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Ritual, Strategy, or Convention: Social Meanings in the Traditional Women's Baths in Morocco

Introduction

When I lived in Morocco for two years, friends back home asked me to write about the lives of women there. I found the task intimidating, because of the variety and contrasts I saw in this North African country, an ancient Muslim nation struggling with European influence for much of this century. Both traditional and modern, Morocco has a complex society which cannot be generalized.¹

In Morocco there are both rural and urban women, of nomadic Berber origin and of Arabic ancestry, and the traditional veiled Muslim woman as well as her unveiled counterpart who dresses in what we call Western clothes. Women stay home and women work outside the home. Some have many children, some limit their families and others never marry. How to write intelligently about all of them?

There is a place I can write about, a place where almost every woman in Morocco goes, regularly or for religious purification or for special occasions, and where she is freer than in any other public establishment. It is a place I got to know through long hours there. This place is the public bath, scene of ritual weekly bathing, known in Morocco by its Arabic name, the *hammam*.²

My early visits to hammams in Morocco resulted from first, a desire for a hot bath and second, a general interest in the culture of women there. I did not intend to take on the role of participant-observer or imagine that I would, some years later, reflect on what I

learned there to look for social meaning. I needed to bathe, loved the experience of the hammam, and kept detailed journal notes.

I lived in Morocco from June 1983 to July 1985, spending two years teaching in Casablanca, and summers in Azrou (in the Middle Atlas mountains), Tangier, and Rabat, the capital city, respectively. My first hammam visit took place in Azrou, a medium-sized, rural, Berber town, and I bathed at hammams in virtually every town and city throughout Morocco where I spent more than three days' time.³

I bathed weekly at a hammam in my Casablanca neighborhood, the Mâarif, a working-class district with few foreigners then living there. Altogether I bathed at Moroccan hammams about one hundred times. When I returned to Morocco in 1989 for a fifteen-day visit, I bathed at four hammams in different towns or cities, including a visit to my regular hammam in Casablanca. Through my observations in and notes from baths in many parts of Morocco, both rural and urban, I can describe the social organization of the hammam and why its use persists.

The women's public bath receives only marginal mention in Western writing. Hildred Geertz and Susan Schaefer Davis refer to it briefly in writing about other issues in Morocco. Westerners generally know of such public baths only through literature or travelogues, which contribute to the myth of the bath as an orgy-like place where women (or men) behave in ways that Westerners do not (so the 'other' thinking goes). Our view of women's baths in non-Western countries has been clouded with fantasy and what Edward Saïd calls Orientalism.

Few have looked at the hammam as a social institution on its own. Here I describe the hammam as I experienced it, since sheer enjoyment of it was my first motive in writing about it. I detail the important ritual aspects of the bath and, in acknowledgment of cultural biases, I look at Western attention to the Eastern women's bath. Then I describe how it functions in Moroccan society as a social world for women. Finally, I try to place the women's bathhouse in contemporary Moroccan culture — why does the tradition continue, when its original purpose of providing bath water because homes had none, no longer holds true?

The Bath Scene and Ritual

When one enters the large, high-ceilinged room, she will be struck by the simultaneous sensations of heat, noise, and darkness. The heat, and noise — women's voices, echoing, and raised to beat the din — are walls she instantly passes through, and her eyes work hard to see in the low light.

The visual sense takes over as she begins to sort out the view: a jumble of naked women, sitting, crouching, or lying on the floor, alone or in pairs or trios. They rub, scrub and massage themselves and each other, in a luxurious and seemingly erotic atmosphere of abandon.

The room is concrete, its ceiling arched, floors and walls covered in tiles. Women crowd around the water source, a large concrete basin built into the wall, usually divided into two parts for hot — scalding hot — and cold water faucets. They fill buckets with water, carrying half a dozen or so to the part of the floor they have chosen, and mark off this territory by a half-moon arrangement of the heavy, worn wooden or black rubber buckets.

Small children are everywhere, playing together or sitting in their mothers' water buckets, waiting to be washed. Children come to the hammam with their mothers, grandmothers, sisters, or some other female extension of the large and important Moroccan family.

These children often scream and cry as their mothers scrub and brush them as vigorously as they do themselves. Sometimes, exhausted by the heat and wrapped in a robe or towel, children nap on the benches in the dressing room while their mothers finish their own baths. But the children, like their mothers, love the weekly excursion to the hammam.

At the hammam, certain pungent smells cut into the ubiquitous fragrance of soap. The citric scent of oranges is common, since many women take them along to quench the unavoidable thirst in the bath. Children suck on oranges; the peels float away and clog floor drains around the room. There is also the smell of henna, the herb which Moroccan women use on their hair. Pounded to a fine powder and mixed with water or oil to make a muddy paste, henna is packed onto the hair and left under a scarf for hours, to be washed out at the hammam. Some women add a spice to the mix to disguise the smell of henna in their hair, and thus another odor at the hammam — the lovely scent of cloves.

The bath has a ritual and paraphernalia, including some Moroccan specialties. There is *sabon bildi*, or country soap, a thick, gooey, dark brown substance that somewhat resembles petroleum jelly. *Rhasool* is a traditional shampoo that comes in the form of hard, dry gray chunks that look like rocks. Two other requirements are a small, natural scrubbing stone and the *kees*, a coarse black mitt.

Protocol begins in the dressing room, where bathers take off all but their undergarments. This important social rule must not be broken and serves a taboo on women looking at other women's genital organs. One

leaves one's belongings with the woman in charge and pays a fee of several *dirhams* (Moroccan currency, then about eight U.S. cents each).

Inside the hammam, a bather chooses a room among the two or three connecting rooms of varying degrees of heat: very warm, hot, and extremely hot. She tries to find a clear space on the floor. This can be difficult on a Friday, the Muslim holy day, when women prepare themselves to pray at the mosque, or on a Sunday, the day before school begins. She marks her area with buckets, and fills them, two at a time, with water from the large basins, usually along a wall.

Before sitting down, the bather must perform a ceremonial washing of the floor area, which means splashing water from the buckets and swishing it away with her foot. She may not take someone else's floor space, and must try not to splash others with water as she bathes. The wise bather finds a spot that is upstream, not down, of all the dirty water that swirls its way toward the drains.

The hammam bather applies *sabon bildi* to every centimeter of her skin. She relaxes for a few moments to accustom herself to the heat and allow her skin to start perspiring. Then, she slowly scrubs with the *kees*, going over each part of her skin several times. This step is vital to the bath. The *sabon bildi* melts into her skin and makes scrubbing with the rough *kees* easier.

Women scrub and rub each other, unselfconsciously, in what is certainly a pleasurable experience. It is proper form to ask someone nearby to scrub one's back, and she will usually do so with care. One may offer to do this for someone sitting close by. Or, one can pay a woman who works there for a complete scrub and rubdown, which sometimes includes an intense massage.

A common sight at the hammam is a woman lying relaxed on the floor while another kneels over her, lifting her arm or turning her over, scrubbing away the old skin. One smiles and perspires as she works hard; her partner smiles, eyes closed, as she gives herself up completely to the other's ministrations. This intimate, uninhibited way of relating to each other is part of the satisfaction of the hammam for Moroccan women. They may perform this act of love for their friends, children, their own mothers, or sometimes, an older woman will take charge of a younger one, perhaps the rare foreigner at the bath, and give her the rubdown of her life.

The bath continues, women refilling water buckets as need dictates. This means arduous long lines and waits at the faucet, and heavy, full buckets to carry. Impatience here can turn into arguments. At one hammam I arrived early, one of the first, and naïvely filled all my buckets with steaming hot water, only to watch the later comers

stand in long waits for the trickle of hot water that remained. For the final rinse, the bather stands up and douses herself with all the water left in the buckets. Back in the dressing room, she sits or stretches out on benches for as long as it takes to settle the red flush on her face and become reaccustomed to the temperature of the real world. Older or pregnant women often lie down and nap.

Some hammams are very small and simple, two dim rooms with one central water source and few amenities. In baths like this, the women who work there make an occasional sweep with a broom, pushing orange peels and other garbage to a central drain in the floor. In bare feet, with her skirt tied up at her waist and her knee-length *srwel* (long pants) underneath showing, the woman working at the hammam helps keep order in the bath. Others are grander, with three large rooms for bathing, light falling from windows in the ceiling, several water sources and items for sale, such as modern-style shampoo and combs along with the traditional bath pomades.⁴

This traditional bath for women in Morocco takes two to three hours, a group experience of talk, laughter and the occasional dispute over territory or splashed water, which is forgotten after five minutes. When someone leaves the hammam, she says *b'sahahtik l'hammam*, a traditional blessing that means "to the health of you and your bath." It is as certain as are the Muslim traditions that shape Moroccan society that she will hear *Allah atik sahad*, the second half of the formula, "God give you health."

The Western Gaze

The hammam must be experienced firsthand, over a long period of time, for a sense of the role it plays in Moroccan women's culture. Many United States readers who know anything of Moroccan society do so only through Elizabeth Fernea's popular first-person account of her year there in the early 1970s, *A Street in Marrakech*. Fernea's well-described house, now a hotel in Marrakech's old section, stood literally right across the narrow street from a hammam. In her neighborhood, the bath and the bakery were connected, and she describes a number of encounters with the boy who guards the doorway to them. Yet she seems to have lived so close to this bath without making it part of her experience there, and her wonderful account, therefore, lacks this dimension.

Chandra Mohanty provides an excellent assessment of a view held by some Western feminists about women in Arab or Muslim societies.

We may think of Arab and Muslim women as one and the same, when to speak of Muslim women, for example, includes women from over twenty Arab and non-Arab countries. We may assume similar "historical, material and ideological power structures" among Muslim women (1991: p. 61). In Morocco there are women who are neither Arab nor Muslim, though those groups definitely dominate; there is no one Moroccan woman.

As Mohanty points out, we sometimes see Arab or Muslim women as passive victims of a hostile social structure. We keep them in a subject/object relationship with us (1991: p. 71). Western feminists need to see others in all their complex realities, with the particular histories and circumstances of each society firmly in mind. As a Westerner writing about the women's baths in Morocco, I aim to describe a social act — bathing in a group in a public place — and to ask why it continues long after its original purpose. Does it tell us anything about Moroccan society?

Susan Schaefer Davis briefly refers to the hammam in her account of women's work in a Moroccan village. She describes the women's bath in terms of its employees, their status in the village, income level and so on. She does capture its essential nature in a rural village: "In an area where women are still generally secluded, the bath is one of the main places where women of all families and social classes meet and gossip. . . . [A]lthough clanging pails, splashing water and crying children all conspire against it, the bath is one of the main centers of communication" (1978: pp. 418–419).

Perhaps the most often-cited Western account of women's baths is that of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762), the British aristocrat who traveled widely and wrote letters home filled with her observations. Her audience, like-minded aristocrats, shows clearly in the slant of her letters, as do the extreme upper-class hosts which shaped her tours. From Lady Montagu's 1717 letter about her visit to a woman's bath in Sophia, Turkey:

I stop'd here one day on purpose to see them . . . I beleive in the whole there were 200 Women and yet none of those disdainfull smiles or satyric whispers that never fail in our assemblys when any body appears that is not dress'd exactly in fashion . . . The first sofas were cover'd with Cushions and rich Carpets, on which sat the Ladys, and on the 2nd their slaves behind 'em, but without any distinction of rank by their dress, all being in the state of nature, that is, in plain English, stark naked, without any Beauty or deffect conceal'd, yet there was not the least wanton smile or immodest Gesture amongst 'em . . . There were many amongst them as exactly

proportion'd as ever any Goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian, and most of their skins shineingly white, only adorn'd by their Beautifull Hair divided into many tresses hanging on their shoulders . . . I perceiv'd that the Ladys with the finest skins and most delicate shapes had the greatest share of my admiration, tho their faces were sometimes less beautiful than those of their companions . . . so many fine Women naked in different postures, some in conversation, some working, others drinking Coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their Cushions while their slaves (pritty Girls of 17 or 18) were employ'd in braiding their hair. In short, tis the Women's coffee house, where all the news of the Town is told, Scandal invented, etc . . . I was charm'd with their Civillity and Beauty and should have been very glad to pass more time with them, but . . . I was in haste to see the ruins of Justinian's church, which did not afford me so agreeable a prospect as I had left, being little more than a heap of stones [*sic*] (in Halsband, 1965: pp. 313-315).

While the women at the bath are more interesting than stones, they do not make it beyond the level of agreeable prospect and tourist attraction for Lady Montagu, who counts the visit to the bath among her day's round of touring. She observes and rates the women as physical specimens but does not connect with them in any way. She shows no compunction about gazing at the bathers, but will not allow herself to be similarly regarded or participate with them in the bath.⁵ Her constant use of the pronoun forms "they," "their" and "them" indicates her sense of the women in this bath as beings completely distinct from herself.

Lady Montagu's much-read letter describes a few moments in a narrow slice of life in Turkey; Moroccan public baths do not have marble couches or ladies of the court with slaves waiting on them. While Moroccan baths vary in quality and cost, they are open to the public and if a woman can afford the entrance fee, she may enter. Lady Montagu saw the bath from her world view: what ladies of quality do, and how they treat her. Note her comparison of the Turkish court women to those in her homeland. She also rates their bodies, as if attending an auction or a sale; her remarks about the physical attributes of the Turkish women recall the assessments of African slave women on the market blocks of her time.

Montagu helped propagate the myth of the exotic Oriental woman living in an alien world. More than two hundred years later, in 1936, the French writer Anaïs Nin visited Fes, Morocco and continued the Western tradition of "othering" the women of the baths. In her diary she describes her visit:

I met the Arab women walking to their baths . . . They walked veiled and laughing, showing only their eyes and the hennaed tips of their hands holding their veils . . . I followed them. When they entered at the mosaic-covered building near the mosque, I entered with them. The first room was very large and square, all of stone, with stone benches, and rugs on the floor. Here the women laid down their bundles and began undressing. This was a long ceremony . . . and as I looked at them I felt that they could never really be naked, that all this they wore must cling to them forever, grow with their bodies. I was already undressed and waiting, standing, as I would not sit naked on the stone bench . . . I had come to look at them, because the beauty of their faces was legendary, and proved not at all exaggerated. They had absolutely beautiful faces, enormous, jeweled eyes, straight noble noses with wide spaces between the eyes, full and voluptuous mouths, flawless skins and always a royal bearing . . . I sat in admiration of their faces, and then I noticed that they looked at me. They sat in groups, looking at me and smiling. They mimicked that I should wash my hair and face. I could not explain that I was hurrying through the ritual because I did not like sitting in the darkening waters. They offered me the pumice stone after using it thoroughly all over their ponderous bodies. I tried but it scratched my face. The Arab women's skin was tougher . . . They laughed at what they must have thought was a European woman who did not know the rules of cleanliness . . . I finally slipped away to the next room where pails of cooler water were thrown over me. They were all watching me, with friendly nodding of their heads, commenting on my figure. By counting on their fingers they asked was I adolescent? I had no fat on me. I must be a girl. They came around me and we compared skin colors. They seemed amazed by my waist. They could enclose it in their two hands. They soaped my face with tenderness. They touched me and talked . . . I was ready to leave, but the Arab women transmitted messages of all kinds with their eyes, smiles, talk. The old woman led me to the third room, which was cooler, and threw cold water over me, and then led me back to the dressing room (in Stuhlmann, 1967: pp. 77-79).

Nin interacts with the women in the Fesi bath much more than did Lady Montagu. Yet her remarkable entrance into the bath, uninvited, alone and unprepared, is notable. She "had come to look at them," and unabashedly does so. Nin does bathe with the Moroccan women, and the gazing, touching and comparing are mutual, not one-way. Still, she perceives the women as significantly different from herself; they are very much the "other." In describing the women undressing, they seem almost inhuman to her, a fleshy mass together with their clothes.

She boldly enters their private world, unbidden, sure of her ability to do so and to have a favorable reception. Nin visited Morocco twenty-some years into the French occupation there, and her writing shows a presumptive colonialist attitude in appropriating selected aspects of the indigenous culture. Also, her description follows Lady Montagu's in its cataloguing and rating of the women's physical characteristics. She shows some self-conscious awareness but still sees the bathers as a homogeneous group of women that can be categorized.

My own first visit to a women's bath in Morocco appears in my journal entry dated Azrou, July 10, 1983, and describes first impressions that held true in virtually every hammam I visited.⁶ My experience differs from Montagu's and Nin's in that I went with a local resident and was beginning to study the local language. I had heard about the hammam and had some idea what to expect. Yet it was unquestionably a completely new experience for someone from my background; I describe the women as "thoroughly naked" and the atmosphere as "hot, steamy and sensuous." I also enjoyed the bath a lot, and knew I would be going back.

Much surprised me in my visits to Moroccan hammams. Once I noticed two grown women, naked identical twins, bathing beside me. Another time women in the waiting room lectured me about wearing a knee-length dress without *srwel* underneath. They said *h'shumah*, one old woman putting her finger under her eye and pulling down, in the Moroccan gesture for "shame on you." In Essaouira, a coastal city known for its seafood, the hammam floor was littered with empty shells of crab legs and claws.

One evening I seemed destined not to have my bath. It was in Marrakech, during Ramadan. During the holy month I liked to go to the hammam at the hour of *liftor*, the breaking of the daily fast at sundown. The bath was virtually empty at this time, as all went home to be with their families and partake of the ritual soup, milk and dates. One or two women stayed behind to run the place, usually crouching around a fire and having their soup right there.

I had hennaed my hair in the morning and looked forward to a leisurely evening bath to rinse it out. At the first hammam I went to, the woman in charge would not let me enter and wouldn't say why not. I asked around and learned of another bath on Zanaqat Zitoun (Olive Street) further inside the medina, and I asked a family walking together to show me the hammam. They took me to the men's entrance, which I almost entered, until someone stopped me.

At the woman's entrance, a friendly woman told me to wait, and then an old woman came out. She would not let me enter, either. *Alesh*

la? (Why not?) I asked, perplexed. "Because I said no, that's why, and when I say no, the answer is no." I felt five years old. I went inside the doorway anyway and just stood for a few minutes, mainly to get away from prying eyes on the street, and frustrated, cried.

The old lady came after me, walking rapidly, putting on her *jellaba* (long, hooded robe) as she walked, and took me by the wrist. She said she was taking me to the *douche* (public shower), and, severe-faced, pulled me along, turning right and right again, further and further into the alleyways of the medina. Suddenly she stopped and pointed, then turned and walked away.

I had no idea where I was or how to get out of there. I still needed to wash the henna out of my hair; I could not sleep with it. I walked along, trying not to look lost, and asked some teenage boys in the doorway of a tiny shop where the nearest hammam was, and one gentle soul kindly led me there. I would never have found it on my own. I tried to learn from this situation. Was it because it was Ramadan? Was it an overt dislike of Westerners, or Americans in particular? Or was it just that my henna would make a mess, and people feared I wouldn't clean up after myself? Nothing like that had happened before.

As a Westerner, particularly one from the United States where privacy and physical modesty are cultural rules and where individual bathrooms (sometimes several to one dwelling) are prized territory, I have found that my lasting impression of the hammam is delight in the sense of well-being that the bath gives and gratitude for the chance to have known Moroccan women in this way. Moroccan women's freedom about touching — in a particular social setting with specific rules — impressed me. A structured social act for them, bathing in a public place in Morocco may be more than just a bath.

The Bath as Social World

The hammam is a cultural common denominator among Moroccan women. It is also a place where an outsider can observe much about the culture. I saw gold, for example, the honored standard of wealth for the Moroccan woman — the traditional wedding gift from her husband and often the only property she owns throughout her life. Whether it be earrings or the popular stacks of bangle bracelets, the Moroccan woman often displays her gold jewelry, including during her bath.

Some Moroccan women have tattoos, signs of their Berber origin. Nomadic Berber tribes inhabited Morocco before the Arabs came, and

still active today, each tribe has a simple symbol which it weaves into its carpets, and, yes, may tattoo onto its women's chins, necks, foreheads, wrists or ankles. Today Berber women can often be recognized by the ash-blue tattoos.

If a woman has just married or is celebrating a special occasion such as the birth of a child, her feet and hands will show it in beautiful, lacy, dark orange patterns created by painting henna paste on with a small stick. These intricate designs, which include hennaed fingernails or toenails that turn a deep black or brown, last for weeks. In Alifa Rifaat's short story "Honour," she describes the bath ritual associated with marriage in Egypt:

They took Sophia to the public bath. The bride's bath involves special rituals. Shalabya, the bath house attendant, came with her equipment to perform them. She brought ashes from the stove, sugar, lemon, scented soap and an abundant supply of containers filled with warm water, all of which are applied to the bride's body so she will be smooth and hairless. During the process, Shalabya whispered words of guidance into the bride's ear to prepare her for the night. Amidst the singing and cries of joy the bride let Shalabya decorate her with red and white dyes. Then we combed her hair (1981: p. 82).

Ceremonial occasions aside, regular bathing at the hammam is a place of information exchange for women in Morocco. In a place where both traditional and modern medicine share the respect of the people, signs of health problems are always a topic of discussion at the hammam. Be they telltale surgical scars or the dark souvenirs of a burning, rendered by a traditional doctor to excise a disease, all are debated by women at their bath. Once in a great while one sees a woman, or a very young girl, who has been circumcised, outer genital parts and clitoris cut away in an operation that most Moroccans say occurs rarely, if at all, today.

This collective bathing experience is a way of life as unquestioned as the rising of the sun. Sanitation is not an issue, because one leaves the public bath so unquestionably clean that potential health hazards seem impossible. Many Moroccans have bathing facilities at home, but they still go to the hammam, at least for special occasions such as religious feasts, weddings, or after the birth of a child, no matter what their educational level or social class. Whether for the cleansing steam heat or the social encounters, the visit to the bath is experienced as pleasure.

Every Moroccan town and city has hammams, one for each neighborhood. Men have hammams too, and neither sex visits the other's

(except the inclusion of small boys as previously noted). The baths are usually side by side, the water for both heated by the same wood-fueled fire. In a very small town, a sole hammam might be shared by women and men, with designated hours or days for each. It is a widely known place with clearly designated social norms.

Public baths do not advertise, however, and can be hard to find. I went to one in Rabat that was built into the wall that surrounds the old medina (the traditional, pre-colonial section of the city); to enter I lifted a heavy wooden slab covering a hidden arched doorway. In Marrakech, just off the popular tourist square D'jemaa el f'na, I found a hammam down a narrow dirt alleyway, up a flight of stairs. In Fes it was inside the old medina on a dark street three feet wide, yet huge and bright inside with two-story-high ceilings. Sometimes the public bath is next to the public baking oven, its huge, underground fire serving the bath and the bakery at once.

Hammams have regular users; women (and men) tend to be loyal to one over time. Proximity may be the determining factor; price may affect the choice. Some hammams are more expensive than others, and for persons of very limited means, a couple of dirhams can make a significant difference. Hammams open in the morning and close shortly after sundown, later in winter. Women could not go to the hammam during the night, when their mobility is much more constricted.

In the end, the women's hammam is an important place not only for relaxation but for exchange of news and information (who is a good doctor, who will have a baby). Western ways of exchanging information and establishing community — telephones, neighborhood newspapers, community groups, or casual encounters in stores — do not function that way in Moroccan society. The hammam serves that purpose. Morocco's society is collective; people together take responsibility for the disabled or infirm, for example, and public celebrations of marriages, births and male circumcisions are important. The bath is part of living collectively.

It is ultimately the social place for Moroccan women, who come in two- or three-generational family groups or with friends. Girls drop by to look for their friends or sisters; women greet the workers there with multiple kisses on the cheek. Once school days have ended, women's opportunities for meeting women outside their family and marriage relationships diminish. The hammam milieu is a positively sanctioned one for such interaction.

Sometimes I felt like an intruder on intimate social and family scenes that have been continuing for literally hundreds of years. I felt that I saw much of Morocco inside the hammam. Here Moroccan

women go, and are at ease, and touch each other unselfconsciously and with pleasure. While not a place for erotic contact as are some Western baths, the hammam is the place where women relax completely and reveal much about themselves. It has specific norms for behavior and a social function beyond that of bathing. It is, as Montagu says, the "women's coffee house," in a culture where corner cafés are still forbidden terrain for them.

Tradition in a Changing Society

Why does the custom continue in an era long past the one when hammams served the needs of households without running water or bathing facilities? While I lived in Morocco I saw the women's baths as an innocuous opportunity for being outside the house, away from domestic tasks, in a relaxed situation where accompaniment by a man was unnecessary for social approbation. Once a week, she is out of the house and away from the eternal chores of daily food preparation, in a land where freezers and convenience foods are rare. She has several hours of uninhibited repose in a place where friends, family and neighbors laugh and exchange news, and where no man will ever enter.⁷ Finally, she spends time on herself and her body, scrubbing and smoothing to a clean glow that gives an unmistakable aura of well-being. The weekly visit to the hammam in Morocco seems a well-anticipated leisure and an otherwise rare time of attention to self.

I saw no other public gathering places for women beyond school age. They meet with women in their families and in their immediate environment — the apartment building, the alleyway, the block — but even though more now work at outside jobs, women's movements in Morocco remain limited compared to those of men.

Hildred Geertz writes about relationships among women in the Moroccan community of Sefrou. She describes the importance of talk, visiting and neighborhood relationships, usually defined by perimeters similar to those a neighborhood bath defines. "This tangled social world of home and neighborhood, the dar and the derb, is above all a women's world" (1978: p. 330). Women move about freely in their own homes and immediate neighborhoods — a couple of blocks — in a world in which social forces act to control women's movements.

Geertz stresses the importance of this contact with other women: "They may relate freely to any of their female companions, and because the intricacies of personal relations are constantly being discussed among them, most women have a detailed knowledge of

everything that is going on" (1978: p. 331). Moroccan women discuss everything, Geertz says; nothing is exempt from scrutiny. The weekly visit to the bath is part of this: "The give-and-take of mutual review and appraisal continues at all times, sometimes desultory and trivial, sometimes intense and agonistic, often touching on their men's lives as well as their own" (1978: p. 333).

Hammam bathing as I saw it seemed a luxurious escape for Moroccan women from household drudgery and an occasion to develop camaraderie. I still hold these assessments of the bath. Yet the women's bath has not been without controversy. Leila Ahmed, in her examination of gender roles in Islam, says that in medieval Islam, the women's bath had its critics.

Some theologians frowned upon the practice for women and pronounced it un-Islamic. . . . Ibn al-Hajj censures the practice. . . . argu[ing] that religious law required that women be covered from navel to knee when among other women but that women at the baths paid no attention to this and did not cover themselves at all. . . . Jewish and Christian women also attended the baths: Islam required that Muslim women's bodies not be seen by non-Muslims . . . Hammams led to numerous corruptions, including some he had not mentioned (1992: pp. 120–121)⁸.

In medieval times, bathing at the hammam for Moroccan women may have been more controversial. Is it still connected to seclusion of women? Magida Salman says, in Islam, "[p]uberty constitutes the end of childhood and the beginning of seclusion in the narrow world of feminine space" (1987: p. 7). Her movements must be controlled, surveyed (1987: p. 11). That may include even going to the bath.

Nawal el Saadawi says that men in the Arab world want to keep women out of their sight and the public domain. "The female world . . . is looked upon by men as an area surrounded by, and peopled with, obscure and puzzling secrets, filled with all the dark mystery of sorcery, devilry and the works of Satan" (1982: p. 147). As infants and toddlers, Moroccan men visit the women's baths with their mothers, sisters or other family members. But after those early years, the bath becomes a place with lines clearly drawn, women safely outside the gaze of men.

In a chapter on spatial boundaries, Fatima Mernissi describes women's visits to the hammam as "trespass[ing] into the men's universe," that is, the street, the public realm. Respectable women stayed home, or, went to the baths with an elderly female chaperone after receiving their husband's permission to go (1987: p. 143). Women

sometimes cannot freely choose to go to the bath, then. Mernissi describes the importance of the baths for women:

[A] hammam . . . has manifold functions besides allowing people to perform the purification rituals and bathe. The hammam is an intense communication centre, a powerful information agency exposing the secrets of the families who frequent it . . . [the women who work there] have more or less complete biographical accounts of the members of the families living around the hammam. The young girls are a particular target for gossip . . . (1987: p. 123).

Yet, going to the hammam may be considered a privilege, a freedom to be granted, not a right. Mernissi's discussion of the baths appears in her account of mother- and daughter-in-law relationships in Moroccan households, in which "the wife must ask for permission and money to go to the hammam" from the husband or the mother-in-law (1987: p. 131). The consent to go to the bath may be withheld; the right to go to the bath is important and valuable enough to make it a bargaining point in some relationships that involve power struggles.

Fatna Sabbah writes about the eroticization of relationships between men and women in Islam, in which the dangerous female body "has been neutralized by the traditional structuring of space (seclusion of women)" (1984: p. 17). Is the hammam a sanctioned freedom from such surveillance and control, or, might women's baths be precisely an extension of the seclusion, separation and control of women's movements? The women's bath in Morocco, while serving some positive social functions, also helps to keep women in their proscribed place.

Conclusion

I was a naïve observer, especially during my two-year residence in Morocco, when I used the baths functionally and simply lived the experience. I did not systematically investigate public baths nor formally interview Moroccans about them. With a functional Moroccan Arabic level, I could converse with women in the bath on most topics but surely missed nuances, cultural references and lots of unfamiliar vocabulary.

My observations come from my love affair with the experience of bathing at hammams. I made my own ceremonial hammam visits part of my experience of them (turning thirty, leaving Morocco, revisiting Morocco). The baths intrigued me, and I could only experience them

through my cultural lenses, those of a middle-class, white, Christian-raised North American woman. Yet, I also lived and worked in the culture for more than two years, speaking the local dialect, and became such a regular at my Mâarif hammam that my presence there as a foreigner there perhaps diminished in importance for the local women.

In Moroccan society as I knew it, the women's public bath was an indispensable social outlet. Behavior related to, but outside, the hammam — getting permission to go there, going there alone versus going escorted, for example — reflects important larger issues of women's freedom of movement and their place in Islamic consciousness. But in a time when many homes have running water and private baths, it is a tradition which would not have to persist only to serve gender relations. Inside the women's hammam endures a socially important, pleasure-giving environment for those who go there, and that is why it thrives in Morocco in the late twentieth century.

Notes

1. Warm thanks to Phyllis Coontz, Mounira Charrad, and Aziza Zemrani for their helpful comments and suggestions on this manuscript.
2. Transliterating words from a non-Latin language to the Roman alphabet is always a subjective business; to me, the word in the Moroccan Arabic dialect (known as *dar-ija*) sounds more like *hemmem*, but I will follow Mernissi and Ahmed, two Moroccan women writers, along with many others, who use *hammam*.
3. I traveled a great deal in Morocco, having a fair amount of free time. A comprehensive list of towns and cities where I bathed in hammams includes Azrou, Casablanca, Essoauira, Fes, Goulimine, Marrakech, Midelt, Ouarzazate, Rabat, Rich, Tangier, Tafraout, Taroudant, Tiznit and Zagora. In larger cities such as Marrakech I bathed at more than one hammam.
4. One hammam in which I bathed had individual urn-shaped water basins and spigots built along the wall at about four-foot intervals; each bather simply waited for an empty spot and dispensed with the heavy buckets, using her own plastic dish to scoop water from the basin as needed. This hammam, however, was rare and I found no others like it.
5. Lady Montagu continues: "The Lady that seem'd the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her and would fain have undress'd me for the bath. I excus'd my selfe with some difficulty, they being all so earnest in perswading me. I was at last forc'd to open my skirt and shew them my stays, which satisfy'd them very well, for I saw they belev'd I was so lock'd up in that machine that it was not in my power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my Husband" [*sic*] (1965: p. 315).

6. I wrote:

Yesterday evening I had my first experience at a hammam, or public bath. In ways it was just like I had imagined. Many mostly naked women sat around the edge of the room, drying off, talking, slowly dressing . . . We watched M. pick out about eight heavy, black rubber buckets for us all to use . . . We went into the inner room and found a place along the wall where the three of us could sit. The walls were lined, all the way around, with women sitting on the floors, legs outstretched, with three or four black buckets marking off their territory . . . We didn't get as many stares as I thought we would. Many women returned the smiles I offered. Some women had their children with them and bathed them too. The place was pretty crowded, and women of all ages and sizes were there, all thoroughly naked except for the perfunctory bikini underwear. The atmosphere was hot, steamy and sensuous to me, as I watched the women lovingly scrub each other's backs, sides, buttocks, even breasts. Many smiles and much camaraderie among the women, all taking their time and relaxing . . . They scrub themselves and each other very hard, all over, repeatedly, and douse themselves with water from time to time.

K. and I, pretty well finished, sat talking, rinsing ourselves and idly scrubbing . . . We went to the outer room, slowly dried and dressed, and did get a few stares, especially at our clothing. Kim wore a *jellaba*, so she was more respectable than I, at least in her opinion (unpublished journal).

7. Croutier, in her superficial look at hammams in a chapter of *Harem: The World Behind the Veil*, describes the hammams of harems as "an erotic distraction for harem masters" (1989: p. 91) and cites the secondhand account of a French industrialist who describes a sultan's game of concealing himself to watch his women enter the bath. No other writer mentions adult men having access to women's baths, and my experience in Morocco showed deeply-held taboos by both men and women about opposite-sex contact of any sort inside the hammams.

Croutier, a native of Turkey who moved to the United States at age eighteen, revisited Turkey fifteen years later as a self-described "expatriate" with a "self-conscious awareness of . . . feminist rhetoric" (1989: p. 11). She developed a fascination with the harem quarters attached to the Topkapi Palace, and conjectures about social behavior in the harem women's baths. Her mix of cultural perspectives and the limits of her account — she comes from a privileged background and writes of palace culture — bring into question her contribution to an understanding of social uses of the bath.

8. Interestingly, during the time that I lived in Morocco, non-Moroccan men were banned from using the men's public baths. The reason most often cited was a fear of homosexual advances from Western men to Moroccan boys or men. No such prohibition existed against non-Moroccan women using the public baths.

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