The city of Cairo has always been reputed for its relatively large number of well-designed and beautifully decorated *hammāms*. They were constructed of different materials such as stone and brick covered in plaster, with some examples where the brick copula in the ceiling of the undressing room is replaced by a large wooden ceiling surrounded by windows and topped by a lantern “shokhsheka”⁹⁸. The windowless walls were always far thicker than required, in order to retain the heat. For the same reason, the entrance was always small and narrow [not to mention discreet], yet it was also usually grandly framed, ornamented [mostly with Arabic calligraphy] with stalactites and painted in bright colours, perhaps to allude to the tranquility that could be found within. *Hammāms* were clearly thought of as places of relaxation and rest in the busy urban chaos of Cairo.⁹⁹

The typical basic structure of an Ottoman public bath consisted of three main sections: an outer section comprising the entrance “madkhal”, which is typically discreet and leads to the undressing room “meslakh”, which is the most decorated room and normally includes a fountain of cold water or “faskeya” which has an octagonal base as a centrepiece, through a benched corridor. This is where people undress/dress, socialise, rest and enjoy food and drink, as in some cases, it may also contain a stall for coffee for the bathers’ convenience. Each bench is furnished with either a mattress and cushions or a simple mat according to the status of its user.¹⁰⁰ The ceiling contains wooden beams where towels used by bathers were hung to naturally dry. It was designed as a large square room with high wooden ceilings up to ten metres in height. Another narrow and benched corridor leads to the second main space of the *hammām*, “bayt ‘awal” (or first chamber)¹⁰¹. This is a small warm room which acts as a bumper/ transition zone between the cold changing room and the inner hot bathing rooms. “Bayt al-Harara” (hot room), which is the main bathing space consisting of a cross-shaped space organised centrally around the central space saHn¹⁰². This room is normally cruciform with four marble “leewans” or iwans on the sides and a hot-water fountain rising from a high octagonal base cased with white and black marble and pieces of red tiles, in the centre. In other words, it serves as a “central hub” surrounded by the annexing rooms in a cruciform setting.¹⁰³

93 Hammāms were considered as a kind of ‘matrimonial market’, according to Atassi and Abou Khater, “Hamman in the Mediterranean Region”, 29.

94 Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 53-54.

95 Atassi and Abou Khater, “Hamman in the Mediterranean Region”, 29.

96 Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 55.

97 Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 52.

98 Atassi and Abou Khater, “Hamman in the Mediterranean Region”, 26.

99 Fadli and Sibley, “Historic Hammāms”, 60-67.

100 Lane, Manners and Customs, 337.

101 It is known as “first chamber” because it is considered the first of a series of warm rooms, constituting the structure of the bath building.

102 The sahn, which was originally octagonal in the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods, changed to a square-shaped form during the Ottoman period. After Fadli and Sibley, “Historic Hammāms”, 67 and Lane, Manners and Customs, 340.

103 Sibley and Jackson, “Architecture of Islamic Public Baths”, 158. Also Lane, Manners and Customs, 338.

The facade of the bath was mainly decorated with patterns similar to facades of mosques but more elaborate (sometimes coloured in red and white or other colours). The next or middle section contains a series of rooms some of which contain a maghtas (deep plunge pool) and also another room known as the “Hanafeeyeh” (tap). The “maghtas” is approached through a flight of steps and is mainly used for dipping in the warm water which streams into the tank through an opening in the dome of the chamber, while the “Hanafeeyeh” is the room which contains two taps; one cold and one hot, placed upon a basin for supplying the water to the bath. There could be one or more of these chambers, i.e., “maghtas” or “Hanafeeyeh”. The “saHn” is surrounded by three to four iwans (side rooms) and two types of small rooms called “khilwa” (private space). The “maghtas”, which appeared during the Mamluk period, consisted of an elevated small room with an inserted hot water plunge pool.¹⁰⁴

Located on the top of one of the plunge rooms is the third and innermost section, “mustawqid” (furnace or heating system), which is considered to be the “heart” of the *hammām*. It is not accessible through any of the afore-mentioned rooms and is only connected to the bathing spaces through copper water pipes and could not be seen by the users. The heating system works for the whole building through smoke and steam travelling under-floor/through-the-walls channels which heats the rooms as well as direct heating for the water tank.¹⁰⁵ Water is transferred to the bathing spaces and the plunge pools through a unique gravitational system. In one of the earliest descriptions of *hammāms*, Abdel-Latif al-Baghdadi¹⁰⁶ explains that the furnace has an open dome from which the flames reach a platform with four copper cauldrons “naHassa”. The floor of the fireplace is covered with layers of salt since, apparently, salt conserves heat. Hypothetically, the furnace traditionally has other functions which can be considered as good sustainability practices, such as the recycling of rubbish and the re-use of the by-products of local traditional workshops as fuel. Another interesting function of the furnace is to cook fava beans “ful” in special containers. Furthermore, the ash from the furnace added to the traditional wall plasters is noted to increase their performance.¹⁰⁷ According to Sibley and Jackson, the heating system is highly reminiscent of the Roman hypocaust. However, for some reason the *hammāms* of Egypt present an exception to this rule, as the hypocaust system seems to have been rejected during the Fatimid era. Instead, a system of hot water pools releasing heat and steam into the bathing spaces was adopted.¹⁰⁸

The middle section customarily has a ceiling in the shape of several domes covering each room. The domes are dotted with coloured glass apertures imitating a “starlit sky”, locally called “qamariyāt”, strategically positioned to provide beautiful emissions of light with relaxing multicoloured hues which helped in creating a nice de-stressing atmosphere.¹⁰⁹ The floors were covered with white marble, sometimes mixed with black and some small red tiles, just like the durka’ah of a room in private house. The building materials ranged between bricks and plaster, which was not a very good choice due to the emission of steam and exposure to temperature variation, which eventually caused the walls and domes to crack. The technique for raising the water from the well to the boiler was through a Sākiyeh (or a waterwheel) turned by an animal of burden e.g., a cow or a bull. It was normally placed on one of the higher levels of the building.¹¹⁰

People mostly undressed in the “meslakh” during the spring or summer months, while they prefer to use an inner closed room, “bayt-awwal”, during the cooler seasons of autumn or winter. In this area, one could also find two or three restrooms/bathrooms. The servant/attendant (normally a young beardless boy), aka the “lawingee” - which is how the contemporary Egyptians used to pronounce the term “leewangee” (or “leewan” keeper) - would then provide the bather with a number of towels (up to five) to be used in the following manner: one to place his clothes inside it, another to wrap around his waist (known as “maHzam”), a third to put around his head (like a turban), a fourth over his chest and a fifth around his shoulders to cover his back. After getting undressed and wrapped with towels, the attendant would lead the user to the main “chamber, “bayt al-Harara” (the hot chamber).¹¹¹

104 Fadli and Sibley, “Historic Hammāms”, 67 also Lane, Manners and Customs, 340.

105 Lane, Manners and Customs, 340.

106 Abdel-Latif al-Baghdadi, Kitab al-Ifada wa'l Itibar (The Eastern Key) [Book of Benefits and Reflection concerning Observations and Events witnessed in Egypt]. Translated and edited by Kamal H. Zand et al, London (1965) and Al-Hyia Al-Ama lil Kitab, Cairo (1998), 2nd Edition. After Fadli and Sibley, “Historic Hammāms”, 67 (and note 9).

107 Fadli and Sibley, “Historic Hammāms”, 67.

108 Sibley and Jackson, “Architecture of Islamic Public Baths”, 158 also Atassi and Abou Khater, “Hamman in the Mediterranean Region”, 28.

109 Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 69 also Fadli and Sibley, “Historic Hammāms”, 67

110 Lane, Manners and Customs, 336-337.

111 Lane, Manners and Customs, 337-338.

The bathing rituals in the hammāms of the Mediterranean region are described by Sibley and Jackson as follows: “The bathing ritual in the hammāms of the Mediterranean region follows almost the same sequence with slight variations. The body is never entirely exposed to the gaze of other bathers and is traditionally wrapped in a ‘fouta’, a cotton towel. After sweating in the hot room and then having their body scrubbed by a hammām attendant, the bathers wash their body facing the individual stone or marble washing basin, scooping water with a brass bowl commonly known as ‘tassa’ and pouring water over the whole body. The bathers sit directly on the warm stone or marble floor or on wooden stools. The washing of private parts of the body takes place in semi-dark niches for a higher degree of privacy. The bathers move around spaces of different heat and steam intensity, but also of different levels of natural light and privacy, in order to perform different body treatments. The scrubbing of the body takes place either on the floor or on the large, heated marble table under the pierced dome or vault of the hot room.”.¹¹²

Ironically, it was believed that the level of cleanliness was measured by the sound of clapping the hands on the body, the louder the clap the cleaner the body! After finishing the bath, massage was offered, either with or without oil then later the next offered service was epilation¹¹³ (for both sexes) using a material called “nawra”, which consisted of a paste made out of a mixture of lime and orpiment. Epilation was mostly performed in a separate private room or “khillwa”.¹¹⁴

Concerning the cost of using the public baths, it didn’t seem to be very high. According to the Jewish Geniza, a person was estimated to pay five loaves of bread.¹¹⁵ According to Lane in 1860, a full treatment at the *hammām* costed around a piaster (this could mount up to four piasters if adding the tips of the bath attendants). It could even cost less for a simple rinse with soap and water.¹¹⁶

As regards to the health benefits of visiting the bath houses, they were thought to have both physical and psychological advantages for one’s health. A person was supposed to go there to clear his mind as well as to revive his exhausted body by relaxing, getting a massage done and enjoying taking a plunge in the deep hot tub after a long day’s work. An important action was to go to the bath house right after catching an illness to sweat it out or after recovering from it (known as “washing of health’ or Ghusl al-siHa”) to feel that you are completely cured and wash away all traces of the disease.¹¹⁷

Hammāms also had a good share of contribution to the socio-economic structure of the Egyptian state, as several jobs were provided to the locals. Any public bath offered at least six different types of jobs, e.g., manager “al-maalem or al-maalema”, observer “al-nātur or al-nātura”, masseur “al-ballān or al-ballāna”, hairdresser “al-māshit or al-māshita”, rubbish collector “al-qamimi” and heating technician “al-waqqād” plus of course some extra personnel as assistants¹¹⁸. The previous set of jobs emphasise how the Egyptians seriously considered the body hygiene and personal care.

Once one enters the bath, the “ma’lem” (or keeper of the bath) greets him, then is supposed to hand in his personal belongings for safe keeping. Consequently, he appoints a servant to tend to the user’s needs starting by taking off the shoes and supplying a pair of wooden clogs then leading to the “meslakh”.¹¹⁹ The user then proceeds to the middle section which includes the plunge pool and the tap room, which are also known as the heated rooms or “beit al-Hararah”. Once inside, the user starts to sweat as a result of the hot and steamy atmosphere, he is immediately tended by the “mukeyyisatec” (or the massager) who starts to knead his body and tracks his joints in a specific skilled manner which is both relaxing and medicating to make the joints supple. During the process, he also scrubs the soles of the feet by a special rasp or a stone-like object, known as “Hagar al-Hammām” (or stone of the bath).¹²⁰ The next procedure would be rubbing the bather’s body with a coarse woollen bag (known in Arabic

¹¹² Sibley and Jackson, “Architecture of Islamic Public Baths”, 155.

¹¹³ This service was offered as recommended every forty days.

¹¹⁴ Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 64.

¹¹⁵ Shelomo Dov Goitein, A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Community of the Arab World as portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza, (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, Vol. 5, 1988), 43.

¹¹⁶ Lane, Manners and Customs, 342.

¹¹⁷ The latter information was recorded in the Geniza records which contains reports over the centuries that a sick person has recovered and already entered the bath. Refer to: Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 56-57.

¹¹⁸ Lane, Manners and Customs, 337-342. Also Heba Youssef, “La Toilette Feminine”, 47-50.

¹¹⁹ Lane, Manners and Customs, 337.

¹²⁰ There were two kinds of rasps that were used; one which is very rough and porous, while the other is of finer texture depending on the roughness of the skin. The rasps used for the ladies were sometimes covered with a thin layer of silver.

as “kees”). This act is known as “takyees”, hence the name of the “mukeyyisatec”. After this point, the bather can have a dip in the “maghtas” or proceed to the “Hanfeeyeh” where he is lathered by a “leef” (or fibres of the palm tree of Hejaz i.e. Saudi Arabia) containing plenty of soap using water brought in a copper container¹²¹ and warmed in one of the tanks. The soap is then washed off using tap water, and if required, the attendant would shave the bather’s arm-pits and then leaves him to enjoy further washing as he pleases. Later on, the bather covers himself with his towels and moves back to the first chamber to recline on the cushioned mattresses for a while if he wants and enjoys a cup of coffee and smokes the “shisha” (or the water-pipe). He then gets dressed, retrieves his personal belongings and goes out. On the way out, the services offered in the *hammāms* are paid to the keeper of the bath¹²².

Modern/Contemporary Culture

In 2019, there is only a handful of surviving *hammāms*¹²³ that are still fully operational in Cairo. Two of them are historic and are under the supervision of the Ministry of Antiquities; Bāb al-Bāhr and al-Malāṭily (Margoush)¹²⁴. They are known by the locals as “*Hammām Balady*” or “*Hammām Shaaby*” (local bathhouse). The structure of the modernly built ones is highly evocative of older *hammāms*. Additionally, the offered services underwent negligible change. The main difference is that it is not visited by the “Middle-Classed” Egyptians as it used to, but mostly by the lower social class or the local communities.¹²⁵

The recent decline of bathhouses could be attributed to several socio-economic reasons, for example: religious beliefs, modesty, hygiene, convenience or financial causes. Moreover, in our modern-day society, public baths are unfortunately linked to negative conceptions like homosexuality or facilitating immoral sexual encounters despite the segregation of both sexes to two different times of the day or to separate buildings.¹²⁶

The different reasons for clients to use versus not use the bathhouses were incorporated in a study published in 2010. Dina Shehayeb¹²⁷ investigated together with her team members - as a part of a larger research study - a number of public baths in five countries: Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Syria and Turkey. Two *hammāms* were studied in Cairo: al-Tanbali and Bāb al-Bāhr. Participatory observation, interviews and questionnaires were all used to complete the survey. The results concluded indicated that there was a clear benefit, whether health, beauty or social values (celebrations of pre-wedding or childbirth) for the bath users, while the non-users were reluctant to go for many reasons; for example: bad reputation¹²⁸, poor hygiene and mostly lack of privacy (people being shy of sharing a bathing experience with strangers). Hence, health hazards, moral judgment, and ignorance of its benefits are three main challenges facing the future of the use of *hammāms* in Cairo. However, there could be an interest to use the *hammām* if certain conditions were changed such as: certified cleanliness of water, repair and contemporary upkeep, additional services such as a gym and service of food and beverage, and the option to go through the bathing process in less time. Another important factor that could affect women in particular, is allocating a discreet entrance

¹²¹ Apparently, the tap water was not suitable for lathering with soap due to its brackish (saline) nature as it comes from a well.

¹²² All the above mentioned services were charged for one piaster, but the bather could choose to pay extra (up to 4 piasters) as a kind of tips. He can also pay individual smaller tips to the “lawingee” and the “mukeyyisatec”. Lane, Manners and Customs, 341-342.

¹²³ al-Tanbali [Monument number 564, 18th century] in Bāb al-Shāreyah, al-Malāṭily (Margoush) [The only surviving example of a double bath in Cairo, monument number 592, 1780] in al-Nahāseen, Bāb al-Bāhr (18th century) in Bāb al-Shareyah, Meshmesh (el-Talāt) and el-Arbāa (Owkal) in Bulaq Abu el-Elā. The latter two are modernly-built. (Personal observations and communications with the local community).

¹²⁴ Segelāt wezaret al-āthār (Records of the MoA).

¹²⁵ Marcus Benigno, “Cogs in the wheel: A day in the life of a hammam attendant”, Egypt Independent, June 11, 2012. <https://egyptindependent.com/cogs-wheel-day-life-hammam-attendant/> Accessed on 3/8/2019

¹²⁶ Mohammed Hocine Benkheira, “Hammam, nudité et ordre moral dans l’Islam médiéval (1)”, Revue de l’histoire de religions (en-ligne) 224, no. 3 (2007): 324-328, <http://doi.org/10.4000/rhr.5303>. Also Warner, “Taking the Plunge”, 62-63.

¹²⁷ Dina Shehayeb, “Survival of the Mediterranean Hammam in Contemporary Societies”, HBRC (Housing and Building National Research Center) Journal Special Issue, (2010), 1-17. The study is entitled [HAMMAM – Hammam, Aspects and Multidisciplinary Methods of Analysis for the Mediterranean Region”, FP6-2003-INCO-MPC-2, Contract Number: 517704]. Grant Awarded by the European Community (EU)]

¹²⁸ In December 2014, an Egyptian TV presenter initiated a police raid on the Bāb al-Bāhr hammām, where she secretly filmed scenes implying male homosexuality within the bathhouse. As a result, the place was closed for further investigations. Later on, the case was dismissed because the allegations could not be proven and the bathhouse was allowed to re-open and operate as normal. For more details: AFP Newsagency (on Youtube), “Cairo Bathhouse trial: 26 men acquitted of ‘debauchery’”, Youtube, 13 January 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORnTa-ZqPDA>. Last accessed on 19/9/2019.

especially in commercial streets like the case of Bāb al-Bahr, for example.

On another note, the middle and higher social classes have found a convenient replacement offered by luxurious health clubs and spas that are available in most high calibre hotels or social sporting clubs. Customers of these establishments receive deluxe body-care or skin treatments as well as sumptuous massages. However, these modern services are more inclined to offer body-care and beautification therapies on personal basis rather than being a place for social gatherings. On the other hand, it is also worth-mentioning that pre-marriage preparations and special celebrations e.g. “lillet el-Ḥenna” (male or female) are still enjoyed in groups within these facilities.

Conclusions

Looking after one's health and personal hygiene is crucial for the sanity of our minds and souls. Egyptians have always been fastidious about their health and cleanliness since the dawn of history. This fact could be traced as far back as the Pharaonic civilisation, through the Graeco-Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, Modern and Contemporary eras. The ancient Egyptians considered bathing linked with religious purity, which is also relevant to our contemporary religious beliefs. The Greeks introduced public baths to Egypt and encouraged their use. This practice was promptly welcomed and even favoured by the Egyptians. Bathhouses increased in number steadily over the ages, noting some changes in their structure or heating techniques but they always maintained their function as a social hub for the Egyptians, not only for body care and beautification but also for meeting up with friends. Unfortunately, over the past decades, the use of traditional public baths has suffered a great decline due to several reasons e.g., level of cleanliness, change of religious beliefs or even bad stereotypes. But on the other hand, a new type of establishments evolved to cater for the needs of higher social class, like health clubs or spas which are mostly located in high calibre hotels. However, these modern services are more inclined to offer body care and beautification therapies e.g., massage and skin care rather than being a place for social gatherings. It could be concluded that the *ḥammām* provides us with extremely rich material for Egyptian intangible cultural heritage ranging from the traditional wooden slippers worn in the bathhouse to avoid slipping, songs, poems and sayings etc... On a final note, it is rational to extrapolate that traditional *ḥammāms* are the nucleus for our contemporary spas and health clubs.

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