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# Architecture and the Sacred: A Season in the Hammam<sup>1</sup>

Abdelfettah Kilito

**M**any men speak about their early childhood experience of the steam bath or *hammam* as if it were a lost paradise. They used to accompany their mothers to this warm and moist place, a place filled with magical female bodies. And then they had to stop going with their mother and resign themselves to visiting the *hammam* with their father. They had to leave the world of women and enter into the world of men. At about the age of five, they were subjected to a second weaning, a second separation. The maternal *hammam* is thus nostalgically recalled as a paradise of childish loves.

I personally have no recollection of my first years in the *hammam*, in any case not of the bodies of young and vigorous women! The only image (memory? fantasy?) that I still have is the flabby nudity of three middle-aged women. They are standing at the entrance to the first room of the *hammam*, where they are probably chatting because they are arranged in a circle and facing each other. One of them negligently holds a bottomless wooden bucket. They will never move from their positions; they'll remain fixed in this pose for all eternity.

Let us move these women, these Danaids with pierced casks, out of our path, eliminate them from our consideration and enter the *hamman*. Our steps will lead us gradually but directly toward the third room, the overheated room with its streaming fountain and its basin full of boiling water. Along our way, in the humid semi-darkness, we will discern standing, sitting, or lying silhouettes. We will take some water at the fountain, energetically wash ourselves, and then reemerge in the daylight—clean and with our bodies reinvigorated. All this is true, but it should be added that, in the meantime, we will have experienced significant moments of human existence in the way they are depicted by religion: life and death, submission and revolt, virtue and vice, pardon and blame, hope and despair, this world and the next one, joy and suffering, the appeal addressed to God and the problematic answer that descends from above.

It is not only in the mosque that a believer lives and practices his faith, nor is it only through reading the Qu'ran that he forges bonds with the sacred; the *hammam* is also a place of spiritual effervescence where he lives a story in his flesh and in his spirit; it is the story of stories, the story of his destiny enlarged to the dimensions of all human destiny. In the space of a single hour, time contracts and becomes condensed; then the history of man emerges—his relationship with the world and with God. The comparison between the *hammam* and the mosque is not gratuitous, for the *hammam* assures the ritual purity of the body, a prelude to prayer. And that's not all: the architecture of the *hammam* is centered upon the basin of hot water, the living heart of the structure, its center of attraction, a magnetic focal point from which no one can escape. The path through the *hammam* is constrained; it leads straight to the basin, reminding one of the mosque in which one can only move in a single direction, the direction of the *mihrāb*, the niche that has been opened in the wall and is pointing toward Mecca.

But in contrast to the mosque, the *hammam* is a place of risk, of spectacular falls. At every moment one is on the verge of slipping upon the soapy tile. One can also faint in the suffocating heat. And then, the worst of all nightmares, one takes the risk of falling into the steaming basin every time one leans over it to fetch water, of being hurled to the bottom of hell, hell being a simmering burial pit, a boiling abyss. Whoever crouches down to plunge his bucket into the basin must resist the call from below, the suicidal attraction, and to know, according to the throw of the dice, whether he is among the just who will be showered with blessings or if he is among the pariahs who will incur divine wrath. The *hammam* is a theater where rehearsals for the final day, judgment day, take place. All those bodies slowly moving about, as if in a dream, or silently gathering in front of the basin, indistinct bodies, interchangeable, naked: one cannot make out their contours in the dim light, and besides, they display no sign that might betray their origins, their social class, their wealth or their poverty, their strength or their weakness. By establishing an absolute indistinguishability, the *hammam* simultaneously creates an absolute equality, prefiguring the situation that will prevail on the final day, when no one will be able to enjoy the benefits of titles, honors, or any other privileges.

Equality in the face of God, equality in the face of death. To go to the *hammam* is to die a little, to "rehearse" one's own death. And when I say death, I'm not only thinking about the state of exhaustion that invades the entire body and bows it toward the ground, that shortness of breath that immediately causes you to flee the hot room for the milder temperature in one of the other two rooms. When I say death, I'm also (and above all) thinking about a specific experience, the experience with the masseur, that muscled character with a tireless heart, a kind of genie of the *hammam*, a man who seems ignorant of spoken language, articulated language; while he massages you, he whistles, strident sounds made by placing the tip of his tongue against his teeth, sounds whose meaning can only be plumbed in the bestial or primitive depths. You are

completely at the mercy of this sturdy individual; you are dependent upon him; in his hands, you succumb to complete inertia; you are dead; you are a corpse undergoing the washing that precedes burial. You are like death in many ways: nakedness, inertia, proximity to the ground, and the water, the warm water that purifies you and prepares you for your encounter with God. The masseur is a ferryman: as the one who washes the dead, he is not kneading your body for hygienic or therapeutic reasons; his role is even more awesome because he ushers you across a threshold—the threshold that separates this world from the next one.

The *hammam* involves a descent into the other world. One does not ascend to the *hammam*; one descends into it; it would be difficult to imagine an elevated *hammam*. As soon as you open the door to enter the first room, you must descend a step, at least one step. The *hammam* is a chthonic place, located in the depths of the earth, in its subterranean entrails. As a netherworld, it is dark, with neither star nor sun, far from day and night, beyond calendars and chronologies. The sun cannot enter this world of the dead, this den of shadows with indistinct forms—imperfect reflections of the forms in the world above, the world bathed in sunlight. The *hammam* is a cloudy mirror upon whose surface are projected vague silhouettes, unrecognizable apparitions. You become the shadow of yourself as soon as you descend into this catacomb, this burial pit with a thick, suffocating vapor.

What are all these shadows doing in this infernal place? They're waiting, they're waiting for a sign of the divine, the epiphanal sign, the uncertain announcement of salvation. As you know, the most precious thing in the *hammam* is the water, warm water; sometimes it flows in streams, but often it becomes scarce, a miserly amount, and that is when the most terrifying moment occurs, the most dramatic episode. After having scraped the bottom of the basin, the bathers, dripping with sweat in front of their empty buckets, crouch down and wait for the blessed water to begin flowing again. The great ordeal begins. It is initially an ordeal of language: one must communicate with the being on the other side of the wall, the other side of the rock, the water carrier who is both invisible and unpredictable. His intentions are undecipherable, and everything depends upon his mood; he can provide unlimited amounts of water, just as he can withhold it; master of the water and the fire, he functions in a way that seems completely arbitrary.

It's with him that one needs to communicate. But does he hear? Does he have any concern for those tired shadows who are on the verge of distress? Perhaps he is asleep; perhaps he is not where one thinks he is; perhaps he has left, abandoning to their fate those who are completely dependent upon him, those whom he holds prisoners before a blind wall. As time passes, despair overwhelms them. Occasionally a shadow, overcome with a fit of rage, picks up a pail and strikes the wall of the basin, giving new life to an ancient gesture, the gesture of Moses striking the rock with his stick and causing water to spring

forth from the hard, dumb rock. . . . The dialogue with this invisible being continues, endless but also increasingly violent, a one-sided dialogue, or more precisely, a dialogue in which the instrument of communication is not the same for the two parties. The appeal launched by the bathers and the repeated blows on the rock merge with the message of the voice, of the word that they are crying out to the invisible being: "Free the water!" But he does not react; he does not respond to speech with speech, nor to blows with blows. His only response is silence, an ambiguous response, all the more so because no one knows whether or not he has received the message. In the presence of this silence, a wait that might be endless, the request is renewed; the cries become louder and louder; the tone of the discourse (and of the blows on the rock) vary, alternating among entreaty, supplication, protest, indignation, and even threats or insults.

The silence of the invisible being becomes increasingly intolerable. People consult each other and decide to do something; in any case, they will not continue to roast their bodies without attempting to escape from this disturbing situation. To extract an answer from the invisible being, the first need to know whether or not he has received the message. Their last recourse will be the *hammam* attendant, a character whom I have not yet described and one to whom it will be necessary to address an appeal forthwith.

Seated peacefully near the door, he supervises arrivals and departures; he is also responsible for the bathers' clothing, and as the doorman, he mediates between two worlds, the outside world and the inside world, the world of sunlight and the world of darkness, the world of solid bodies and the world of unsubstantial shadows, the world of apparel and the world of nakedness, the world of the living and the world of the dead. It is to this liminal man that they will have recourse in their attempt to ascertain the intentions of the invisible being. He will be the messenger, thus complementing his role as an intermediary between two worlds with that of intermediary between the shadows and the invisible being, with whom he is in direct contact; he can approach him; he can speak to him, undoubtedly face to face, whereas the shadows are irrevocably separated from him by a blind wall. His intercession provokes a favorable response from the master of the water and the fire, finally rescuing the community of shadows.

His intercession does not always have an immediate effect; the invisible being, it seems, insists upon remaining unpredictable and underscoring the exceptional nature of his gift. As their wait lengthens, the bathers divert their anger toward the mediator, whom they accuse of being responsible for the misfortune that has befallen them, the mediator who thus assumes the role of scapegoat. Then suddenly a miracle occurs: a thin stream of water begins to flow! The rock has finally softened and become liquid! An immense joy spreads among the shadows.

But they must continue to wait for a while before they can help themselves to the water; they must wait until the basin has been filled to the rim; they must organize the distribution of the water, resist the temptation to act in an

undisciplined way, and think about the common good. Attempting to fill one's own buckets immediately would only create chaos and confusion; everyone would like to be the first to take the water; scuffles would break out; the ensuing melee might degenerate into a free-for-all, and in the end, no one would get any water. However, none of that happens. From among the mass of bathers, someone suddenly emerges and installs himself next to the basin to prohibit all selfish initiatives. It is usually a well-built individual whom no one has specifically appointed to this task. He designates himself and offers his services for nothing. He has immense power, but no one ever challenges his authority, which stems from the fact that he will be the last to be served. And that is exactly what happens. This man who draws and distributes water demonstrates an admirable egalitarian spirit and provides an exemplary lesson in self-sacrifice and altruism. When the basin is full, he allocates the water in an equitable fashion, only half-filling each bucket at first. In the end, everyone returns to his own place after having exercised his communal spirit and having experienced a few privileged moments of human solidarity. The water continues to flow, and since everyone has been served, the basin overflows. After scarcity... abundance and excess, but no one worries about communicating with the invisible being and asking him to halt the stream of profusion.

After having mentioned the four principal characters of the *hammam* (the masseur, the invisible being, the mediator, and the man who guards the basin), I must remind you of a fifth one; it is true that he remains outside, but he is still essential. When the bather leaves the *hammam*, he has already exchanged his former being for a new one. He is in a state of ritual purity; he has changed clothes (and skin). Then he ascends from the chthonic world into the world of sunlight, where, after having died, he experiences a rebirth. Upon leaving the *hammam*, he will perhaps encounter the man who supplies the fuel, prodding his donkey with a short stick, the donkey loaded with sawdust and spreading a pleasant smell in his wake, the warm and sweet smell of wood. Always accompanied by his donkey, he is one of the few people who have direct and intimate contact with the invisible being. In his deep pit, the latter uses wood chips and sawdust to assure the fusion of water and fire, to feed the glowing, incandescent magma that seethes in the bowels of the earth, a subterranean sun, an upside-down sun that shines from below.

Today his donkey has disappeared; you will no longer encounter him in the vicinity of the *hammam*. He has been replaced by a Honda. Furthermore, oil is gradually superseding wood. A small change, on the outside, inessential. Yet when one touches a single element, its movement affects other elements, and in the end, the entire structure collapses. The donkey has been replaced by the Honda and the wood by the oil; as a result, the sweet smell of the sawdust and the wood chips disappears; then the contact with the tree and the forest (no matter how distant) disappears as well. For that matter, the buckets in the *hammam* are no longer made of wood; initially, the soft wood was replaced by a cold, hard, sharp metal, and later by a black, dull, dismal plastic material.

More serious than the disappearance of wood is the disappearance of the basin and its replacement with faucets—a faucet in each of the three rooms. This means that the heart of the *hammam* has ceased to beat, that a profound change has taken place, and that its immediate effect has been a panicky disorientation. A *hammam* without a basin (or whose basin has ceased to function) is like a mosque without a *mihrab*; all directions become possible, and they all have the same value. There is no longer an orientation that points one unequivocally in the direction of the fire; there is no longer the initiatory path that leads from one room to another until it reaches the overheated room. Because it's now the same temperature in all three rooms, the initiatory path no longer has any meaning. The tripartite division of the *hammam* no longer has a *raison d'être*, for the separate function of each room has disappeared.

All at once the sacred character of the *hammam* becomes blurred. If one needs merely to open a faucet to have hot water, what need is there to dialogue with the invisible being and to experience everything that this dialogue entails in terms of ordeals, dangers, and hopes? The *hammam* is no longer a *hammam*; it is a public bath, a hygienic place, nothing more. An entire dimension of our childhood, our past, is crumbling. Things are no longer what they were; we must say goodbye to the *hammam*.

translated by Patricia Geesey

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>This paper originally appeared in A. Bencherifa and H. Popp, eds., *Passauer Mittelmeerstudien, Vol. I, Le Maroc: espace et société* (Passau, 1990) and is reprinted here with permission.