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Sensitive Zones - Relativizing universal concepts - Hygiene

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"Don't wash, I'm coming!"

Message attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte,
engaged in the Egyptian campaign,
sent to his wife Joséphine before his departure.

Introduction

The concept of hygiene, either personal or public, is a sensitive area which is often involved in intercultural contacts.

As stated in the article by G.Speltini, S.Passini and D.Morselli¹ *"The theme of cleanliness, with its antinomies clean/dirty and pure/imperfect, has a consolidated cultural tradition in areas such as anthropology and history. It is a theme that has, in fact, an undoubted social and cultural connotation."*

There are many episodes reported by teachers who work in intercultural classes touching on this theme.

During a training course for Kindergarten teachers in a city in northern Italy, the teachers reported as 'a problem' the fact that it was necessary to teach the use of cutlery to African and Indian children who would otherwise spontaneously eat with hands: what was considered a 'normal' way of bringing food to the mouth in the families of these children was instead considered an absolutely unhygienic practice by teachers who forbid it.

The second episode concerns the experience of some teachers of Italian language for foreigners who were called by a vocational training centre to help a group of foreign students enrolled in a course for socio-healthcare assistants. During the first interview between the Italian teachers and the trainers of the vocational course, it immediately emerged that, apart from the language difficulties, many misunderstandings concerned the personal care of the foreign students, particularly those from West Africa. Teachers reported complaints about clothing (the use of plastic flip-flops), body odour (the smell of food) and beauty accessories (painted nails, hair braided too long, etc.).

All these aspects were perceived by teachers and, according to them by patients, as a lack of cleanliness and hygiene of the person, while they were not perceived as such by the people involved who claimed to be 'clean' people.

But what is Hygiene? To delineate the concept of hygiene, we refer to dictionary definitions. This is the definition found in a prestigious encyclopaedic dictionary:

"Hygiene. - Branch of medicine which aims to safeguard the state of health and improve somatic and psychic conditions by studying and suggesting measures to protect the health of individuals"

¹ G.Speltini, S. Passini, D.Morselli 'Cleaning issues: representations and values' in *Giornale italiano di psicologia*, 2010, University of Bologna.

*(individual or private hygiene) and populations (public hygiene), with reference, in the case of the latter, to all those environmental conditions (work, urbanisation, pollution, transport) which involve problems of a sanitary nature”.*²

In the same dictionary we find an article that expands the definition:

*Hygiene, from the Greek ὑγιεινή (implied τέχνη), "wholesome, benefiting health", is a branch of medicine concerned with safeguarding and improving the state of health, through the study of measures to protect the health of individuals and populations. The fields of hygiene are the removal of harmful conditions from the external environment, the regulation of food processing methods, the control of epidemic, infectious and socially relevant diseases. Mental hygiene aims to protect mental health by defining interventions to promote balanced psychological development, prevent the onset of distress, and treat the damage caused by mental illness.*³

According to the above definitions, we can distinguish two types of hygiene: public hygiene, which refers to the responsibility of all citizens in the public sphere, and private hygiene, which is the responsibility of each individual in his or her personal sphere. We can also talk about other types of hygiene: personal hygiene, sports hygiene, environmental hygiene, industrial hygiene, postural hygiene, domestic hygiene, mental hygiene, pet hygiene and school hygiene.⁴

As we can see, all these definitions refer to medicine and standards for disease prevention. It therefore appears, according to these sources, that the concept of hygiene refers to objective, scientific and universally accepted practices.

The clean/dirty and pure/impure oppositions dichotomies

In none of the definitions in the previous paragraph are there any references to the concepts of cleanliness or dirtiness, but inevitably, when speaking of hygiene as a sensitive area subject to intercultural comparison, we must enter another domain, that of the dichotomies clean vs. dirty and pure vs. impure. These terms appear immediately less neutral. In this case, too, it seems useful to start with definitions and we refer to another prestigious Italian dictionary.⁵

- Clean: without traces of dirt [...] pure, unpolluted: clean water, clean air; who loves cleanliness: very clean person. In figurative form: [...] to clean something up, get it out of the way, eliminate it. [...] Honest, clear, unblemished: clear conscience; unclean affairs; that does not offend the moral sense, modesty: clean joke.
- Dirty: not clean, filthy; having a guilty conscience, feeling guilty for having done a reprehensible deed | having a criminal record, [...] Dishonest, immoral: dirty politics, dirty joke, obscene subject; making it dirty, committing a dirty or dishonest act.
- Pure: devoid of foreign elements, not mixed with other substances: alcohol, pure gold; [...] uncontaminated: air, clean water; which has not taken in elements of other languages or styles: pure Sicilian speech; pure Romanesque church; pure-bred, uncrossed animal.
- Impure: mixed with substances other than the original: impure air. Stained by sins or, more generally, by faults: impure soul; particularly infringing sexual morality: impure thoughts.

We see how these definitions appear much less “neutral” and are heavy with judgements. References to hygienic/scientific aspects are limited, while references to images concerning ethical and moral

² Online encyclopaedia, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/igiene/>

³ Augusto Panà, Anna Spinaci, Luigi Frighi - Universo del Corpo (1999), in www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/igiene/

⁴ <https://it.conbarro.com/higiene-234774>

⁵ Italian language dictionary, i Sabatini Coletti in https://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario_italiano/

aspects while relating to behaviour, education, customs and cultural representations appear particularly present.

A nother point of view might be introduced here, namely the psychological aspect, introducing the dichotomy of familiar/extraneous, which seems to us extremely pertinent to the intercultural issue related to the theme of hygiene.

In the article by G.Speltini, S.Passini and D.Morselli⁶ the anthropologist Mary Douglas is quoted: “*the deeper one analyses the concepts of dirt and contamination, the more obvious it becomes that one is dealing with symbolic systems, and this applies to all human cultures. In short, the idea of dirt refers to a system of classification, which distinguishes what is familiar and reassuring from what is ambiguous and extraneous; and with respect to extraneousness, different social strategies can be adopted, from those that incorporate it into existing schemes, to those that reject it or ignore it, considering it dangerous in itself.*”⁷

But, as we have seen in the dictionary definitions, the terms dirty/clean and pure/imperfect carry with them moral and ethical evaluations, and so it seems natural that religions often refer to purity/cleanliness to enshrine norms of behaviour and ritualized hygienic and purification practices.

In the same article quoted above, we read, “*For example, in the Jewish religion, the differences between what is pure and what is impure are very marked. Impurity may concern contact with a corpse, menstruation, conjugal relations, childbirth [...] Then there are very detailed and extensive rules of purity related to food, in which there are not only precise categories of pure and impure animals, but also prescriptions concerning the prohibition of contamination between meat and dairy products, which require in the kasher (ritually pure) kitchen the strict separation between dishes intended to contain one and the other food.*”⁸

Many religions have defined a set of norms that define pure” behaviour as opposed to”dirty” and immoral behaviour.

Similarly, societies have also addressed the question of what is acceptable and therefore 'clean' versus what is defined as 'dirt', 'impurity' and 'contamination'. However, we can note differences in the way different societies have sought and try to preserve their 'purity'.

In their article, G.Speltini, S.Passini, and D.Morselli also quote the anthropologist Remotti: ⁹ “*Purification can, for example, take the form of a cleansing of thought, but also the form of "the brutal elimination of others" (p. 28), an action sometimes referred to as "ethnic cleansing". Purifying means first of all separating and eliminating (sometimes also destroying, annihilating), separating not only the similar from the not similar, but the worst from the best, throwing out the bad and retaining the good. In particular, in line with Hodson and Costello (2007)¹⁰, We believe that representations of cleanliness and dirtiness are linked to prejudices against certain devalued social groups, for example immigrants or gypsies, or they refer to comparative judgements between different cultures, whose level of cleanliness or dirtiness is taken as a marker of civilisation.*¹¹

⁶ G.Speltini, S. Passini, D.Morselli 'Cleaning issues: representations and values' in *Giornale italiano di psicologia*, 2010, University of Bologna.

⁷M.Douglas. . Purity and danger. An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ F.Remotti. Contro l'identità. Roma-Bari: Laterza,1996

¹⁰ G.Hodson, K.Costello, Interpersonal disgust, ideological orientations, and dehumanization as predictors of intergroup attitudes. *Psychological Science*, 18 (8), 691-698, 2007

¹¹ G.Speltini, S. Passini, D.Morselli 'Questioni di pulizia: rappresentazioni e valori' in *Giornale italiano di psicologia*, 2010, Università di Bologna.

Hygiene and religions

In the different religions water is referred to as the 'source of life' and is present in rites for the expiation of sins: a substance that washes and purifies bodies and souls.

Water has a crucial function in rites of passage as an element of hygiene, and in the game of oppositions clean/dirty - pure/imperfect.

The relationship with water in different religions is illustrated as follows:

- **Hinduism:** It is believed that by immersing oneself in the waters of the Ganges (one of the seven sacred rivers) all sins are forgotten.
- **Buddhism:** The water washes away bad luck and bad deeds during the year.
- **Christianity:** The "holy water" is water that has been blessed by a member of the clergy and is used in baptism and to bless individuals, churches, homes, and articles of devotion. A natural symbol of purification, water has been used by religious peoples as a means of removing uncleanness, either ritual or moral. Holy water is used in Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, certain Lutheran synods, Anglicanism, and various other churches.
- **Judaism:** In the Jewish tradition, ritual washing is intended to restore or maintain a state of "purity", by a complete immersion (tevilah) in the special pool (mikveh) or in the "living" water of a river or sea or the ritual washing of hands with a jug (netilat yadayim)
- **Shintoism:** inside many shrines there are containers of water with which to purify oneself before entering the sacred place. Waterfalls are considered sacred places.
- **Islam:** For Islamic culture, water is a gift that must be protected, above all for its purification value. For this reason, some mosques have a courtyard with a pool of clear water in which to purify themselves. Muslims must be 'ritually pure' before entering places of worship.

"O you who believe! When you rise for prayer, wash your faces and your hands [and forearms] up to the elbows, run your wet hands over your heads and wash your feet up to the ankles. If you are in a state of impurity, purify yourselves. If you are sick or on a journey or coming out of a latrine or after approaching women you find no water, do the lustration with clean earth, passing it over your face and forearms." ¹²

The Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed have conveyed to us the great importance of cleanliness, both moral and material. The good Muslim must have both a clean soul and a clean body. The first must not be soiled by sins and must eventually be cleansed by prayer, remembrance of Allah, almsgiving and good deeds, the second must be daily cared for and cleansed from the dirt that can contaminate it during the normal course of daily life.

The Wudu (as minor ablution is called, i.e. the actions of bodily cleansing to be performed before praying) need not be repeated if it has not been interrupted by certain acts including urinating or defecating. If the Wudu has not been interrupted the Muslim can do the next prayer without the need to repeat it.



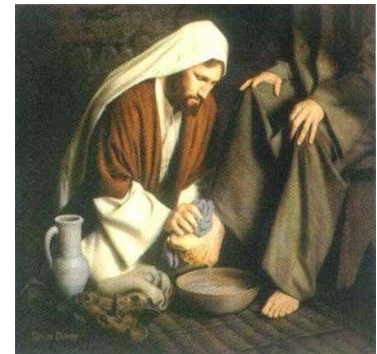
¹² Qur'an, sura 5, verse 6, [Donne e Islam \(donne-e-islam.it\)](http://Donne e Islam (donne-e-islam.it))

There are other precautions such as not eating garlic or onions before going to pray at the mosque so as not to disturb other believers with smells that can distract them from praying.¹³ It is also interesting to know that in order to go to the Mosque to pray, Muslims must dress decently, comb their hair and beard and carefully clean their teeth by chewing a kind of liquorice stick called Siwak: *Anas narrated: "Allah's Apostle said, "I told you repeatedly about (using) Siwak*." (The Prophet gave importance to the use of Siwak)."*¹⁴

From these practices we can see how cleanliness, hygiene and care of one's body are part of the normal life of a good Muslim according to Islamic tradition.

The following episode again concerns the experience of an Italian teacher who was assigned to give a language course to a group of North African workers in the very factory where they worked. The teacher in question had to mediate during a conflict between the foreign workers who, during the period of Ramadan, washed their feet before prayer in the washbasins of the communal bathrooms and the Italian workers who complained about this practice which made the floor excessively wet and dangerous. Through the mediation of the teacher, the company management promised to provide the communal toilets with special foot-washing facilities (bidets) that would solve the problem. In this way, the need of Muslim workers to practice their body purification operations was safeguarded without contradicting the safety requirements imposed by a work environment which does not take these needs into consideration.

As far as Christianity is concerned, we find a passage in the Gospel of John, chapter 13, where the episode of the washing of the feet is recounted. Jesus "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end", and while the devil had already put in the heart of Judas Iscariot the intention of betraying him, Jesus got up from the table, laid down his clothes and took a towel, wrapped it around his waist, poured water into the basin and with an unprecedented gesture, because it was reserved for slaves and servants, he began to wash the feet of the Apostles, drying them with the towel with which he was girded.¹⁵



In those days people walked on dusty and muddy roads, sometimes dirty with animal excrement, in open sandals. Therefore, it was normal to find oneself with extremely dirty feet at the end of the day.

¹³ Personal hygiene measures in the relationship with others take on a sense of community care and social respect. In <http://www.donne-e-islam.it/>

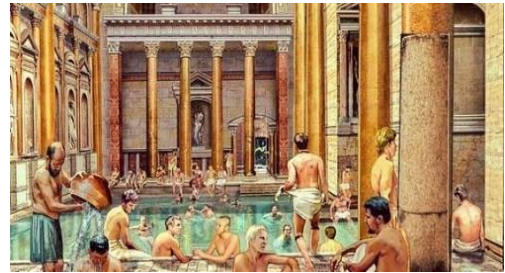
¹⁴ Sahih Bukhari; volume 2 ,libro 13, hadith 13 in <http://www.donne-e-islam.it/>

¹⁵ 1 Before the feast of Passover, Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end. 2 As they were eating dinner, when the devil had already put it in the heart of Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray him, 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given him everything into his hands and that he had come from God and was returning to God, 4 got up from the table, laid down his clothes, and taking a towel, fastened it around his waist. 5 Then he poured water into the basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel with which he had girded himself. 6 He came to Simon Peter, and he said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered, "What I do, you don't understand now, but you will understand later." 8 Simon Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you will have no part with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not only your feet, but also your hands and your head!" 10 Jesus said, "He who has bathed has no need to wash except his feet, and he is all worldly; and you are worldly, but not all. 11 For he knew who betrayed him; therefore he said, "You are not all worlds. 12 When he had washed their feet and put on his clothes, he sat down again and said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Master and Lord, and you say well, for I am. 14 If therefore I, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also must wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, so that as I have done, you may do also. [https://www.laparola.net/testo.php?riferimento=Giovanni13&versioni\[\]=C.E.I.](https://www.laparola.net/testo.php?riferimento=Giovanni13&versioni[]=C.E.I.)

The washing of feet was a characteristic of hospitality in the ancient world, a duty of the slave to his master, the wife to her husband, the son to his father. This washing of the feet is one of the greatest lessons that Jesus gives to his disciples, because they will have to follow him on the path of total generosity in giving of themselves, not only to the usual figures, but also to all their brothers and sisters in humanity. The washing of the feet thus becomes a symbol of brotherhood and acceptance of the other.

Hygiene in history and cultures

If we look at the history of many societies, we can see that the evolution of personal and public hygiene practices has not been linear over time. That is, it is not correct to think in older societies conditions of cleanliness were poorer and there was a progressive improvement. Rather, there has been a succession of historical periods in which the idea of hygiene has changed due to cultural and social changes and historical events.



Already 2000 years ago in ancient Rome there were public baths and in all the large cities of the Roman Empire, they had baths and visitors could enjoy pools with cold or hot water, as well as exercise areas. The Romans cleaned their bodies with oil and then removed it with an object called a strigil¹⁶.

The ancient Romans cared for their bodies as much as they needed for personal cleanliness and hygiene. "They washed their arms and legs every day, for the necessary cleanliness after work; but only every nine days did they take a full bath," Seneca reminds us.¹⁷

In the Middle Ages, however, the toilet was designed to be dry and focused on the most visible parts of the body. Only the hands and face were "wet", but generally one washed with a dry cloth. At the time, in fact, it was thought that water was harmful because penetrating into the holes in the skin would break the humoral balance; bathing made one tired and weak, predisposing the body to the contagion of diseases. Strict precautions were taken before washing, including resting, staying in bed and protecting oneself with appropriate clothing.¹⁸



Other customs that contrasted with those of Europe can be found in the North American continent, specifically in central Mexico where the Mexica lived.¹⁹ They supplied their city with clean water from Chapultepec from the aqueducts built by both Nezahualcōyotl (between 1446 and 1478) and Ahuitzotl twenty years later. The Mexica brushed their teeth every day, swept their streets and treated

¹⁶ A bronze or iron instrument used in antiquity to cleanse the body, and especially the limbs, after bathing.

<https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/strigile/>

¹⁷ N.Zardo 'Un tuffo nell'igiene delle antiche civiltà del Mediterraneo', in <http://www.perinijournal.it/>

¹⁸ <https://www.accademiafabioscolari.it/igiene-nel-medioevo/>

¹⁹ The mexicas (pron. mescica; nahuatl: Mēxihcah [me: 'ʃiʔkaʔ], singular Mēxihcatl) or mexicas - better known as Aztecs in Western historiography - were one of the great pre-Columbian civilizations, the most flourishing and alive at the time of contact with the Spanish. From northern California, they developed in the Mesoamerican region of present-day Mexico from the 14th to the 16th century. The name they called themselves is "Mexica" or "Tenochca", not Aztec, and it is no coincidence that Mexica is still the term used to define their descendants; the term Aztec, however, was not coined until many centuries later by the German geographer Alexander von Humboldt to distinguish these pre-Columbian populations from all modern Mexicans. The term 'Aztec' often refers exclusively to the people living in Tenochtitlán (where Mexico City is located today), situated on an island in Lake Texcoco, who referred to themselves as the 'Aztecs'. Mēxihcah Tenochcah [me: 'ʃiʔkaʔ te: 'noʃkaʔ] o Cōlhuah Mēxihcah ['ko:lwaʔ me: 'ʃiʔkaʔ] .<https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aztechi>

their waste. They built public toilets and every day their faecal waste was transported by canoe to be applied as fertiliser. The hygienic conditions of the cities of their “conquerors” were likely much worse then.

Let's not forget that some hygiene practices that we now consider 'obvious', such as hand washing in hospitals, are actually quite recent practices even in the so-called culturally “evolved” old continent.

In fact, it was only in 1847 that Ignaz Semmelweis discovered that in Vienna's obstetric clinics, women in childbirth were dying from infections transmitted by the hands of doctors who visited them without washing their hands after dissecting corpses in the anatomy department. "It took forty years - and Pasteur's work on bacterial contamination - for Ignaz Semmelweis's brilliant insight to be accepted and applied across the board. And only then, by 1894, could the great physician have a worthy memorial erected by his home town of Budapest."²⁰

The attention to hygiene is also evidenced by some particular habits present in many different cultures: behaviours which are deeply internalized by the community practicing them but can appear unfamiliar to the eyes of a visitor not accustomed to them and so they require a discovery of the frame of reference of the other.

For example, if we all knew to take off our shoes before entering Japanese homes, but not all of us may know the custom of doing the same in some restaurants, or of wearing special slippers before entering public toilets. The Japanese take off their shoes for cleanliness. Traditionally, the Japanese ate meals sitting on tatami mats instead of chairs, and they rolled out the futon to sleep on tatami floors. As they are very close to the floor, it's not appropriate to bring the shoes into the house which would result in a dirty floor.

There are habits amongst different peoples which to the Western eye are outside the paradigms of cleanliness, hygiene or beauty but which for some indigenous tribes are parts of rites of passage. They may have to do with growing up and using make-up, as for the girls of the Himba tribe in Namibia who start using otjize (a paste of butter, fat and especially red ochre) as soon as they are old enough to take care of their own hygiene.



Like the Masai who see the act of spitting as sacred symbolism and a form of respect and good luck. The Masai believe that when it rains on their arid land, God is spitting on them blessing them,²¹ so when two friends meet, they spit on their hands before shaking them. At the birth of a child they spit on the new-born as a wish for a long and fortunate life, as seen in the photo.²² On his daughter's wedding day, it is customary for the father to spit on her forehead.

The most common popular belief about the purity of the hands, for instance in Hinduism, Islam, and some African cultures, is to consider the left hand as “unclean” and reserved solely for “hygienic” purposes, while it is thought culturally imperative to use the right hand for offering, receiving, eating, for pointing at something or when gesticulating.

In a shelter for asylum seekers from West Africa and Pakistan, the Italian workers noticed that the consumption of toilet paper was so low compared to their expectations. They therefore decided to ask the people housed in the structure what was the reason. The guests explained that they were

²⁰ S. Zoli, La storia delle vite salvate con l'acqua, in <https://www.fondazioneveronesi.it/>

²¹ Elmer Duane, Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility InterVarsity Press, 2006

²² <https://iseu-extranhos.blogspot.com/2011/04/culturas-mais-esquisitas-do-mundo.html>

used to washing their private parts with water and soap rather than using toilet paper. For the Italian operators it was a surprise to find out that there was a way of practicing hygiene different from what they were used to.

Conclusions



As a final reflection, we present Zygmunt Bauman's thoughts on the question of hygiene in "The Society of Uncertainty":

We call "cleaning" the removal of what is undesirable, the re-establishment of order. 'Cleanliness' means order. The contagious magic of avoiding physical contact with danger is the first degree of conscious hygiene. Hygiene requires the use of cleaning/purification tools: brooms, brushes, scrapers, soaps, cleaning sprays, washing powders; but also barbed wire or walls to enclose camps, reserves, ghettos designed to hold back the impure and contagious.²³ and this

and not to forget because in the measure of things lies its usefulness and profit for the individual and common good and that freedom will always have the last word.

Cleanliness is a universal imperative and is related to the sacred, but it is also constitutes a barrier, a way to differentiate between people. It is in the name of cleanliness (moral or physical) that certain people can be excluded or held in ghettos, like the leprosy camps in the past and the so called refugee camps of the present. So to decide if a certain concept of cleanliness is worth retaining, it has to respond to question if it is compatible with individual freedom or the common good.

Ressources (Who invented this activity or who inspired it)

Zygmunt Bauman, *'La società dell'incertezza'*, p. 72, Società editrice il Mulino, 1999

M.Douglas, *'Purity and danger. An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo'*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970 (trad. it. *Purezza e pericolo*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1975).

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²³ Zygmunt Bauman. LA SOCIETA' DELL'INCERTEZZA. P. 72, Società editrice il Mulino, 1999



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