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Interpreting Their Blood: The Contradictions of Approaches to Menstruation Through Religious Education, Ritual and Culture in Rabat, Morocco

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***Interpreting their Blood: the Contradictions of
Approaches to Menstruation through Religious
Education, Ritual and Culture in Rabat, Morocco***

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SIT Spring 2006

Abstract

Menstruation is often perceived by individuals of different cultural and religious backgrounds as dirty or impure, and therefore has become a demeaning feature of womanhood. The dialectical concepts of purity and impurity are integral parts of Islamic religion, thought and practice as they draw lines between those things sacred and those profane. Women's religious education, in particular, is critical in establishing positive reinforcement for their perceptions of their physical selves and their role in society. However, education in this manner cannot be limited to schools and religious institutions; family and culture are integral parts of a women's education about subjects relating to her menstruation. Through an investigation of Islamic approaches to menstruation, this paper attempts to assess the relationship between the realms of formal religion as presented through texts and educators on menstruation and societal cultural perceptions of the subject in Morocco. Rituals of purity become a critical indication, manifestation and tool of the discourse that are both followed and redefined by different women.

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Table of Contents

- I. Abstract**
- II. Acknowledgments**
- III. Introduction**
- IV. Methodology**
- V. Language: Names and Phrases**
- VI. Purity (*Tahara*) and impurity (*Najasa*)**
- VII. Islamic Education in Morocco**
- VIII. Coming of Age (*Bulurh*)**
 - a. Menarche Rituals of the Village**
- IX. Religious Practice**
 - a. Perceptions and Understanding**
 - i. Dirty (*Muscha*)**
 - ii. Fasting During Ramadan**
 - iii. *Adha***
 - iv. Waiting Period (*al a'adah*)**
- X. Irregularities**
- XI. Virginitv**
- XII. Conclusion**
- XIII. Implications**
- XIV. Appendix**
- XV. Bibliography**

Introduction

For many girls, the most significant aspect of their sexual growth and development during puberty is the onset of menstruation. If a girl has not been prepared for this event, the sight of the first few drops of blood can be terribly frightening and confusing. At this time, cultural and familial attitudes towards menstruation and its understanding of impurity, informed largely by religion in urban Morocco, are critical in impacting a girl's understanding of her place in society and religion, as she must change her normal practices. Within the urban capital of Rabat, educated residents, predominantly religious scholars, have proclaimed an adoption of a moderate Islam, taking pride in the tolerance and relevance of Islam to Modern daily life. Simultaneously, social family values have retained notions of gender and social life that do not correlate with the progressive ideas advocated by this brand of modernist Islam.

Although Islam stresses a basic knowledge of text and scriptures demanding openness when talking about all subjects, in reality there are many individuals whose knowledge of the formal tradition is limited or misunderstood. It is through rituals and practices passed down from those knowledgeable, religious perception about menstruation and gender roles become an integral and tangible form of education, both in schools and in the home. The notion of ritual, for this paper, will be understood predominantly as a socially and formally dictated behavior yielding symbolic significance. Through the study of ritual it is possible to extrapolate meaning, function and significance of the ritual in hopes of understanding both social dynamics and individual identities.

For a society enveloped in a culture and religion seeped in patriarchy, it is difficult to foresee a positive understanding of such a specifically feminine issue like menstruation. Negative representations and general misunderstanding of feminine issues such as menstruation, and their association with dirtiness and undesirability emerges not only out of patriarchal traditions but out of the gap between primary and secondary socialization as well. Children are socialized into society through several different institutions; in this case, the disparity of education and understanding of menstruation is highlighted in the gap that exists between the familial realm and that of the formal educational, ie teachers, peers and religion. Menstrual taboos in Morocco and parts of Islamic society may be best understood through an analysis of purification rituals and

other religious regulations, as observed by both men and women during a women's menstruation, for such rituals are manifestations of the perceptions of female societal roles and cultural expectations of women. While some women have subjected themselves to a negative perception of menstruation as something shameful, others have determined ways to redefine and interpret their religion's approach to menstruation, that allows for a positive and encouraging view of womanhood within Islam and Moroccan society.

Methodology

Based largely in interviews and written sources, this research aims to flesh out the relationship between the two worlds of formal and practiced religion as expressed through culture. Considering the sensitivity and privacy of this subject, surveys and participant observations were not an adequate form of research for this project. The majority of the following research, conducted in Rabat, was acquired through interviews with educated and middle class individuals. While the focuses of the interviews were with high school students and recent graduates, I also conducted several interviews in Loutichina, a village located in the Middle Atlas in central Morocco. These few interviews conducted in the countryside have provided an integral basis of comparison for understanding the significance of women's access to education, as it affects their understanding of themselves and their religion. While some interviews were conducted in English interspersed with Arabic, others were conducted completely in Arabic, mostly with a translator¹.

The majority of the quotes in this paper are based largely on my notes and recollections of conversations. I opted not to record conversation for fear that such a medium may hinder the interview process, as the subject matter, for some, is considered to be personal. Additionally, in light of the private nature of the topic, I preferred to give the women I was interviewing more focused eye contact and attention than frequently and frantically writing notes. I found that when I did it stifled the interview process. As a female foreigner and stranger, with genuine intention to get to know the women and hear their stories and thoughts, women were much more open to talking to me about their own ideas and experiences with menstruation.

¹ Translators were quite informal, providing definitions and interpretations upon request. This was not necessarily the fault of the translator, but rather those being interviewed rarely paused for translations to take place.

In addition to the personal interviews I conducted among the women, I also interviewed and spoke with several male and female students at the school of Dar el Hadith al Hasaniya in Rabat. This school, established in the 1964, is a place of higher education for masters and doctorate degrees in Islamic studies. Graduates from this school become the Ulema, or religious scholars of Morocco. Through these few interviews, in addition to discussions held with a teacher of *Tarbiah Islamiah* and a worker from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, I was able to learn more about my topic from the perspective of formal Islam. These interviews were also conducted through a mixture of English and Arabic, generally with the assistance of a translator. A list of interviewees may be found in the appendix along with interview questions, however the names have been altered and last names are not included in order to maintain confidentiality.

Additionally, I studied pertinent texts, including Ayas from Qur'an², Hadiths from the Maliki School, as well as secondary sources written on the subjects of menstruation, Islam, gender roles in addition to facets of Moroccan culture. The majority of the Hadiths that were studied for this paper came from the Maliki school of thought. Because the Maliki School of Islamic Hadiths and *Sharia* law is most prevalent today in Morocco, I chose to focus my literary study on the Maliki body of recorded Hadiths. Included in this category of formal religion and education is the information I received from the educators I interviewed.

Considerations and Positionality

Aside from the general and significant concerns about language gaps involved in such research, I must make note of several issues relating to my positionality as a Jewish American college student. My efforts in this paper focus on understanding religious ideas and traditions, and as a non-Muslim, I recognize that my understanding and the perception of such practices is that of an outsider. For the purposes of this paper I have chosen to use the terms and ideas expressed by those I interviewed, as well as the terms used in the Qur'an and Hadiths. I feel that this is one positive way to gain a greater degree of understanding of the culture and religion of the study. I have also struggled through this paper, recognizing my "western notions" of women's rights and power, to

² In an effort at uniformity and ease, all Qur'anic quotes are derived from the Dawood translation. The Koran. Penguin Books, England 1999.

open my ideas and analysis to alternate visions of women and their status and respect in society. It is this redefinition of feminine ideals that this paper will seek to illuminate through an exploration of menstruation, its conceptions, perceptions and interpretations. Nevertheless, I do recognize that my notion of positive gender roles and positive female ideals are expressed throughout this research.

Language: Names and Phrases of Menstruation

Different societies throughout time and space used different phrases, terms and euphemisms to refer to menstruation. It is important, as a first step, to analyze the dynamics of language around the topic of menstruation in Morocco and in Islam. Throughout this research, there has been no uniform term or phrase to describe menstruation that fit all peoples and situations. It is clear that the usage of certain expressions by specific individuals reveals much about that particular society, level of education and individual perceptions on the topic. Yet, for the purposes of this paper the English terminology (menstruation, menstrual cycle, period) will be used to describe the subject matter. The following were the most prevalent terms used to refer to menstruation:

La règle:

“*La règle*” was the most frequently used word when discussing menstruation amongst educated individuals in Morocco. This French word meaning “rule” connotes a certain sense of order or regularity. Menstruation, through such language, is assumed to be a rule of nature, a matter of regular occurrence.

Dam al Haid:

dam al Haid is the classical Arabic term for menstruation used by the Qur’an in Surat Bakarah. This term is used most frequently by the religiously educated. *Al haid*, as explained by Dr. Farida Zmaro, the third woman to graduate from Dar el Hadith al Hasania, is a combination of the blood, the place and the time. The grouping of these three elements is what constitutes *haid* as is discussed in the Quran. Haid is said to come from the word in Arabic for “running.”

A'ad Al-Shariah:

A'ad al-Sharia, literally translated as the “custom or habit of the month”, is also a Classical Arabic term used to describe this period of menstruation. The root for *a'ad* may also be found in the word *a'adia* meaning “normal” in Arabic, a term that was used frequently when discussing menstruation.

Haq Shar:

For the most part, uneducated individuals used the expression *haq shahar*. The phrase literally translates as the “right of the month.” Throughout my research I found that this term was used most frequently in the village. When it was mentioned in other interviews in Rabat, I was questioned as to where I had learned this phrase, suggesting that it was a crude way of referring to the issue at hand. Yet, this term encompasses many integral notions of menstruation for women in Morocco. *haq* according to dictionaries may have up to three definitions into English, including “right”, “truth” and “duty”. Even within the English language “right” takes on a number of meanings depending on its context. To be right is to be in accordance with fact, reason, or truth. Such terms may have the power to connote a natural phenomenon that is accepted and rational. Although, it is interesting that the notion of “duty”, religious and social was a prevalent notion amongst the Moroccans interviewed. It was explained to me on a number of occasions that after the onset of a girl’s first period, she is obligated, in the same way that a man is obligated after his first ejaculation, to begin to fully practice the pillars of Islam, most notably praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan.

Ana Manakish

ana manakish, literally meaning “I am not clean” in dialectical Moroccan Arabic is a phrase explained to me by an interviewee as a way one woman may tell a friend that she is currently going through her menstrual cycle. Many men and women associated dirt and uncleanness with menstruation, believing that the physical blood, its smell and touch, made it different from clean blood from other parts of the body.

Al Dam

al-dam, meaning “the blood”, is another part of the list of crude names for menstruation in Morocco used predominantly by uneducated individuals.

Paper Outline

The first section of this paper, “Purity and Impurity”, will provide an analysis of the concepts of ritual purification of menstruation within Islam, to better understand the categories these rituals delineate of pure/sacred and impure/profane. The next section, “Religious Education in Islam” aims to look at the forms and implication of religious education in conveying not only the technical process of such rituals, but also the greater social implications of the approach of religious education in Morocco to menstruation. “Coming of Age” and “Menarche Rituals of the Village” will focus on the beginnings of Muslim Moroccan women’s experiences and understating of menstruation, both through Islam and cultural traditions. Growing with the girls, the next part of the paper “Religious Practices” aims to understand the implication of religious regulations around menstruating women as well the personal opinions of said rulings. Restrictions around prayer, fasting, sexual intercourse, divorce and irregularities will be main aspects of analysis of the above-mentioned section. Lastly, in an effort to recognize the interconnectedness between menstruation and sexual development, “Virginity”, and conceptions of virginity in light of religious and social understanding will be described in terms of their relationship to ideas about menstruation.

Purity (*Tahara*) and Impurity (*Najasa*)

For Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean. (2:222)

Purity as a divine attribute is a central ingredient in many faiths, including those of the monotheistic tradition. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam there are strong theoretical lines drawn within the physical world to distinguish between times, places and people that are “pure” or “impure”. It is the case that water serves a practical and symbolic tool for purification within a variety of different religious and faith traditions. Water is attributed with the symbolic and technical capacities to clean and purify people and objects from their perceived pollutions. Divisions between binary concepts such as purity and impurity are distinguished and manifested through such purification concepts and ritual practices. Purification through ablution is an obligatory component of the Islamic prayer ritual. Muslims are obliged to carry out *wudu*, (ritual ablution), before each of the five-daily prayers.³

In addition to the daily ritual of *wudu*, there are special occasions when Muslims are expected to perform a lengthier purification ritual. This full ablution, known as *ghusl*, is considered necessary in three instances: 1) after a new Muslim takes *shahada* (witnessing prayer) for the first time 2) after sexual intercourse where there has been discharge of semen or sexual fluids, 3) after a woman completes her menstrual cycle. In the Qur’an there are two types of blood that are distinguished from regular blood, which require a full ablution; *dam al haid* and *dam al nifas*, menstrual and the post-natal bleeding. These categories of blood are considered impure, in contrast to the blood that may emerge from other parts of the body resulting from a cut or nosebleed, for example. Regular blood does not prevent a Muslim from performing her prayers, whereas there are clear regulations around women who are in their menstrual cycle that exempt them from praying during this period. While there are other cases in which men must ritually purify themselves in order to return to their daily religious practices, the only blood that has been deemed impure is that relating to the female. Placing a taboo around women, sex and their sexual organs, renders bodily emissions, both sexual and dirty unacceptable while performing religious duties.

³ Quran 5:6

Islamic Education in Morocco

The onset of a girl's menses is a critical time in her life, when much of her physical and social life changes rapidly. Such developments can be scary and confusing if not addressed and discussed in a productive manner. Women need to be aware that the less education that they have about their reproductive and hormonal systems, the more they are likely to be manipulated by negative societal ideas that stand to subordinate them because of their lack of knowledge. The attitude of several interviewees explained that much of the responsibility for educating men and women about menstruation lies on the formal school system and not within the home. Family is a critical part of Moroccan life and has a great influence on individual and social consciousness. It is exceedingly crucial for families to be open and educate their children, especially considering only 51.7 percent of the population over the age of fifteen in Morocco is literate.

Moroccan public school systems provide a broad curriculum including math, science, history, geography, language and other "secular subjects." Additionally, as a country with a 98.7 percent Muslim population⁴, the schools also provide an Islamic studies class known as *Tarbiah Islamiah*. The teaching of Islam in public schools is funded in the government's annual education budget⁵. In this class, students have a chance to learn about all subjects and issues related to their religion. It is in such a class, that students learn the five pillars of their faith, how to pray, and how to conduct the exact procedure and order for ablution and more. Students learn that there is, in addition to the small ablution (*wudu saghir*), necessary to complete before the prayer (*salat*), there is also a larger ablution, called *ghsul*,⁶ which must be completed after a number of instances; after sexual orgasm, menstruation and post natal bleeding. Such a class opens a space for students to ask questions and learn about how Islam approaches any and all life matters. This openness is a critical step towards familiarizing individuals with taboo subjects that can misinform other notions and ideas about self-perception, gender and social roles.

"*La ahhaia fi din*," it is not a shame within religion, explained Laarbi Billouch, an employee of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. For him the quote implies that one should

⁴ "Morocco" CIA World Factbook. April 20, 2006.

⁵ US Department of State. Morocco. International Religious Freedom Report 2005 Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

⁶4:43

not be ashamed to talk about an issue in order to avoid the possibility of making mistakes. This concept was repeated time and time again in regards to menstruation, sex and other subjects that may be considered socially unmentionable. Students explained that if they ever had any questions they felt very comfortable approaching their *Taribiah Islamiyah* teacher for advice and guidance. Islam creates an important space for education of which some Moroccans have taken advantage. Yet, education cannot be left in the realm of secondary social institutions. Family and family values are critical in informing individuals about menstruation and other women's issues. In fact, it is within the very institution of the home that many girls have learned to feel ashamed of their menstruation, as they feel they must hide it from their fathers or other members of their family. The students who came from more open families with mothers who spoke to them about menstruation were less ashamed of the natural pattern of their menstrual cycles. Nevertheless, I found that there was at times a disparity between the openness demanded by people and the actual perceptions of menstruation, as something shameful and inappropriate.

Despite the accuracy of the quote in terms of education in schools within Rabat, that there is no shame to talk about an issue in front of teachers, men or women, there is a disparity between the way Islam is presented as perceiving menstruation and women and the understandings of the same topic by society and individuals within the culture. Moroccan women, much like women of many other societies have come to know and experience menstruation as something dirty and to be ashamed of; an attitude which is condoned by society, despite the tolerance preached by religious educators. Many women are reminded in front of their partners, children, peers and co-workers that they are the weaker sex because of menstruation along with other reasoning.

Interestingly, the issue of menstruation, along with topics such as sex and masturbation that are taboo in many societies including Morocco's are taught and open for discussion amongst boys and girls in school. The realm of education allows for a space in which students may study and discuss such issues, specifically as they relate to Islam. It is education in this way that opens up the doors to understanding even those subjects deemed shameful by society. It was clear through discussions with women in Loutichina, a rural village in central Morocco, that their feelings about menstruation enshrouded with more embarrassment than the women in the urban areas. There exists a

corresponding gap between the knowledge the unschooled women in the village had on the issues of puberty, menstruation and sex compared the educated women in Rabat.

Although religion and education provide a safe space to learn and understand menstruation, it is still a shameful topic that many women feel they want to keep private. The biggest reason for this is due to the fact that many women feel that when they have their period they are dirty. For some women being unclean is something dishonorable that they want to hide predominantly from their elders and from men. Yet, most women do have their own individual understanding and feelings about the issue, in addition to their own approach to their own menstruation. A woman's preliminary education both in school and at home has a large impact on the way she understands herself and her role as a woman.

Coming of Age (*Bulurh*)

The onset of menstruation for women of different societies, religions and cultures is deemed as a coming of age symbol. It is with a girl's first menstruation, also known as her menarche (*mubtadiyah*), that she is considered mature enough to assume the duties expected of every practicing Muslim. It is at this point that a girl must begin praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan. It is with menstruation that a girl is ushered into the realm of womanhood. Interestingly, the onset of "manhood" for boys is perceived in a similar manner within Islam. A boy assumes the religious duties of prayer and fasting with the first emission of semen. The physical development and change of the sexual organs of both sexes serve as the determining factor of the shift in social roles and responsibilities that each assumes as they enter into this next phase in their lives.

Nevertheless, it was clear that many girls not only saw this as a significant change in their relationship to Islam, but also in terms of their status in society, particularly amongst their friends. It was the case with most girls that received their period at the later end of the scale, at around 15 or 16, that they were relatively happier and excited about the onset of their "womanhood." Asmaa, an energetic senior high school student explained, "I was so happy, because now I knew that I had grown up; I had now become a woman."⁷ At the same time, there were several girls that were not as enthusiastic about the changes that

⁷ Asmaa. Personal Interview. 25 April 2006

were happening to them physically. As Hanane, a woman of 22 years expressed, “I didn’t want to have to start taking on responsibilities and helping my mother around the house, so I actually didn’t tell her when I first got my period.”⁸ Even though the excitement and significance of this moment in a girl’s life varies, it is seen as a critical milestone in her life.

There is a direct correlation between the change of societal and religious expectations of a young woman and her own physical growth and development. Yet, the fact that adulthood, in this way, is so closely related to emissions that are perceived as impure, lends it the potential to usher in individuals with negative assumptions that will be part of their self-understanding of their own gender and sexuality.

Menarche Rituals of the Village

Students interviewed in Rabat recalled no special rituals after the onset of their first period. Although a woman’s menarche is critical in establishing her physiologically into a new realm of sexual maturity, her position as a practicing Muslim, and member of the family and society changes as well. Nevertheless, it seemed that such a milestone was not marked by any particular ritual or event for girls in Rabat, with very few exceptions. In fact, one girl, Hanane, who mentioned that her grandmother had told her to watch her stained underwear in milk, explained, that she received her period while visiting her grandparents in a different rural village in Morocco.⁹ Her fellow peers who were around the interview at the time mocked the ritual Hanane described. The ritual to them, they explained, was silly and meaningless. Cultural rituals like that (unrelated, in their minds to Islam) they explained only take place in rural areas.

The trend, for the most part was so. Despite one account of an urban girl whose grandmother fed her milk and dates after her first menstruation, it was mostly the stories of the uneducated women of the rural town of Loutichina that recalled varying rituals and traditions around their menarche. Several of the women remembered putting on make up and dying their hair with henna. Rituals involving makeup and beauty function as markers of growth with the onset of a new phase of femininity and womanhood. In his chapter on Moroccan weddings, Comb-Schillings discusses the notion of the first

⁸ Hanane. Personal Interview. 26 April 2006

⁹ Hanane. Personal Interview. 26 April 2006.

application of henna as representation of woman's blood, namely that related to her virginity, and therefore representing her value and status as well. Blood, as symbolized through henna, has the ability to be turned into things of beauty that are then deemed valuable by men.¹⁰ Other women referenced rituals aimed at determining the length of a woman's first period. Several were told to look out of a window and count the passers by to determine the amount of days the blood would last.

The greater presence of ritual in rural, less educated areas may be explained by the need of these women to bestow meaning on such a milestone. One woman confessed at the end of an interview that she actually did not understand the reason for women's menstruation. Because of their lack of education, these women are not able to pray or follow other aspects of the Islamic religion; therefore many of the limitations placed on women while menstruating do not apply to some of these uneducated women. As a result of their lack of knowledge and understanding on the subjects of formal religion and menstruation, a void of meaning that is filled with the above-mentioned rituals is created which helps render menarche and menstruation a significant event in a woman's life.

¹⁰ Combs-Schilling, 1989 pp. 212

Religious Practice

As new women enter adulthood, with newfound expectations, both in terms of religious obligation as well as familial responsibility, it is that same aspect that has ushered girls into the realm of womanhood that also mandates that women stop their practices for that period of time. According to Islamic thought and practice, women, while menstruating, are restricted from some of their daily and religious practices. Such may be understood as restrictions while other regulations provide a certain sense of freedom for the women. It is important to realize that the very absence of religious practice is just as significant if not greater in yielding meaning as to a women's state of being. While there were slight discrepancies in the list of restrictions I was told by my interviewees, the following are the basic regulation for a woman while in her menstrual cycle:

1. *Pray (Salah)*
2. *Fast during Ramadan (Saum)*
3. *Have intimate relations with her husband*
4. *Touch and/or read from the Quran*
5. *Enter a Mosque*
6. *Perform Tawaffa, circumambulation around the Kabba while on Hajj*

The interviewees would stress time and time again that these rules were in the Qur'an. However, when turning to the text of the Qur'an the verse about ablution before prayer, it only provides a list of moments in which a person, namely a male is in the proper purity state for prayer. The Qur'an does not address this practice directly. There are Hadiths that expressly forbid women to pray while in menstruation. Several traditions show that menstruating women were not supposed to perform *tawaf*, circumambulation, around the *Kaaba* during *Hajj* while they were menstruating.

Si Muhammad the Tarbiah Islamiah teacher told a relevant story about Muhammed: "The Prophet Muhammad and his wife Aisha were making *Hajj*, when the prophet noticed Aisha crying, recited this Hadith." He said, "What is the matter with you? Have you got your menses? The prophet explained that Aisha could perform all the other obligations of *Hajj* except the *tawaf*."¹¹ In terms of prayer within the Qur'an, the only circumstances that make a person unclean in the eyes of Allah, when it comes to

¹¹ Muhammad. Personal Interview 29 April 2006

performing the prayers are mentioned 5:6¹² and 4:43¹³. In neither of these verses, which are focused *tayummim*, dry ablution, and alternate circumstances that may hinder prayer, does it mention menstruation as a circumstance to exempt women from prayer.

The moments of impurity as mentioned in this verse include only sexual orgasm, illness, or digestive excretion. To include menstruation in this list would be interpreting menstruation to be equivalent or to share qualities with other issues mentioned above. Si Muhammad, explained, that menstruation is perceived as a form of excretion or *ifraz*, unrelated to digestion and is something that a women's body is attempting to "expel."¹⁴

Menstruation may additionally be viewed, as a temporary illness such that those days not fasted should be accounted for, as any ill person would do after Ramadan. The Qur'an states that those who are ill or on a journey can desist from fasting and make the days up later¹⁵. Yet again, there is no direct mention that menstruating women fall into the same category of people who are exempt for the time being from fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.

Nevertheless, it is widely accepted throughout most streams of Islam that women do not pray, fast, touch the Qur'an, make *tawaaf*, or have intercourse during their period of menstruation. Despite a predominantly uniform understanding of said restrictions, different women had varying opinions as to the reasoning of the changes they must make in their religious practices while menstruating. Some women, like Khadija, who were more outwardly devoted and invested in their religious identity, expressed some regret and sadness, but with resolve for the tradition and rules in the Qur'an¹⁶. Women like Khadija see their menstruation as a fact of their impurity preventing them from participating in sacred performances for their religion. Yet, others like Khawlah, expressed relief at being provided with a break from praying or from fasting during

¹² "Believers, when you rise to pray wash your faces and your hands as far as the elbow, and wipe your heads and your feet to the ankle. If you are unclean, cleanse yourself. But if you are sick or on a journey, or if when you have just relieved yourselves or had intercourse with women, you can find no water, take some clean sand and rub your faces and your hands with it. God does not wish to burden you' he seeks only to purify you and to perfect His favor to you, so that you may give thanks" (5:6)

¹³ "Believers, do not approach your prayers when you are drunk, but wait till you can grasp the meaning of your words; nor when you are unclean – unless you are traveling the road – until you have washed yourselves. If you are sick or on a journey, or if, when you have relieved yourselves or had intercourse with women, you can find no water, take some clean sand and rub your faces and your hands with it. Gracious is God and Forgiving" (4:43)

¹⁴ Muhammad. Personal Interview 29 April 2006

¹⁵ "In the month of Ramadan the Koran was revealed, a book of guidance for mankind with proofs of guidance distinguishing right from wrong. Therefore whoever of you is present in that month let him fast. But he who is ill or on a journey shall fast a similar number of days later on" (1:186).

¹⁶ Khadija. Personal Interview. 20 April 2006

Ramadan. These so called “restrictions”, for Khawlah and her friend Fati were beneficial and were not seen as interference in their relationship to Allah or to Islam. Rather, they were seen as a relief and thus an enhancer of their relationship to Allah.¹⁷

Despite the individual ritualistic discrepancies among the women there is a general concern that women cannot achieve the same level of faith or spirituality as men because of the restrictions preventing them from fulfilling their religious duties. This line of thinking may not be consistent with the Quran as Sanea, a friendly but quiet girl of 25 explained to me that this argument contradicts the undisputed image expressed in the Qur'an of women and men as equal in terms of their duties and expectations as Muslims. In fact there is a line in the Qur'an that proclaims, “The believers who do good works, both men and women, shall enter Paradise. They shall not suffer the least injustices.”¹⁸ To assume that an individual's faith is determined only by the extent to which she/he is able to carry out the rituals negates all of the other aspects of faithfulness and observance that cannot be quantified. Sanea explained, “God rewards or punishes according to deeds and intentions, not by what has been biologically determined. Why would Allah punish a woman for something that Allah has created?”¹⁹ Yet most women that were interviewed do not recognize Sanea's point and therefore many more negative attitudes towards menstruation remain. In addition to some of the physical realities that make menstruation unpleasant for some women, a general negative interpretation of Islamic thought does contribute to an overall sense of distaste regarding a normal bodily function, which further promotes a negative self-image of women.

Yet there are glimmers of different interpretations that have been expressed by confident women such as Dr. Farida Zmaro who recalled an interesting Hadith, which was a story of Muhammad the Prophet on the idea of conviction. A woman in the story, Dr. Zmaro told me, is posed with the question of how she feels when she is in, as she understands it to be, “a state of impurity” and cannot perform the customary religious practices. The Hadith details the woman's intention to one day to give charity (*sadaqa*), but before she can she is called to an emergency, as her mother falls deathly ill. The Hadith explains that “*Inma al'a'amal bial niat*,” literally meaning, “Even without work, there is intention.” Even though the woman did not have a chance to give to charity

¹⁷ Fati. Personal Interview. 9 April 2006

¹⁸ 4:124

¹⁹ Sanea. Personal Interview. 11 April 2006

(*sadaqa*), Allah has considered it as if she had, because her intentions and convictions were true and genuine. In the same way, Dr. Zmaro explained, one may retain religious conviction towards Allah even if there is something preventing you from practicing fully.²⁰ Most women do not feel that such limitations on their daily practices hinder their faith or closeness to Allah, mostly because the very act of not practicing is a form of following and observing the religion. Despite this line of thinking several women expressed that they do feel as though these religious restriction interfered and hindered their faith.

Additionally, the mere absence of practice is a ritual in itself. The fact that once a month women must cease a certain practice is not a limitation but a different ritual practice. Rituals, performed for the purposes of worship, atonement or dedication, are also predominantly performed to sever a purification processes. The monthly repetition of such changes is the source of significance for these women. To have to recognize that one is changing something in ones daily practices allows women to think about the process they are going through. The meanings through such practices, therefore, are rendered through difference.

Perceptions and Understanding

In spite of the differences that exist between the women and their perceptions of menstruation, the underlying idea that was stressed time and time again was that menstruation was a normal (*a'adi*), and natural (*tabi'i*) occurrence. Scientifically, menstruation is a point when a girl moves into the reproductive phase in her life, when she starts to develop the necessary components to produce offspring. For many Moroccan girls it is the scientific understanding of menstruation that first occurs to them. "We learned all about it in biology class," said twenty-year-old Meryam. "You can look for the physical signs: your breasts start to grow and hair develops under your armpits and such."²¹ Despite their familiarity with menstruation and their scientific understanding of the bodily process, many girls are still ashamed and embarrassed by the topic, thinking that menstruation is dirty. Many times throughout the conducted interviews with the Moroccan men and women menstruation was described as something unclean or dangerous, or even something that manifests women's weakness, especially in

²⁰ Zmaro, Farida. Personal Interview. 27 April 2006.

²¹ Meryam. Personal Interview. 12 April 2006

comparison to men, thereby appealing for Allah's mercy and leniency. The following is an analysis of varied responses received from interviewees as to why, in their opinion, women had to change their daily practices.

Dirty (*Muscha*)

The idea of being dirty was the greatest line of distinction drawn by men and women as to why expectations of women are different when they are menstruating. Many of the women, and men were not actually able to even explain why menstrual blood was dirty; it was just understood. In an effort to help explain the distinction between the blood²² that comes out from other places in the body from menstrual blood, one mother, Najat raised that issue of smell.²³ For her, the smell was one of several other factors that made menstrual blood dirty.

The explanations of being or feeling dirty while menstruating, for the women, are strongly related to the physical circumstances, and not necessarily to a spiritual notion, of impurity. Being unclean, according to Fatima and others, is the explanation for why women are not supposed to pray or touch the Qur'an. It is a contradictory notion that something so normal and natural can also be so dirty and taboo. Even though it was stressed that menstruation was not a taboo subject as it is in other societies, there were many women who still considered the issue to be a shameful topic that they would only selectively discuss.

Yet it is clear that there is a difference in the way that Islam, according to its Hadiths and traditions, regards menstruating women in contradistinction to formal Jewish law. While purity is critical in Islam, as ablutions are followed meticulously and regularly, Islam, in juxtaposition to Judaism, sees itself (as explained by religious educators) as a tolerant religion with a practical approach to daily life issues. On several accounts, Islam's pragmatic treatment of menstruation was compared to the extreme stance traditional Judaism takes on the issue. Dr. Zmaro explained: "Islam is not like Judaism. The Jews don't eat, sleep or sit next to their wives when she has her period.

²² According to Islamic thought if one is cut and begins to bleed during Salat, the person may continue in their prayers. Blood from a cut does not render the person impure or in a state that is not suitable for prayer, as it does for menstruation.

²³ Najat. Personal Interview. 10 April 2006

Menstruation is *not* a taboo subject in Islam.”²⁴ For her, Judaism and Islam are two religions derived from a similar source with many similarities in theology and practice. It is a result of the proximity and similarities of the two religions that make the small differences exponentially informative for defining religious identities. However, Fischer explains that that such a separation of women is a “double edged sword.” On the one hand, “it reinforces sex role differences, but it also allows women a sphere of manipulation.”²⁵ This same sphere of separating exists, though to a lesser degree, created by the exemption and rulings dictated within Islamic tradition. In the same manner, Muslim women, like Jewish women have made concerted efforts, whether conscientiously or not, to redefine such a space, and reclaim it as their own. Nevertheless, by critiquing another religion’s approach to menstruation as unacceptable, Dr. Zmaro, Muhammad, Khadija and others who used this comparison are able to take pride in the tolerant and practical attributes of their religion.

The discussion on menstruation in the Maliki school of thought is significant, and emphasizes the very point Dr. Zmaro intended through her comparison. The Hadiths make it clear that men are allowed to associate with women in every way except for sexual intercourse. Aisha and the other wives of the Prophet Muhammad were instrumental in pointing out his attitude of tolerance. One Hadith states, “Aisha, wife of the Prophet (may peace be upon him), reported: I used to comb the hair of the head of Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) while menstruating.”²⁶ Another Hadith recalls a moment at night in bed as Aisha “jumped out and broke apart” because she began to menstruate. The Hadith states that Muhammad responded to Aisha, telling her “Put on a skirt and come and lie down there again.”²⁷ Other Hadiths similarly state scenarios in which menstruating women come into contact with other men by washing their feet.²⁸

Whether or not Islam can be described as a more tolerant religion than another is irrelevant, for scholars have the ability to argue on end about such topics. The tolerance

²⁴ Zmaro, Farida. 27 April 2006

²⁵ Fischer, Michael M.J. *On Changing the Concept and Position of Persian Women. Women in the Muslim World*. Pg. 205

²⁶ Rahimuddin, Mohammed. Muwatta Imam Malik. Ch. 34 #125

²⁷ Ch. 33 #122

²⁸ Ch. 29 #116

that may be found in the religion can only come to life through the cultural and societal practices of the people living the religion. In fact, there tends to be a gap between scholarly understandings of the religion, which are generally focused and closely based on the text and the general societal perceptions of the people. Nevertheless, every reading of a *surah*, an *ayah* or a Hadith is an interpretation of an idea, as every person will extrapolate their own ideas from the words put forth depending on context and circumstance.

While the blood itself, according to social understanding, is dirty, it also influences perception of the place from which it came, namely the vagina, rendering it an unclean and taboo part of the body. Holding negative attitudes about their genitals and about menstruation in particular may curtail women's abilities to take pleasure in their bodies and sexual experiences, whether they are currently menstruating or not. Such disruptions, while troublesome, are not surprising as they characterize women's bodies not as sites of personal pleasure, but as objects of male desire.

The regulation in Islamic law for *wudu and gusul* as explained by Wheeler, is directly related to contact, but even more so to physical emission and intention. The demand for ritual purification after discharge of urine, feces, blood or other discharge, in addition to engaging in physical pleasure either on ones own or with a woman, grants significance to these moments as moments of pollution and impurity. The body is indeed a source of impurity within Islamic thought. The correlation of the categories of purity and impurity, as related to both the symbolic and physical, correlate strongly with the realms of sacred and profane within Islamic thought. Beyond religious rulings concerning ritual purity and prayer, the dialectical relationship between sacred/pure and profane/impure may be further expressed through regulations and exemptions of ritually impure menstruating women during other sacred holy practices aside from prayer, such as fasting during Ramadan.

Fasting During Ramadan

The reasoning and explanations for why women who are menstruating are not obliged to fast during Ramadan differ slightly from the reasoning provided for the other regulations mentioned above. First of all, it is understood by all Muslim women that they must substitute for days that they missed during Ramadan after the holiday is completed. Nevertheless, there were two interesting points raised explaining why women do not fast

during Ramadan. The more common response is one that explicitly implicates the way women see themselves in society, especially as compared to men. It was explained that Allah understood that women are weaker than men especially during their periods, and for this reason are excused for the week from fasting. Khawlah explained to me with certainty, “Women are not strong like men. Men can do physical work not like women.”

It was during this same discussion that Khawlah’s best friend Fati gave her own interpretation as to why women do not fast while they are menstruating during Ramadan. Her reasoning is as follows: “Allah knows that it is difficult for women to fast for the whole month. He gave women permission not to pray or fast as a sign of mercy. Allah has forgiven us and provided us with a break.”²⁹ Fati’s point is an interesting etymological one. The word for womb or uterus in Arabic is “*rahim*”, which is derived from the same root for mercy “*rahma*”, a key attribute of Allah within Islam. Fati and other women see menstruation and Allah’s mercy as they relax and take breaks from the difficulties of fasting all month. Many women explained that they had no qualms about not fasting the whole month at once. Exemptions from fasting and some of the other religious rituals are viewed as an extension of God’s consideration of women. It is as though abstention from prayer and fasting during a woman’s menses is a divine acknowledgement of women’s increased difficulty during that period. This notion that Allah is forgiving is a kind and tolerant idea that allows for a disparate understanding from the majority view of women’s weakness.

Although menstruation is still a shameful topic in certain realms, women like Fati have taken advantage of the personal space relegated to her through such religious restrictions. Fati’s explanation challenged the perception of women being passive victims of an ideology that demeans them. While she is asserting her right as a woman within the context of Islam by carving out a space for her to relax, it is still something she is unable to put out to the public. Most girls admitted that while they are comfortable eating at home in front of family, some expressed the need to reserve themselves from their fathers or other male members of their households. Hanane elaborated, “It’s a matter of respect for the father, because he is older, but also I just don’t want him to know that I have my period.”³⁰ Khadija expressed deep shame, explaining that she would barely eat when she had her period during Ramadan. “Maybe I would take a date and some milk to the

²⁹ Fati. Personal Interview. 12 April 2006

³⁰ Hanane. Personal Interview. 26 April 2006

bathroom and eat it privately,” she confided in me.³¹ At the same time, other students explained that they were comfortable eating in front of their entire families, including their fathers and brothers. The act of eating in front of others for some of these women asserts a certain confidence in one’s womanhood. Although women see their exemption from fasting as a compensatory sign of weakness, eating in front of male figures on Ramadan can be seen as a way to allow women to assert themselves and embrace their state of being a woman in her menstrual cycle if not in public, in front of their families.

Yet the absoluteness with which women explained to me the difference between men and women’s strength begs the question of women’s treatment within and by society. Although many women are comfortable with feeling weaker than men simply because of the societal concepts of gender, it is still indicative of the way some women believe they should be regarded in society. It has been deduced by academics and past researchers that there is a tendency within Moroccan and Islamic culture to protect women. While it has been argued that Western thought has perceived such a concept to be degrading to women, as they are encouraged not to leave the house often, or encouraged to dress modestly, it is difficult to make the evaluation that men and women are equal, even morally, if they are distinctly separated into different hierarchical roles within society

³¹ Khadija. Personal Interview. 20 April 2006

Adha

The second point at which menstruation becomes significant in Islam is when it deals with the notion of health, for both of men and women. The notion of potential health danger was a common reason for the restriction against intercourse between a husband and wife during the women's menstrual cycle. One of the few verses in the Qur'an that discusses menstruation is found in the second Surah of Bakarah *ayah* 222, as it states:

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TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

The following are three different translations of this one verse:

I
Abdullah Yusuf Ali
They ask thee concerning women's courses. Say: They are a *hurt and a pollution*: So keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean. But when they have purified themselves, ye may approach them in any manner, time, or place ordained for you by God. For God loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean.

II
Marmaduke William Pickthall
They question thee (O Muhammad) concerning menstruation. Say: It is an *illness*, so let women alone at such times and go not in unto them till they are cleansed. And when they have purified themselves, then go in unto them as Allah hath enjoined upon you. Truly Allah loveth those who turn unto Him, and loveth those who have a care for cleanness.

III
M. T. Al-Hilali & M. M. Khan
They ask you concerning menstruation. Say: that is an *Adha* (*a harmful thing for a husband to have a sexual intercourse with his wife while she is having her menses*), therefore keep away from women during menses and go not unto them till they have purified (from menses and have taken a bath). And when they have purified themselves, then go in unto them as Allah has ordained for you (go in unto them in any manner as long as it is in their vagina). Truly, Allah loves those who turn unto Him in repentance and loves those who purify themselves (by taking a bath and cleaning and washing thoroughly their private parts, bodies, for their prayers, etc.).

The only verse in the Quran that discusses the notion of menstruation directly, with instruction, is an order for the *men* not to “come near them [women].” The Quran does not address women when discussing the issue of menstruation. There have been a number of discussions and debates as to the direct translation of this verse, especially in regards to the term *Adha*; different English translations of the Quran have provided different definitions of this term.

Muhammad, the teacher of *Tarbiah Islamiah*, elucidated on this issue of *adha*, explained “*adha* is something *not good* for the health.” He referenced “science” as having proven the physical health dangers for both men and women when having intercourse while the woman is in her menstrual cycle. This idea was articulated by most of the individuals I interviewed, both men and women. After explaining that a woman during her menstruation has no desire to be intimate with her husband or partner, it was generally agreed upon that it has been proven scientifically hazardous. Meryam explained as she demonstrated with hand gestures “it pushes up what needs to come out.”³² Additionally, it was explained that such an activity could result in the man acquiring diseases and infections.

The notions of *adha*, although mentioned in the Qur’an, were most often referenced as science in an effort to give credibility, authority and authenticity to their claims. Even when discussing *adha* as an Islamic notion expressed in the Qur’an, Said, an administrator at Dar al Hadith proudly explained, “Science is now starting to prove what the Qur’an has already stated.”³³ Said, like many of the individuals I interviewed, is approaching Islam and daily life from a strand of modernist Islam quite prevalent in urban Morocco, and in institutions like Dar al Hadith. Esposito, in his book Islam: The Straight Path, discusses the ways in which religion, specifically Islam, has been used as a tool of reaction against European imperialism, much like what existed in Morocco under French colonialism. Esposito describes Islamic modernism as an attempt to reinterpret Islamic sources while “assimilating Western ideas and institutions” such as western science.

Modernist Islam attempts to emphasize Islam as a “progressive, dynamic, rational religion” that has the ability to generate a sense of “pride, identity and conviction that Islam is related to Modern life.”³⁴ Although such religious thinking is not monolithic in Morocco or even in Rabat, it is helpful in understanding the religious approaches to understanding and addressing issues like menstruation in urban Morocco. Said’s response is exactly one of pride in the religion’s relevance and accuracy to everyday modern life.

Specific Hadiths of leniency and tolerance for menstruating women have come to dominate the consciousness of modernist Muslims like Said. There are also Hadiths that

³² Meryam. Personal Interview. 12 April 2006

³³ Said. Personal Interview. 17 April 2006

³⁴ Esposito 156

are very specific, as they directly explain how men and women should come into contact with each other while a woman is in menstruation. As it states, “tie over her drawers or skirt and then you may press over those.”³⁵ This Hadith is explicit in demonstrating that the regulation stated in the Qur’an is limited to direct contact only. It is the interpretation of the Hadiths that render the command in the Qur’an as a lenient one. For the verse in the Qur’an that speaks directly on the issue of female and male intimate relations during menstruation only states *la takaribuhun*, or “don’t come near (get close to) them (feminine).” Nevertheless, the ideals presented in the Hadiths have so strongly seeped into the general consciousness of those who follow the religion. Therefore the tendency does not favor an extreme or literal interpretation of the verse. Such has been a common thread in the attempt to present Islam as a pragmatic and just religion.

The Waiting Period (*al a’adha*)

The last category of importance relates to the psychological state of a woman while she is in her menstrual cycle. Its relevance is found in a Hadith told to me by Si Muhammad on the subject of divorce. Rephrased, the story reads as follows: A man who lived during the time of the prophet wanted to divorce his wife while she was in her menstrual cycle. He asked the prophet about the divorce and was told to “wait till she purified herself from this and then wait another month till she purified herself again, at this point you can decide whether you want to divorce her or not.” So, the story continued, the man listened to the prophet and in the end decided not to divorce his wife.³⁶

According to the above-mentioned Hadith, a man must wait a month and a week before deciding to divorce his wife. The reasoning suggests that a woman finds herself in a different mental state while she is in her menstrual cycle. Thus, a woman’s emotions and attitudes will differ depending on whether or not she is menstruating. Many women agree and do feel that they are not exactly “themselves,” while menstruating. As Khadija explained, “I hate having my period. It puts me in such a terrible mood.” To assume that a woman is not in control of herself and her own emotional state, is a degrading assumption that makes women seem powerless against the nature of their own bodies.

³⁵ Maliki Ch. 33 #121

³⁶ Si Muhammad. Personal Interview 29 April 2006

Dr. Farida Zmaro elaborated a slightly different thought on the subject of divorce and *al a'adah*, yet her explanation related to the Qur'anic references to the relevance of menstruation to divorce. She never mentioned the notion of a woman's temperamental emotional state as being a point of consideration in Islam. Dr. Zmaro explained that there "must be a waiting period of 4 months and 10 day before agreeing to a divorce" so as to make sure that the woman is not pregnant.³⁷ This notion is a reference to an ayah in Surat Bakrah that states, "Divorced women must wait, keeping themselves from men, three menstrual courses. It is unlawful for them...to hide what God has created in their wombs: in which case their husbands would do well to take them back, should they desire reconciliation."³⁸ The quote is clear, as it explains that before a divorce may take place it is incumbent upon the couple to be assured that there will be no potential for complications.

There is no definitive causality between the fact that the teacher who described the emotional state of a woman was male and the doctor who referenced the notion of caution around pregnancies was female. However, there are a variety of perspectives and emphases to be made on the issue even between these two individual interpretations. While the first idea does not stray too far from biological reality concerning the shift in women's hormones while they are in their menstrual cycle, to focus on the hormonal change as something beyond a woman's control is seen as demeaning to women. The second interpretation does seem to have a more practical focus, as it attempts to avoid complications and confusions.

Irregularities (*Istihada*)

According to Islamic thought the minimum duration of a woman's menses is three days and its maximum is ten days. A day refers to a 24-hour period. Blood, which flows for less than three days and three nights, is not *haid* but is referred to as chronic blood discharge called *istihada* (flowing of blood out of the normal period). This happens on account of some sickness. If blood flows for more than ten days and ten nights, then all those days beyond ten days will be regarded as chronic blood *istihada* or discharge. The example of *Istihada*, as presented by Si Muhammad, provides another example as to the tolerance and understanding of Islam. One Hadith from the Maliki tradition states:

³⁷ Zmaro, Farida. Personal Interview. 27 April 2006

³⁸ 2:226

Aisha, wife of the Prophet Allah (may peace be upon him), reported Fatimah daughter of Abi Hubaish having said: Apostle of Allah, I am not clean: shall I abandon prayers? The Messenger Allah (may peace be upon him) said that the blood was some nerve and was not menses. And when the days came when before the ailment, she used to menstruate, she should abandon prayer, and when the period ended, she should wash off the blood and say her prayers.³⁹

This Hadith is only one of 5 others that report similar circumstances and instructions for women who bleed beyond their regular period. Accordingly, the religious rulings of *istihada*, along with other issue relating to menstruation, are reflective of Islam's attempt to provide lenient and pragmatic rulings relative to other faith traditions like Judaism.

Virginity (al a'adriah)

Virginity in Islam is a form of purity. A girl is expected to remain a virgin until she is wed. Yet, virginity in different societies is defined according to different terms. It is unquestionable that in Morocco a woman's virginity is directly related to her hymen. Throughout childhood and adolescence girls are sometimes prohibited by their parents from engaging in any activities that might interfere with the integrity of the hymen, which is a small circular membrane at the opening of the vagina allowing the passage of menstrual flow. Buschra, a girl of 24 years, explained that her parents never allowed her to ride bicycles because they were afraid that it would affect the status of her virginity.⁴⁰ The opening is very narrow and is torn when penetration occurs, as in sexual intercourse. This is occasionally accompanied by bleeding. Such blood loss has been required in some cultures to prove that the woman is a virgin at marriage so a blood-stained cloth would be given to the groom's family on the wedding night to verify the bride's pure state. If a woman did not bleed, the repercussions could be severe. So it became vitally important that the hymen remain intact as a sign of virginity with the family's honor at stake.

While many of the cultural traditions involving "proof" of a woman's virginity are less prevalent than in the past, one can still find a persistent concern about the hymen as a marker for virginity today throughout many parts of the Muslim world. It is for this very reason that Moroccan girls do not use tampons; for fear that insertion of the cotton may break or tear the hymen. One girl, who requested not to be named, explained that she hid

³⁹ Maliki Ch. 36 #131

⁴⁰ Buschra. Personal Interview. 11 April 2006

her menstruation from her mother because she was nervous she had done something wrong to lose her virginity. She said “my mother had warned me time and time again about virginity and the importance of staying pure. I was afraid that she might think that I lost my virginity if she knew I was bleeding.” It is for reasons like this that education becomes exceedingly important, because there can be many misunderstandings as to what is happening in a woman’s body when she is menstruating. It is also important that girls not live in a constant state of fear of possibly damaging or hurting their virginity.

Conclusion

Conceptions of the sacred and the pure are enhanced by the practice of rituals and education on issues like menstruation. Morocco, as a country, has lent itself to a more moderate approach to religion and education. In its attempt to create nationalistic and religious pride while also suiting itself up for global politics and economics, the country has been emphasizing and advocating a tolerant and pragmatic understanding of religion. It is precisely this Islam that has influenced urban Moroccan society to disregard the significance of cultural ritual and adapt a very practical and physical understanding of menstruation.

Nevertheless, it is clear that assumptions and even lack of performance of religious rituals, in itself provides deeper meaning and understanding for Moroccan Muslim women. Young female students of Rabat are not like their mothers or their grandmothers. Most of them are looking to experience a life outside of the limitations of their home. Yet, societal restrictions and diminution of women that is manifested through girls’ understandings of their bodies and womanhood have left these young women in a state of limbo between these somewhat competing worlds of pragmatic Islam and a relatively more restrictive society. Yet by embracing those different aspects of women’s life in Islam, female students in Rabat have managed to reclaim and redefine what it means to a woman. Yet, as these young women begin to find their voice in their own interpretations of religion and menstruation, education, both in schools and homes is key to have a greater and more extensive impact on the society.

Implications

Academics have frequently focused on the concepts of ritual purity within Judaism, Christianity, as well as other tribes and ethnicities in the Far East and other parts of the world. While there is much religious literature and discussion about menstruation and purity within Islam, there is far less academic literature pertaining to the subject. This paper was an anthropological and sociological attempt at assessing the impact of religious thought and education on societies and on women's perception of menstruation through rituals. The following research hopes to encourage more discussion and debate, while raising awareness among the youth at the significance of menstruation and perception of women in society. Mothers, fathers and other role models should learn to take on the open approach to all issues, as it advocated in the proverb "*La ahhaia fi din*" and talk openly with their children about issues of puberty, menstruation and sexual development, to assure positive reinforcement as children grow and develop into young adults and beyond. While religion has the possibility to infiltrate negative ideas and perceptions about such topics, making them appear taboo, it is clear from the above research that religion in Rabat has actually created a productive space for education and discussion of subjects that by societal and cultural standards may seem taboo.

Appendix

Interview Questions for Women

1. Background questions, Name, age, occupation, family makeup etc.
2. Do you remember the first time you got your period? How did you feel? Were you prepared? Did you tell anyone? Who?
3. How do you feel when you have your period?
4. How did you learn about menstruation? Did you study it in school? In what class?
5. What do you use when you have your period? Always? Cloth? Tampons? Why or why not? Who purchases supplies when you need?
6. What changes when you have your period? Religious practices etc? Why?
7. Who do you feel comfortable eating in front of when you are not fasting during Ramadan?
8. Who do you talk to if you ever have any questions or need advice about matters related to menstruation and religion?
9. What do you do when your period has ended and you want to return to your usual practices?
10. Will you talk to your children about menstruation outside of the education they may receive at school? How will you talk to them about it? What would you tell them?

Interviewees

Name	Date of Interview	Location	Education	Age	Occupation	Family
Boushra	4.1.06	Loutichina	College graduate	28	Arabic Teacher and Program coordinator	unknown
Tijenia	4.2.06	Loutichina	None	34	Rabat Bait	3 girls and grandmother
Rashida	4.3.06	Loutichina	None	24	Rabat Bait	Husband
Faticha	4.4.06	Loutichina	None	26	None	Mother, Grandmother, Father, 2 younger sisters
Khawla	4.7.06	Rabat	In first year of college	19	Student	Mother, father, younger sister and younger brother
Fati	4.9.06	Rabat	In first year of college	19	Student	Mother, Father, younger sister
Najat	4.10.06	Rabat	High school education	38	Ministry of the Interior	Father, two sons
Bouchra	4.11.06	Rabat	Last year of college	24	Student	Mother Father, brother and sister
Sanea	4.11.06	Rabat	College Graduate	25	Student	Mother, father, two sisters
Meryam	4.12.06	Rabat	Last year of High school	20	Student	Mother, Father, two older brothers, and one younger brother
Fati	4.12.06	Rabat	Last year of high school	19	Student	unknown
Buschra	4.16.06	Rabat	Second year of college	22	Student	Mother, father, two older sisters and a younger brother
Saida	4.23.06	Rabat	Last year of high school	19	Student	Mother, Father, two older sisters
Amina	4.25.06	Rabat	Last year of high school	21	Student	Mother, Father, Grandmother, younger brother and sister
Naima	4.25.06	Rabat	Last year of high school	20	Student	unknown
Fatima	4.26.06	Sale	Last year of high school	18	Student	Mother, Father, 5 sisters and 3 brothers
Hanane	4.26.06	Rabat	Last year of high school	22	Student	Mother, Father, oldest of two brothers
Asmaa	4.25.06	Rabat	Last year of High school	20	Student	Mother, Father, older and younger brother
Khadija	4.20.06	Rabat	Working towards a doctorate in Islamic studies	29	Student	Married
Amina	4.20.06	Rabat	Working towards a masters	36	Student	Not married
Khadija	4.20.06	Rabat	University Degree	34	Student	Not married
Si Muhammad	4.26.06	Rabat	University Degree	35	Tarbiah Islamiah Teacher	Not married
Dr. Farida Zmaro	4.27.06	Rabat	Doctorate from Dar al Hadith	38	Teacher at Dar al Hadith	N/A
Amine	4.11.06	Rabat	Third year of college	21	Student	Mother, Grandfather and younger brother
Said	4.17.06	Rabat	Degree in International Relations	30	Administrator at Dar Hadith Al-Hasania	Engaged
Dr. Laarbi Billouch	4.14.06	Rabat	College Degree	N/A	Ministry of Religion	N/A

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