The interesting thing is not that anthropologists use cases for explication and generalization but why cases can be used in such a manner. Simply put: if culture is an integrated system, then a case is not only a constituent of but also constitutive of the culture's relevant aspects. Members of a community acting upon and within a system of cultural knowledge will behave in ways deemed appropriate to the circumstances. As a cultural activity, bathing is part of the Japanese cultural system—it is embedded functionally, symbolically, and behaviorally in the system, a locus of activity and ideas around and through which culture swirls. Therefore, all the behavior, ideas, values, and so forth related to bathing or enacted while bathing will reflect and project the system.

Viewing culture as an integrated dynamic system is no simple matter. To conceive of such a system one has to envision change, diversity, complexity, interrelationships, determination, and infinite variety all at once. Such a conception is sometimes difficult to achieve. I personally started apprehending it with analogies to weather—which is a nonlinear dynamic system, a chaotic system. A dynamic concept, however, allows us to acknowledge the swirling flux of individualistic, particularistic, changing behavior and beliefs at the same time that we see pattern, structure, determinism, and continuity. The patterns and structures are not mechanical or static, but they are apprehensible, recognizable, and amenable to description and understanding.

I believe that such an integrated dynamic concept is useful and, furthermore, accurately reflects the nature of culture. It is with this concept in mind that I have studied and written about bathing in Japan. An understanding of bathing, then, is more than trivial; it is a more complete understanding of Japanese culture. As a daily mundane activity, bathing is embedded in the lives of Japanese people and reflects common (and uncommon) values, attitudes, and beliefs.

The Research

My interest in bathing began during my first visit to Japan, a visit lasting approximately thirty months beginning in 1968. I lived for roughly eight months in Tokyo, ten months in Sapporo, and the remainder in several other cities. Although I usually resided in apartments with other foreigners, my daily communication was in Japanese. In the first few months of my residence, however, the apartment's water heater would break down from time to time and put an end to my showers. This necessitated visiting the public baths (kōbānyokuji or sentō), where I noted the pleasure the bathers experienced and the air of easy, comfortable sociability. After an initial adjustment for myself, as well as them, I came to know several of the regular patrons and looked forward to our frequent chats. Far from being an inconvenience, for me the sentō became a delightful place to combine hygiene and social intercourse. From that time on, I went to the public baths whenever I had the opportunity.

Toward the end of this first trip to Japan, while living in a private residence in the outskirts of the city of Utsunomiya, I shared a bath with my Japanese landlord and his family. The landlord's wife prepared our daily bath. At least once weekly she placed herbs, leaves, or fruits in the bath for their fragrance, purported health benefits, or simply the way they made the water feel. My landlord was especially fond of his bath, and it was from conversations with him and his family that I began to be aware of cultural meanings connected to bathing that were rather different from my own. Because I personally enjoyed the bath, I began to pay attention to what was happening.

On this and subsequent trips to Japan, I visited several hot spring resorts to stay overnight and simply soak in the hot mineral water. Usually I accompanied friends on these visits and together we enjoyed the cuisine and social activities at the resorts. On these trips we seemed to associate in a manner somewhat different than normal, somehow closer and more intimate. My Japanese companions mentioned this increased personaleness and attributed it to the social bathing.

While residing in Germany in 1974, my interest took on a different dimension. Eavesdropping on a group of Japanese tourists while dining at a small restaurant in a scenic rural area, I overheard a conversation that was to intrigue me for years. These young tourists had been traveling for about a week. They complained about the inability to buy Japanese food and the impossibility of taking an adequate bath. Having heard their attempts to order food in German (which were almost as inept as my own) and knowing they had already visited several European countries, I was surprised that language difficulties were not the subject of discomfort—as they certainly were for me. Language was not mentioned, however, only food and bathing.

Having lived in Japan a complete year before being able to obtain a simple hamburger and some peanut butter for my bread—a situation completely changed today—I could readily relate to the problem of unfamiliar food. But the expressions of nostalgia and discomfort related to not getting
a proper bath were a surprise to me. I had thought the bathing facilities in West Germany entirely adequate, if not always as elaborate as those in Japan. But these tourists were saying that they did not feel completely clean, could not really relax, and that the first thing they were going to do upon returning to Japan was take a bath.

In one of those moments when a flash of understanding dispels preconceived notions, I realized that my own enjoyment of the Japanese bath was a different experience from theirs. I could recall many situations like these they were nostalgically recollecting; I had shared them with my Japanese friends. These tourists, however, who were unaware of my eavesdropping, had made it clear that proper bathing was not the simple hedonism of luxuriating in hot water or merely a long-standing but essentially empty custom; rather, it was deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and practices that made bathing or showering in the Western manner incomplete and unsatisfying. Even though I had bathed alone and with company in numerous Japanese baths, at that point I had never really experienced a “Japanese bath.”

This incident led me to begin questioning Japanese friends and acquaintances more deeply about the bath. My “research” at that time was informal, undirected, and sporadic; it was simply to satisfy my curiosity. In a sense, the responses were disappointing—the Japanese people I questioned had never thought much, consciously, about the bath. While they enjoyed bathing and missed it when unavailable, they could tell me only of their experiences and offered few explanations that helped me understand what I had missed.

Some of the experiences were humorous. A Japanese nephew (my wife is from Japan) and his spouse lived in Germany for a year with a German family. But the length of time my nephew occupied the bathroom caused problems in his host’s house. He could not understand why the family was upset at him for taking a mere thirty or forty minutes to bathe; and for using only “minimal” amounts of water. It was some time before he realized that he was using far more time and water than anyone else. I also heard stories of Japanese tourists coming to America and, not knowing how to take a bath, filling the tub with hot water and then proceeding to wash before getting into the tub—flooding the floor with water. A friend invited his Japanese mother to his home in America, and the first night she did the same thing. In the early 1970s, a friend who was a maid in a large hotel in Hawaii said that the Japanese tourists made a terrible mess in the bathroom. When she went in to make up the rooms, there was usually water and soap all over the floor and towels had been used to mop up.

Apparently these Japanese assumed that all people bathed the same way and that all bathroom floors had drains.

While conducting this study, I checked some of the travel guidebooks available for Japanese tourists and found that they now inform people about how to bathe when abroad in a variety of countries. Generally, Japanese now know that one washes inside the tub in Western countries; even so, during my research I still occasionally encountered people who were surprised at this information. The big concern now seems to be understanding how to operate the bewildering variety of fixtures.

These stories of bathing experiences were amusing to hear, but they did not satisfy my curiosity. When starting my graduate study in anthropology, I decided to do a short paper on the bath and satisfy that curiosity. I attempted research but, other than a paper by Alfred Martin (1939), could find only anecdotal and sometimes contradictory comments in travel literature and very short references to bathing in other studies. No one else had focused on bathing in Japanese culture. Thus I determined to obtain an understanding of the bath as the Japanese know it. This book is based primarily on research undertaken from July 1987 through June 1988.

What at first seemed like a rather straightforward problem rapidly took on huge dimensions. An obstacle to any effort of generalizing about culture in Japan—shared with all complex societies—is the country’s cultural diversity. Given all the regional and class variations of customs, beliefs, and practices in Japan, a survey must somehow cut across these cultural/geographic boundaries.

The Japanese with whom I spoke, as well as essays in the mass media, assume a widely shared set of meanings and behavior associated with the bath. These shared meanings are hardly explicit; usually one encounters only vague references to sets of meanings. I felt compelled, therefore, to discover whether a widely shared set of meanings and behavior in fact existed. Were there pan-Japanese characteristics of bathing? While many Japanese and foreign scholars have written short observations of bathing and its symbolic importance in contemporary Japan, no one had published a comprehensive statement from which my study could proceed. Still, libraries, newspapers, and magazines provide useful information. Articles about travel to hot springs, the declining number of public bathhouses, school trips, bathing advertisements, and the like appear regularly. Occasional television programs focus on bathhouses or hot springs. The ways in which bathing are portrayed in weekly TV shows and movies indicate popular conceptions of bathing and related activities.
My own previous experience and the knowledge gleaned from surveying these resources for any mention of bathing or washing soon disabused me of the notion that I could do a study at one bathroom or within a single neighborhood. I realized that the ritual washing of infants and the deceased, the rinsing of hands at the entrance to a shrine, the cleansing of gravestones, other religious practices involving ritual washing with water, the everyday baths at home and in public bathhouses, and the visits to hot springs were all somehow symbolically interconnected historically and contemporarily. To understand the cultural, social, and symbolic contexts of bathing I had missed in my earlier experiences, it was necessary to study at least some of these practices as well as others of which I was not initially aware.

Furthermore, I would have to compare them across several regions of Japan if I was to characterize “the” (as opposed to “a”) Japanese bath. If a previous study had tied the symbolic and social elements together in a general way or made comprehensive assertions, I might have settled for an in-depth study of a single bathhouse or practices in one community documenting a specific instance—its conformity to and variation from that standard. Lacking that basis, I determined to produce a careful ethnographic study. In order to claim some generality for that study or, more explicitly, to make an authoritative statement about bathing behavior in Japan, I became convinced of three things: I would have to study bathing in a broad sense; the universe of the sampling population would be the entire country; and the study would have to include history, regional variation, and as much of the related cultural symbolism as possible.

With limited resources, I began to tackle the methodological problem of how to study something that cuts across so much of Japanese culture and is practiced daily by virtually every Japanese person in every part of Japan. Fortunately, the history of bathing in Japan from the earliest times through the first quarter of the twentieth century has been carefully studied and documented by Japanese scholars (especially Zenkoku 1972). I relied on their work for the historical dimension of the study. With only minor exceptions, however, I could discover little on the remaining ideological dimensions of bathing in contemporary Japan—the intersections of religion, recreation, health, life cycle, and social relationships.

I decided to approach the remainder of the problem through two major avenues: a local study and a wide-ranging survey utilizing participant observation and in-depth interviewing techniques. I needed a place from which to center my study and a method of gathering data from throughout Japan that would include the various symbolic and cultural dimensions of bathing and give me confidence that the results of the research were in some sense representative of bathing in Japanese culture. I call this method “wandering ethnography” because rather than conducting ethnography primarily in one locale, I roamed through Japan interviewing people in a more or less systematic fashion.

The question of a local place was the easiest. Among the possibilities was a residence in a Tokyo suburb where my family and I could live during the research period. Although the suburb was fairly new, it included a small neighborhood that had developed from a small farming hamlet as a result of nearby factories built before World War II. The neighborhood had a public bathhouse that was originally established in the early years of the community and had recently been completely renovated. Although the bulk of the residents had always lived in one part of Tokyo or another, the population included a few longtime residents of the once rural area as well as a sprinkling of people from many regions of Japan. The suburb’s proximity to Tokyo’s shintamachi, the old downtown district, allowed frequent trips there for a study of the bath in a traditional urban area. Thus the neighborhood could provide a range of information from a broad spectrum of people; it would also allow me to check my conclusions drawn from data collected elsewhere against the experience of people from various regions of Japan, including natives of Tokyo.

The next problem was the issue of sampling. Since I wished to refer to “bathing in Japan,” I needed some way of obtaining at least a somewhat representative sample. I finally decided to divide the country into regions by using eight main divisions already culturally and academically defined (Izumi et al. 1984) plus Hokkaido and then do some research in both urban and rural areas within each region, a sort of geographically stratified sampling technique. (I was unable to extend the work to Okinawa.) The research primarily consisted of participant observation in public bathhouses, hot springs, and other public bathing areas as well as interviews using standard ethnographic methods. By dividing the country into regions and doing research in both rural and urban areas, I hoped to encounter the major regional variations.

I rejected the idea of random sampling as a technique for selecting informants primarily because of the time and funds necessary to design and implement such a strategy. I decided to select the informants opportunistically. People living near my Tokyo residence would be the first interviewed, and I developed a long-term relationship with some of them for
continuing interviews. The people at the baths I visited were obvious choices, as were the owners and proprietors of public bathhouses and hot spring resorts. But to interview these people alone might miss important groups of people who never frequented such places. To assure a more varied sampling population, I decided to interview people whom I sat next to on trains and buses as I traveled; those who were waiting at depots; people gathered in parks, festivals, or other groups; and, in rural areas, to walk through small communities and seek interviews there.

I tried to talk to men and women, young and old. I interviewed farmers, lawyers, educators, professional athletes, "office ladies" (similar to secretaries), construction workers, carpenters, fishermen, doctors, salaried men, business owners, housewives, children, grandparents, students, religious leaders, and government workers. I visited people in upper, middle, and low-income houses. As far as I know, I did not contact anyone in the higher echelons of government, nor did I meet any of the owners or managers of the largest businesses.

Bathing alone in houses' homes and apartments and in hotels afforded experiences that could be checked and compared with informants' information. Bathing with others allowed direct observation of bathing practices and customs. I visited sixty-two hot spring baths, ninety-three public baths, and sixteen other baths (saunas, health centers, and the like). These were selected in each of the nine geographic areas. Thirty of the public baths were located in Tokyo; the others were in cities and towns in each of the areas. Three of the public baths were visited on a number of occasions, since they were close to my home in Tokyo. I stayed at one of the hot springs for a week and at five of them for two or three days; the others involved overnight stays or short visits for a bath, interviews, and observation. I also participated in three professionally escorted group tours to hot springs.

My interest in such a mundane topic engendered enthusiastic responses from most of the people I approached. Capitalizing on my status as a foreigner, I was able to strike up conversations virtually anywhere and sooner or later the subject naturally turned to "What are you doing in Japan?" Upon hearing the topic of my study, people tended to assume that I wanted to observe mixed-sex bathing (a topic that has often been outragedly reported in a variety of sources, both Japanese and foreign) and were, therefore, slightly apprehensive. As soon as they realized that my interests were more comprehensive, people responded with unexpected eagerness. They found the subject intriguing once I had begun questioning them about it and were willing to take time to converse in great detail. After talking with me about bathing for two or more hours, informants would often exclaim that they had never thought about, let alone talked about, bathing so much before in their lives. One man on a train was so intrigued by the subject and by the opportunity to express himself that he stayed on the train for two hours past his stop. Such responses were gratifying and brightened my prospects of approaching people without prior cultivation of rapport. At the same time, this opportunistic method of interviewing sometimes made systematic recording of information difficult.
My intention was to record at least the age, sex, profession, and region of origin of each informant so that I could correct obvious deficiencies in sampling as time passed. The nature of the topic, however, interested people to such an extent that this goal soon proved impossible. In my neighborhood, of course, such information was readily available, as it was at some of the hot springs and bathhouses that I visited. In many cases, however, since my method of informant selection and interview entailed conversations in public situations, I often lost control of demographic details.

During one of my early research trips, for example, while on a ferry from the main island to Hokkaido I initiated a conversation with a middle-aged man sitting next to me. As we were talking, others sitting nearby began to offer information; the group drew attention; and other people, male and female, old and young, joined the group and left it at will. Some people contributed greatly to the conversation for a while and then drifted away; some said nothing; others nodded agreement or disagreement with things being said. When the number of participants reached forty-three—after only one hour of a four-hour trip on the boat—I quit counting. Although this was the largest discussion group that gathered during my research, it was not uncommon for groups of ten or twelve people—often complete strangers who did not exchange personal information—to assemble and discuss bathing experiences and knowledge.

Under these circumstances, recording of complete, accurate information was impossible. As much useful statistical data for analysis is therefore unavailable, this shortcoming calls into question the representativeness of the sample. For instance, only one family of Korean descent is represented for certain. No individuals from the highest economic strata, only a few burakumin (a group that has been heavily discriminated against), and only two people of the old aristocratic families were identified, although I may have encountered several more of each category without knowing it.

An additional problem was that certain regional differences were difficult or impossible for this investigator to sort out. Architectural differences of public bathhouses by region were for the most part easily discerned and documented. Local customs were more problematic. I did encounter regional differences in bathing and related practices, especially concerning rituals of washing infants and the dead. A few practices I only encountered in one place—whether by accident or because they were practiced only there I cannot say. In Kyushu, for example, as part of a series of practices of kusuki, the rituals surrounding the change in status to an elder, some families have the eldest son of the household prepare a bath for his mother to signify that her responsibility of caring for him has now been reversed. Most variations, however, cut across the regional boundaries I had selected: they are practiced in some local areas surrounded by other customs and then show up again in other regions. This is not an uncommon problem concerning cultural practices in Japan (Nagasawara and Tonoeda 1984), which has seen settlement and resettlement of various areas by different groups at varying times over the years.

The extent of regional variation could undoubtedly be sorted out by a well-staffed research team and possibly correlated to other cultural practices. This task, however, was beyond my capacity as a lone investigator. Nevertheless, I did encounter regional variation and was sometimes able to ascertain whether it was a local variation or a general practice. This would have been very difficult to do if I had determined to devote most of my research effort in one area. Although the demographic characteristics of the neighborhood in which I conducted my intensive research made it unlikely that I would encounter a rare practice, conducting the study in a rural community would have distorted my view of what was general.

Even in the urban neighborhood, however, there was a chance of missing a widespread practice. The probability of uncovering widespread practices that do not happen to surface in the primary research area is greater with an element of wandering ethnography in the methodological approach. After much interviewing of elderly people in my neighborhood, for example, I felt I knew a great deal about the bathing practices of the elderly. On one of my trips, however, an elderly woman introduced me to something that had escaped my attention in the neighborhood of my research. She told me that the city of Fukuoka uses some of the heat developed in its garbage incinerators to warm baths at the municipal senior centers. Senior citizens visit these facilities regularly, some daily, for a variety of social activities. When I visited one of these centers, I "discovered" that the entire upper floor of the three-story building housed two large baths. According to the supervisor, the bath was the social activity at the center. Upon returning to my Tokyo neighborhood and querying several informants, they responded that such baths are widespread but they had forgotten to say anything about them to me because they themselves did not frequent such centers.

Of course, one of the characteristics of everyday practices is that they are not usually thought of in great detail; they are too common. It is much easier to recall exotic events. It is the very ordinariness of the mundane that makes it difficult for people to recall all that they know about it.
knowledge is so often assumed that it may not be easily accessible to an investigator. Had I not been traveling and meeting people in different places and circumstances, some of what I learned would have remained hidden from me, although others have no doubt encountered those practices. This does not mean that I was able to encounter everything relating to bathing in Japan. For instance, I could only inquire about seasonal differences since I would not reside in each of the selected regions for an entire year to allow observation. In other instances, particular information that would have been useful escaped my attention but has been related to me since concluding the study.

Pursuing this technique of wandering ethnography, I have developed a great deal of confidence in the results. Today I am able to converse about bathing habits with Japanese from many regions of Japan. While their personal experiences and thoughts may not entirely accord with mine when we are claiming generality for certain behavior, I can cite specific instances of contrary behavior and possible reasons for the variations. My confidence is based largely on the comparative nature of the research: the findings gathered during my wandering through the different regions in Japan as well as the local, urban practices around my Tokyo residence. The technique provided a set of data from which I can confidently construct general characterizations of bathing in a way that the data from an intense local study would never permit. For obtaining certain kinds of information in a complex society where conventional surveys are inadequate or inappropriate, wandering ethnography has many virtues.

2. Bathing, History, and Cultural Change

The History of the Kingdom of Wei, quoted earlier, indicates that the Japanese were doing some ritual bathing by at least A.D. 297, the beginning of the Tumulus, or Kofun, period (Table 1). This bathing was for purification after encountering the pollution associated with death. The Japanese of this period built elaborate burial mounds for influential people, indicating well-developed religious and political systems. Since this is the period of the first historical record of some type of bathing in Japan, it is also a convenient point at which to discuss the history of Japanese bathing and its changes through time.

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<tr>
<td>Jomon</td>
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