

CHAPTER TWO

PURITY AND IMPURITY: WHAT ENTERS AND LEAVES THE BODY

2.1. *Definition and Causes of Impurity in Islam*

The issues of impurity and purification of the body occupy a central place in the symbolic universe and practices of the Moroccan population, just as in other regions marked by Islam. Everyday occurrences like contact with physical substances produced by the organism can have consequences of a symbolic nature which, depending on the social agents involved, may have an impact on moral issues. Thus, a menstruating woman is not permitted to pray, fast during Ramadan or touch a copy of the Quran, because of the impurity generated by a physical substance coming out of her body. To put it another way, intention submits to bodily imperatives. Thus the boundaries between the material and symbolic or moral dimensions are almost imperceptible, as is made particularly clear in the final rite of passage, when a journey to the other world is only made possible through a scrupulous ritual of purification of the dead body, i.e. of inert matter which is, despite everything, matter.

In the Quran the term “impure” (*najis*) appears much less often than the term “purify”.¹ However, orthopraxis and the various traditions attribute a determining relevance to the idea of impurity in the lives of Muslims, who are obliged to do all that is in their power to avoid it or rid themselves of it, because of its associations with evil and the devil. Such implication of the body is historically linked to the contents of Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh*. Although faith (*īmān*) can be a more or less private affair, numerous aspects of its external expression through the body are regulated by law, at least in countries with Muslim governments.

Throughout history, prophetic medicine has been based on the *hadīth*-s but has also taken some of its notions of impurity from the field of humoral medicine. Al-Suyūṭī (1445–1505) wrote in his *Tibb ul-Nabbi* that hair growth should be seen as the waste product of the digestive process which takes place in the heart and the bladder, and that for this reason the hair of the armpits and pubes should be removed to prevent the build-up of impure

¹ *Janāba*, impurity (Quran, 5: 6); *najasan*, the impure, referring to atheists (Quran, 9: 28).

substances.² This sort of regulation of the body, directly linked to the practice of Islam, is basic and central. It is not a matter of establishing pre-conditions for the practice of rituals, because these actions are in fact the expressions of ritual in themselves: the body is implicated throughout the whole process. Prayer as submission, fasting and abstinence during Ramadan and ways of eating are all examples of this notion of the ritual and practice of Islam seen as a purification of the body, seen in fact as a kind of health system.

The *fiqh* traditionally distinguishes between two different kinds of impurity (*h'adath*), although as we will see there are notable differences between the different schools of law. This chapter will make note of these differences, highlighting in particular the characteristics of the Maliki school, which has a predominating influence in Morocco. These legal differences will reveal the political and open nature of a process of body management which nevertheless seeks to present itself as natural and closed.³

2.1.1. *Forms of Impurity*

Forms of impurity in Islam are roughly divided into two categories:

1. *Najāsa*. External impurity, which can impregnate itself on a person's skin or clothes. This refers to damp discharges from animals or humans, such as urine, blood, pus or excrement. Substances produced by pig-like animals or dogs are considered especially contaminating, but other animal substances which are not considered impure, such as sweat,

² Byron Good, *Medicine, rationality and experience: an anthropological perspective*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 109–110. The text by al-Suyūṭī can be found in Cyril Elgood, "Tibb ul-Nabbi or Medicine of the Prophet", *Osiris*, vol. 14 (1962), p. 171: "The waste products of the digestion which occurs in the heart and in the bladder are the growth of hair. Religious law orders these hairs to be plucked in the case of the arm-pits and to be shaved in the case of the pubes".

³ This is an issue which has aroused interest and debate among Islamologists, historians and anthropologists, especially when exploring the relationship between norms and practice. Since this is not the place to go into detail on this debate, I will limit myself to citing a few of the works which have taken up and revised the notions of purity and danger presented in Mary Douglas, *Purity and danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966; A. Kevin Reinhart, "Impurity/no danger", *History of Religions*, vol. 30, 1 (1990), pp. 1–24; Mohammed Hocine Benkheira, *L'amour de la loi. Essai sur la normativité en Islam*, Paris, PUF, 1997; Marion Holmes Katz, *Body of Text. The Emergence of the Sunnī Law of Ritual Purity*, Albany, State University of New York, 2002, and Richard Gauvin, "Ritual Rewards. A Consideration of Three Recent Approaches to Sunni Purity Law", *Islamic Law and Society*, vol. 12, 3 (2005), pp. 333–393.