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Water and the Body in Pre-colonial Southern Benin: Hygiene Practices, Personal Care and Social Representations (17th–19th centuries)

Marius VIDO¹, Yao Serge YOBOUE²

¹Secondary school teacher, independent researcher, Côte d'Ivoire, mariusvido@gmail.com

²Lecturer and Researcher, École Normale Supérieure, Abidjan, Department of History and Geography, Côte d'Ivoire, yobouey_serge@yahoo.fr

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses hygiene and personal care practices in societies in southern Benin between the 17th and 19th centuries. It examines how these practices shed light on attitudes towards the body, water, cleanliness, beauty and

social norms. It is primarily based on the accounts of European travellers and missionaries, supplemented by historical and ethnographic studies; a critical analysis of these sources allows for the observers' own perspectives to be taken into account. The analysis shows that water and bathing played an important role in personal hygiene, with frequency determined by access to water resources. It also highlights the use of soap,

plant fibres, oils, ointments and plant-based sticks for skin, hair and oral care. These practices were not solely aimed at cleanliness and health, but also contributed to the pursuit of beauty, self-presentation and compliance with social norms. Practices relating to menstruation and the care of clothing further reveal the existence of social and symbolic rules governing the body and the importance of women's labour in the transmission of domestic skills. **The study thus links the uses of water and personal care, the social regulation of the female body and oral hygiene practices, and the care of clothing and domestic responsibilities, in order to demonstrate that hygiene was a phenomenon that was at once material, social, cultural and symbolic.**

Keywords: pre-colonial southern Benin, personal hygiene, water, body care, social norms.

Introduction

The history of pre-colonial Southern Benin has traditionally been approached through the study of kingdoms, trade relations, religious practices, wars of conquest and, above all, the transformations linked to European expansion and the slave trade. These approaches have enabled a better understanding of how the ancient kingdoms of Allada, Porto-Novo and Danxomé functioned, as well as their relationships with their immediate environment. They open up new avenues for research, particularly into everyday practices relating to personal grooming, appearance and attitudes towards cleanliness.

The study of these everyday practices offers a particularly interesting field of inquiry and provides a better understanding not only of how people lived, but also of the values and beliefs that shaped their behaviour in daily life. Bathing, washing clothes, personal care, hair care and oral hygiene, the use of oils, ointments or perfumes, as well as the observance of certain rules during menstruation, are not merely actions intended to keep the body clean; they reflect specific conceptions of clean and dirty, beautiful and ugly, as well as pure and impure. They also allow us to observe relationships between individuals and to understand the influence of gender, age, social status and cultural background on everyday practices.

In this regard, southern Benin offers a particularly interesting area in which to study these issues. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, this region was observed and described by European travellers, missionaries, traders and administrators. The documentation they left behind provides valuable insights into the customs and bodily practices of the local populations. However, these sources present a major methodological

challenge: their authors describe African societies through a European lens. Their use therefore requires a critical analysis that distinguishes, as far as possible, the observed practices from the interpretations offered by European observers.

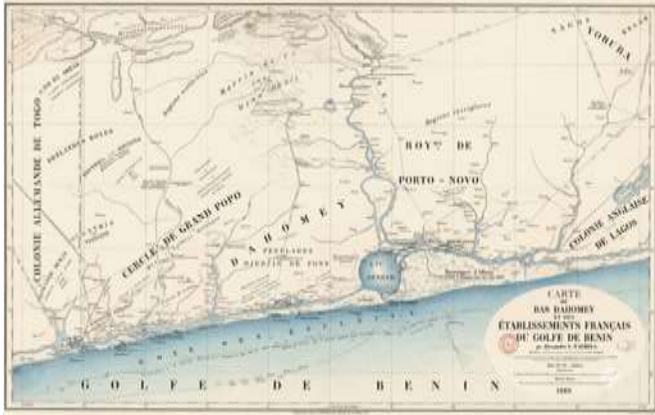
The aim of this study is to analyse hygiene and personal care practices not merely as behaviours intended to keep the body clean, but as social practices embedded within a specific environment and a system of norms. In particular, the aim is to understand the role played by water in personal care, the products and techniques used, how beauty was associated with personal care, and how practices relating to menstruation, clothing and oral hygiene reflected social norms.

The main question this study seeks to address is as follows: how do hygiene and personal care practices in pre-colonial southern Benin help us to understand the relationships that people had with the body, water, cleanliness, beauty and social norms?

As personal hygiene is not limited solely to practical or health-related concerns, the aim is more specifically to understand the extent to which these practices addressed concerns relating to cleanliness and health, whilst also contributing to the expression of cultural values, social norms and differing relationships with the body according to gender, age and status.

To address this issue, we shall first examine the role of water, bathing and various forms of personal care in everyday life, focusing on washing practices, the use of soap and plant fibres, as well as care for the skin, hair and appearance; then practices relating to the female body and oral hygiene, in order to demonstrate how bodily care could be linked to social, cultural and symbolic norms; and finally, the care of clothing and the role of domestic labour, to show that hygiene was, more broadly, a social, cultural and symbolic phenomenon revealing the organisation of pre-colonial societies in southern Benin.

Map of Lower Benin:



Source: *Bibliothèque nationale de France, Maps and Plans Department, GE B-251.*

1. Water, bathing and personal care: from cleanliness to beauty

Personal care played a prominent role in the daily lives of the people of pre-colonial Southern Benin. Whilst water and bathing were the main means of personal hygiene, the use of soap, plant fibres, oils and perfumes, along with various washing techniques, enabled people to care for their skin and hair.

1.1. Water and bathing in daily life

Water played an important role in the daily activities of the people of pre-colonial southern Benin. The presence of several rivers, lagoons and other water sources facilitated personal hygiene, laundry and various domestic activities in many localities. The environment thus provided the necessary elements to keep the body clean and healthy at all times.

Accounts left by Europeans bear witness to the importance attached to bathing in many communities of pre-colonial southern Benin. Olfert Dapper (1686, p. 304) observes that both men and women placed great importance on personal cleanliness by bathing regularly. He writes: 'Men and women take great care to keep themselves clean, and never fail to wash themselves in the evening and in the morning.' This observation attests to the existence of regular personal hygiene practices long before the establishment of the colonial administration.

For his part, Pierre Bertrand Bouche (1885, pp. 45–46), a 19th-century author, states that men and women washed themselves almost every day and sometimes several times a day. The author explains this by the fact that people were exposed to intense heat, sweated constantly and dust easily

clung to their bodies (P. B. Bouche, 1885, pp. 45–46). Alexandre Librecht d'Albeca (1889, p. 85) reports observations along the same lines. In particular, he describes women who washed themselves morning and evening and who made use of the areas around the lagoons to clean their clothes.

These accounts attest that, in several communities in southern Benin, bathing was an integral part of daily life.

However, this frequency of bathing must be qualified by taking into account geographical conditions and access to water. The available accounts relate to places where people had access to water resources. The frequency of bathing depended on the availability of water resources. Communities situated near watercourses faced different conditions from those living in remote areas or areas with limited water supplies. Thus, the high frequency of bathing observed in certain sources should be understood as a practice closely linked to the living environment and the accessibility of water resources, rather than as a standard applicable to all populations in southern Benin. This caveat helps to avoid generalising conditions of access to water and hygiene practices to all populations in southern Benin.

Hygiene practices must therefore be analysed taking into account the ecological and material context, for whilst proximity to water facilitated bathing and various domestic activities, it was not sufficient on its own to keep the body healthy and clean. Various techniques and products were employed for this purpose. Bathing was not limited to simply entering and leaving the water. Sources mention the use of soap and plant fibres to scrub the skin. Father Pierre Bertrand Bouche (1885, p. 46), who spent time in southern Benin, describes a bathing scene in which men and women wash themselves with soap and plant fibres used as sponges. He writes:

Beneath the palm and coconut trees, in the shade of the tall trees growing along the riverbank, all armed with a bar of soap and a handful of plant fibres which they use as sponges, black men and women come to immerse themselves in the water, then lather themselves from head to toe, work the soap into a lather and cover themselves in white foam, rubbing themselves with the cancan; then, finally, they splash themselves with water using their hands or a calabash, and end by drying themselves off, just as the Romans did; after the bath, which purifies and refreshes, comes the anointing, which makes the hair supple and elastic, and preserves the skin's freshness, which would otherwise quickly be dulled by the heat of the sun.

This description confirms the existence of a set of practices and skills aimed at personal hygiene. Oral traditions provide further information on the manufacture and use of these products.

Sources attest to the existence of locally made soaps. On the Gold Coast, for example, the literature shows that before the arrival of the Portuguese in 1482, the Fanti (particularly the women) were already making soap from crude palm oil and potash, extracted from wood ash (see <http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/esj.2016.v12n32p441>).

In 1520, on the west coast of Africa, the King of Portugal formally banned the import of soap manufactured in the Kingdom of Benin, a powerful West African state situated in the south of present-day Nigeria, around Benin City. The reason given was as follows: this soap, made from palm oil, whitened hands and laundry twice as effectively as the soap used in Portugal in the 16th century. C.A. Walckenaer (1827, p. 384). The British naturalist J. A. Skertchly (1874, p. 58), who arrived in Gléhoué at the end of the 19th century to study the region's fauna, noted that various items, including soaps, could be found in one of the region's markets. These soaps, which were the product of the local women's craftsmanship, were in the form of a more or less soft paste, sometimes quite white but often grey (1931 International Colonial Exhibition, p. 133).

In addition to soap, plant fibres are used to scrub the skin to clean it. The loofah, or luffa (see photos 1 and 2), is an example of a plant-based resource used for this purpose. In the Fon language, this plant fibre is called asangokan (Marius Vido, 2021, pp. 23–24).



Photo 1: The loofah.

Source: <http://www.black-feelings.com/accueil/detail-actualite/article/les-vertus-du-loofah-pour-la-peau-black-and-beautiful/#Ewb1fGzL1kbq18fy.99>. Accessed 4 July 2017.



Photo 2: Dried loofah.

Source: <http://www.black-feelings.com/accueil/detail-actualite/article/les-vertus-du-loofah-pour-la-peau-black-and-beautiful/#Ewb1fGzL1kbq18fy.99>. Accessed 4 July 2017.

The availability of these products demonstrates the existence of local know-how passed down through families and the ability of communities to transform available resources to suit their needs. It also serves as a reminder that hygiene practices were linked to the domestic economy and, in some cases, could be found in markets and fuelled trade.

The combined use of these products with water formed part of a broader regime of personal care aimed at enhancing the radiance of the skin and hair.

1.2. Skin, hair, oils and perfumes

Bathing did not necessarily mark the end of personal care. After bathing, other products were used to protect the skin and condition the hair in order to enhance one's appearance.

Pierre Bertrand Bouche (1885, p. 46) notes that after bathing, women would anoint themselves with oil, ointments and cosmetics. He also specifies that after bathing, certain plant-based preparations were used to give the skin a reddish colour. To do this, they would mix into the water a very fine powder obtained by scraping the wood which the Nagos call 'ochoun'; the Minas, 'to'; and the Brazilians, 'pao Brasil'. The purpose of this was to prevent the skin from cracking (J. Teilhard de Chardin, 1888, p. 94). This observation suggests that, once washed, the body became something that could be shown off.

Oils and ointments served several purposes. They were used to care for the skin and protect it from drying out. Certain preparations were associated with medicinal or cosmetic practices. Skin care was therefore not merely a matter of wishing to be clean; it also formed part of the pursuit of beauty

and self-presentation. Hair also played an important role in personal care practices. Sources provide detailed descriptions of various hairstyles and the way in which hair was carefully arranged. Alexandre Librecht d'Albeca (1889, p. 85) refers to elaborate hairstyles:

They gather their carefully combed hair on top of their heads into a conical shape, leaving the forehead, temples and nape of the neck uncovered: some part their hair at the front and back, or trace small paths across their scalps that lead to a main parting at the side.

Edouard Foà (1895, p. 161), for his part, emphasises the variety of hair care practices:

As for the fanciful nature of the hairstyles, their origin cannot be pinpointed. It is possible that, amongst women, this has always been in vogue; they have always had hair and the ability to style it as they please, and, as elsewhere, they display a great deal of coquetry. They may well have, since time immemorial, arranged it in the way that suited them best.

According to Salomé Saloum (2022, p. 173), the main tool used to style their hair was the Afro comb. It was well-suited and ideal for hair care. Carved from hardwood, the comb was a true work of art; the teeth were perfectly rounded and flawless so as not to snag the hair. Hairstyles, beyond their aesthetic appeal, were, like clothing, a marker of social status (S. Saloum, 2022, p. 171). They could reveal a person's age, gender, status or even the specific circumstances in which they found themselves. For example, the women of the royal court of Agbomé sported various styles of hairstyle. According to Félix Abiola Iroko (1997, p. 4), the women's beautiful, varied and original hairstyles were particularly evident among the *Na* princesses.

Perfumes constitute another category of personal care products. In the 19th century, certain authors, including Alexandre Librecht d'Albeca (1889, p. 85), noted the use of perfumes from Europe. This presence attests to the existence of a trade network between the societies of Southern Benin and other commercial regions. The introduction of these products does not, however, signify the disappearance of local practices. Communities could adopt certain products from outside whilst retaining their own techniques and customs. It is therefore more accurate to speak of the circulation, adaptation and appropriation of products rather than the systematic replacement of traditional practices.

From the above, it is clear that personal hygiene relied on regular practices dependent on the environment and the availability of water resources. The use of soap and plant

fibres for bathing, and ointments for hair care, whilst ensuring cleanliness, health and appearance, was also influenced by social and cultural norms. It is therefore necessary to analyse the influence of these norms on the female body and oral hygiene.

2. The female body, oral hygiene and social norms

Hygiene rules did not concern only physical appearance; they were governed by social and cultural norms, some of which related to practices concerning menstruation and the management of the female body. Oral and dental care, for its part, addressed both health and aesthetic concerns.

2.1. Menstruation and the regulation of the female body

Practices relating to menstruation constitute another important aspect of the history of the female body in pre-colonial southern Benin. They show that certain biological functions of the body could be accompanied by restrictive measures concerning the spaces frequented, social relations and domestic activities.

Guillaume Bosman (1705, p. 371) reports that on the Slave Coast, women who were menstruating were forbidden from entering the king's house or the homes of certain important figures in the kingdom. Des Marchais, quoted by Father Labat (1730, p. 225), also recounts that during their menstruation, some women would withdraw from the family home to remain in isolation in makeshift huts. There, they were looked after by elderly women and washed before returning to the family home.

These practices must be interpreted with caution. The vocabulary used by some Europeans—for example, the term 'defilement'—partly reflects their perspective and the interpretations they applied to the practices they observed. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the practices actually observed and the interpretations given of them by travellers or missionaries. In this context, bathing could have several meanings. It could have a practical dimension, as it served to cleanse the body. It could also mark a woman's return to the group and the resumption of her usual activities. Finally, it could accompany the transition from a particular state to one considered normal according to the community's rules.

Menstrual practices also highlight the importance of knowledge transfer amongst women. A girl's first period represented a significant milestone in her life. It was an opportunity for her to learn, from her mother or other women in her circle, the rules governing menstruation, the appropriate behaviour to adopt, and any taboos associated with this new

stage of her life. Knowledge of the female body was thus part of social education. It was both a biological and a social body, subject to rules, practices and values that enabled the young girl to come to terms with her new status and adapt her behaviour in society.

Whilst the management of menstruation reflects a specific framework governing the female body, the attention paid to oral hygiene also demonstrates the importance placed on physical appearance and personal care.

2.2. Oral and dental care

Body care was not limited to the skin, hair or clothing. The mouth and teeth were also the subject of particular care amongst the peoples of southern Benin. Édouard Foa (1895, p. 157) describes, in particular, the use of pieces of wood whose ends were chewed until they became fibrous. This end was then used to scrub the teeth and clean the mouth. This practice served several purposes. It helped to remove food debris, clean the teeth and gums, and promote fresh breath. Oral hygiene could be carried out at various times of the day, particularly upon waking and after meals. Hugo Zöller (1884, p. 204), who spent several weeks in Togo, in the Agoué and Grand-Popo regions, describes a similar practice. He writes that:

Black women take particular care over the maintenance of their short-cropped hair and the cleanliness of their mouths. They almost always have a toothpick to hand, made from a specific type of wood that serves as both a toothbrush and toothpaste: they devote ten times as much time to dental care as a European.

Oral hygiene, however, addressed specific concerns: maintaining both health and the pursuit of aesthetic appeal. The use of plant-based materials also reveals an understanding of environmental resources. The use of certain plant species can be explained by their specific qualities and their effects on the teeth or gums. Oral hygiene is thus linked to knowledge of plants and traditional therapeutic practices.

In short, the study of the female body and oral hygiene reveals that bodily practices were driven by health, aesthetic and social concerns and were subject to standards that went beyond mere cleanliness. This view of hygiene is evident in the care of clothing and in the organisation of domestic work.

3. Clothing, domestic work and the social dimension of hygiene

This section analyses the relationship between clothing and personal care, whilst also considering the role of women in the

maintenance of the body and the domestic space. It also demonstrates that hygiene practices were not solely driven by concerns relating to cleanliness or health. They contributed to the organisation of social life, to relations between the sexes and generations, and to the expression of social status, identities and cultural values in the societies of southern Benin.

3.1. Clothing, domestic work and personal hygiene

Personal hygiene could not be separated from the care of clothing. As clothing was in constant contact with the skin, it could retain sweat, dust and various forms of dirt. Laundry was an extension of personal hygiene and cleanliness practices. Alexandre Librecht d'Albeca (1889, p. 85) describes women washing their loincloths at the edge of the lagoons. This demonstrates that water resources were used for both personal hygiene and the care of clothing.

Clothing, however, served a purpose that went beyond mere attire. Like hairstyles, it constituted a mark of social distinction. The way in which garments were worn could vary according to age, gender, social status, responsibilities or circumstances. Descriptions of the Danhomè region mention various types of clothing, including the loincloth and the *chocoto*. Edouard Foa (1895, p. 165) describes various types of loincloths worn in different ways in the Danhomè region.

Men's attire generally consists of two loincloths: one is wrapped around the waist and falls to mid-thigh, whilst the other wraps around the shoulders and reaches below the knee. The first is approximately 1.6 m to 1.8 m long and 1 m to 1.1 m wide; the other is the same length but 50 to 60 centimetres wider. The smaller loincloth is worn all day, both at work and at home. The other is worn in the street and at night. As clasps, pins or buttons are unknown, the loincloth is tightened around the lower back and the end that crosses over the other is tucked into the waistband formed by the loincloth itself, rolling it slightly from the inside outwards to form a small roll. The people of Dahomey usually draped their two loincloths around their loins, and with the excess fabric formed a bundle-shaped roll on the right near the hip, which they allowed to hang down slightly. At the end of the 19th century, this bundle of fabric was the height of elegance amongst the Fon. The chiefs made it the size of a melon. It was considered very elegant to make it voluminous.

The care of clothing helped to maintain people's appearance and demeanour. It involved a range of domestic tasks carried out mainly by women.

Washing the loincloths, doing the laundry and the various tasks involved in looking after the clothes were largely part of women's daily activities. Behind the apparent simplicity of these tasks lay, therefore, regular work that was essential to the functioning of the family. This aspect helps us to better understand their role in the organisation of daily life. A large part of the work required to look after the body, clothing and the home fell to them, even though this was rarely highlighted in historical accounts.

The teaching of hygiene-related skills was also an integral part of young girls' education. As they grew up, they learnt not only to look after themselves, but also to take part in various domestic tasks. Mastering personal hygiene, laundry and the care of linen revealed a broader conception of hygiene as a social and cultural phenomenon. It shaped them for social integration and prepared them for family responsibilities.

3.2. Hygiene as a social, cultural and symbolic phenomenon

The various practices studied show that hygiene is not limited to a single ritual of washing the body. Bathing, skincare, hairstyling, dental care, practices relating to menstruation and laundry all contributed to maintaining a healthy and clean body. Every society develops its own ways of defining what is clean or dirty, appropriate or inappropriate, beautiful or ugly.

In pre-colonial southern Benin, the frequency of bathing, dental care, the use of oils and perfumes, and the rules surrounding menstruation show that personal hygiene was associated with specific values and perceptions. The body also serves as a true mirror of social organisation. Differences between men and women, between children and adults, and also between ordinary people and those enjoying a special status could be reflected in the ways people washed, styled their hair, dressed, or took care of their appearance.

One of the main lessons of this study is therefore that we must avoid presenting the history of hygiene in Africa as a story that begins with the arrival of Western modernity.

The sources clearly show that, prior to colonisation, there were regular practices involving body washing, soap-making, oral care, skin care and the cleaning of clothes. However, one should not conclude that these practices were immutable. Societies in southern Benin maintained links with various regions and engaged in numerous exchanges. They were therefore able to come into contact with new products and gradually incorporate them into their daily routines. When consulting these sources, researchers must exercise a number

of precautions. Whilst these sources certainly provide an important basis for studying the history of this part of Benin during this period, they have numerous shortcomings. For this reason, they must be cross-referenced with one another and, as far as possible, linked to oral traditions, works on social history, and research into local techniques and knowledge.

The history of hygiene must therefore be viewed as a history of continuities, adaptations and appropriations. The care of clothing and the organisation of domestic work show that hygiene was part of people's daily lives. It thus appears as a social and cultural phenomenon and reflects the relationships between people, the environment and society.

Conclusion

The study of hygiene practices and personal care in the societies of southern Benin between the 17th and 19th centuries reveals an essential aspect of daily life that has as yet been little studied. Bathing, washing clothes, skin and hair care, oral hygiene, and practices relating to menstruation show that the body occupied an important place in the organisation of social life. Water was one of the main resources used in this bodily care. However, the frequency of bathing reported by several authors should not be generalised to the entire population of southern Benin. It must be considered in relation to environmental conditions, particularly the proximity of lagoons, rivers and other water sources.

Personal care practices were based on technical expertise. Soap, plant fibres, ointments and sticks used for oral hygiene demonstrate a thorough understanding of environmental resources and techniques suited to their daily needs, which were sometimes passed down through families. Hygiene was not, however, limited to the pursuit of physical cleanliness. The body was also cared for to enhance its appearance and ensure it was presentable. Skincare, hairstyles, perfumes, clothing and dental care all contributed to shaping this appearance. The body was thus seen as an object of care, health and beauty. Practices relating to menstruation reveal another essential dimension of this history: the existence of specific norms surrounding the female body, such as temporary seclusion, the existence of spaces reserved for women, and purification rituals preceding their return to the community.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of women's labour in the daily care of the body and clothing. Laundry, the passing on of certain skills, and the physical education of young girls all contributed to the reproduction of the domestic and social order.

The history of hygiene in pre-colonial southern Benin thus emerges as a history of the relationship between the body, the environment and society. It encourages us to move beyond a strictly medical definition of cleanliness and to consider hygiene as a set of material, aesthetic, social and symbolic practices. It also demonstrates the value of a history that pays close attention to everyday actions, transmitted knowledge and daily labour, which enable us to gain a different understanding of how African societies functioned before and at the start of colonisation.

Finally, this study opens up several avenues for further research. A comparative study of the various societies in southern Benin – notably those of Danxomè and the Yoruba cultural sphere – as well as with societies along the Gold Coast, would enable a better assessment of regional variations in bodily practices. Greater use of oral traditions and local botanical knowledge would also help to move beyond reliance on European accounts and to reconstruct local conceptions of the body, cleanliness and beauty more directly.

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