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Impurity, Moral Substantiality, and Social Control: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract: The notion of impurity is identified in numerous belief systems, ranging from certain religions to nationalisms. Understanding its nature and functioning beyond its concrete objects is therefore a fundamental anthropological question. This work is grounded in anthropology, though it may be of interest to scholars from other disciplines. Impurity has been highlighted by numerous authors in ethnographic and theoretical texts, but a comparison of these various works indicates a lack of theoretical development. We will therefore begin by presenting the various explanations attributed to it, before proposing that the notion of impurity is primarily a knowledge of natural laws causing illness, death, and misfortune, based on the observation of contagion and implying an ontology of moral substantiality. I propose this concept to designate an ontology in which everything is a substance (bodily fluids and food, but also glances, words, and thoughts) and at the same time a moral value, without distinguishing between materiality and symbolism, a proposal inspired by McKim Marriott's substance-codes (1976). This knowledge has then become a tool of social control, aiming to protect reproduction (social, cosmic, and ontological), through its effective language combining a somatopsychological aspect (disgust reaction) and social rejection.

Keywords: impurity; contagion; moral substantiality; disgust; reproduction; gender

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1. Introduction

The polarity of purity and impurity is present in a wide range of belief systems, from religions such as Hinduism and Judaism to secular ideologies like nationalism and racism[1]. While the specific content varies across cultural contexts, the separation between the pure and the impure remains a fundamental constant that reflects the social, moral, and ontological concerns shared by these systems. It has been studied by numerous historians of religion, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and psychoanalysts, but overall has been under-theorized (Campkin 2007, p. 79; in Duschinsky and Robson 2013). This article is primarily situated within anthropology, focusing on the theoretical development of impurity in various cultural contexts. Its exploration of impurity as both a social and psychological phenomenon may also interest scholars from disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, and religious studies. It is not a matter of finding a single, universal definition of impurity; it is always culturally and historically constructed. That said, it seems to us that the language of impurity has been theorized relatively little, especially when compared to its importance in the everyday lives of individuals and, more notably, in public discourses, as Udo Simon (2012, p. 31; in Duschinsky and Robson 2013, p. 4) emphasizes. In this study, we will analyze how impurity is conceptualized and implemented in various contexts:

from religious beliefs to social and political impact, including phenomena such as racial discrimination and stigmatization associated with certain diseases.

In these belief systems, the first observation is that the pure and the impure must be kept separate. It is therefore on this separation and the relationship between these two polarities that we should focus our attention, rather than on the contents of each category, which vary according to contexts: although some elements are very often found, such as menstruation, birth, and death, in many belief systems we also find skin diseases, sexuality, and social hierarchies.

Secondly, this polarity is associated with other classifications: purity is extremely close to order, cleanliness, wealth, beauty, and goodness, while the impure is diluted in dirtiness, disorder, sin, rupture, defects, and lies. Impure and dirty are not synonymous, but there are overlaps and intersections between the concepts (Bean 1981; Srinivas 1952; Dumont 1967; Saglio-Yatzimirsky 2002).

Thirdly, despite these lexical confusions that associate impurity with the negative pole, one must be careful not to neglect that being impure often has a relationship with power (the power of conception, death, and divine power, among others). Impurity is therefore often ambivalent[2].

Finally, the focus is placed more on impurity than on purity: impurity must be avoided, removed, projected onto others, and used to justify symbols of discrimination, making it a tool for negotiation. That is to say, whether we analyze impurity at the symbolic, structural, material, functional, intersectional, or psychological level, it is always impurity that is at stake. Impurity is an existing condition, while purity is an absence. Moreover, a polluted person is not purified by simply coming into contact with someone pure, while the reverse is common (Babb [1975] 1989, p. 49). Purity is generally not an attainable state for humans: purity and impurity are therefore not antonyms. The absence of impurity does not therefore mean purity[3]. As Mary Douglas (1998) points out, purity has a much broader polysemy than impurity: we can talk about pure chocolate, pure love, pure truth. . .but not about impure chocolate, impure love, or impure truth. In belief systems where impurity exists, it is regarded as normal: resulting from and expressing human life and the order of the world, there is no attempt to eradicate it (Blidstein 2017, p. 8).

2. Anthropology and Impurity

In this section, we will review the two most successful approaches to analyzing impurity, which will allow us to understand which elements seem valid and which interpretations need to be nuanced and combined in an attempt to theorize impurity.

2.1. The "Organic" Interpretation

The first approach highlights the organic aspect of impurity. This kind of interpretation is advanced, among others, by Yalman (1963), Dumont (1967), and Orenstein (1970). According to Dumont, impurity is an irruption of the organic into social life. The source of pollution is contact with death and corpses (human and animal), the organic aspect of birth (and the presence of fluids during it: blood, water, feces, etc.), and various substances emanating from the body's orifices (blood, urine, feces, semen, saliva, milk, etc.). This temporary impurity would also explain the permanent impurity afflicting the lower castes: it is through their constant contact with organic matter (collecting animal corpses, cleaning streets, etc.) that the untouchable castes would find themselves in a permanent state of impurity. Their impure status would therefore result from their polluting activity and not the other way around. However, this organic argument is not hygienic: it is the organic aspect of life that Dumont emphasized, i.e., an irruption of "nature" into human social life, but not a matter of hygiene, cleanliness, or dirtiness; "Hygienic justifications are often

sought for ideas about impurity. In reality, even if something of hygiene can be found encompassed in the notion, one cannot account for it thereby, as it is a religious notion" (Dumont 1967, p. 70). This "organic" argumentation of impurity was already present in Yalman's work, for whom birth was marked by impurity due to blood and feces, while death, the epitome of impurity, involved the rotting of feces in the intestines unable to empty themselves (Yalman 1963, p. 29). Drawing partly from the work of psychoanalyst Kristeva (1980), Valeri (2000, pp. 102–13) asserts that the identity of the subject is threatened by decomposing bodily substances, which is why they must be avoided if one does not want to disintegrate.

While it is true that notions of impurity are often closely linked to certain bodily fluids, this kind of explanation has some limitations. First of all, defining pollution through the organic sets up a false opposition between humans and nature, a paradigm that is difficult to accept outright for India (Apffel Marglin 1977, p. 265) and even more challenging to apply universally. Furthermore, the organic aspect is of course present whenever impurity appears; it could not be otherwise: it is the definition of life itself. All aspects of human life involve fluids, which enter or leave the body, are exchanged, and are refused. However, the reverse is not true: not everything organic is marked by impurity. Women menstruating or having recently given birth must, in almost all belief systems involving impurity, take precautions before being able to cook and cannot access temples and other sacred places; but there are usually no restrictions concerning people with colds or suffering from gastroenteritis, except among Ethiopian Christians (Hannig 2013). Foods handled by impure people (such as the lower castes in India) cannot be eaten by those considered superior to them; but these individuals have no problem defecating in their fields, where their grains and vegetables grow. A midwife in India can deliver all women and clean up the present substances (blood, urine, feces, and amniotic fluid) without being polluted; but she cannot accept a glass of water from a lower caste. These various examples show us that, while it is true that impurity is often linked to bodily fluids, the reverse is not true: many substances leaving the body are not considered impure. Thirdly, impurity is never absolute but always relative: certain bodily fluids (blood, semen, and saliva) are considered impure or not, depending on one's status. The saliva of someone inferior to me will be impure to me, while the saliva of someone superior to me will not be impure to me. The "organic" explanation therefore presents a serious limitation.

2.1.1. Death

A closely related, though distinct, interpretation of impurity is its association with death. Milgrom (1989; in Kazen 2018, p. 7) argues that all types of impurity are symbolically linked to death. This connection is particularly pronounced in various cultural and religious traditions. For instance, Scheid (2020, p. 528) explains that "fears and taboos related to death pollution are a pervasive motif in Japanese cultural history," where impurity is often considered a salient feature of Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion. Similarly, within Jewish thought, impurity is commonly seen as a symbol of death. Feder (2013, p. 154) notes that traditional and modern Jewish exegetes often associate impurity with death, citing connections between the skin disease *tzara'at* (often translated as "leprosy") and death (Numbers 12:12) or mourning (Leviticus 13:45–46). In this framework, menstrual impurity (Leviticus 15:19–24) is viewed as a result of the loss of life fluid, marking a temporary state of infertility.

However, this interpretation has its limitations. While it explains impurity in the context of death and loss, it struggles to account for certain ritual impurities, such as those caused by sexual relations (Leviticus 15:18), despite the seemingly contradictory association of semen loss with death. Veena Das (1976) suggests that the analysis of impurity must

move beyond the biological and organic aspects to consider the sacred. For her, the distinction between the pure and impure is intimately connected to the sacredness of life and death. Nonetheless, this interpretation does not fully explain the impurity associated with lower castes in India, which Das argues is a distinct form of impurity, separate from those linked to menstruation, childbirth, and death.

2.1.2. Lack of Control

For some authors, impurity is not strictly associated with the organic aspect of bodily fluids, but rather with their sudden eruption, which signals a lack of bodily control. Parker (1983) argues that in ancient Greek religion, pregnant women and dying individuals were considered impure because they had lost control over their bodies. The community was "powerless as crucial changes were imposed upon it" (Parker 1983, p. 63; in Mullin 1996, p. 512), and such uncontrollable biological processes were seen as disrupting the social order. In contrast, marriage was not considered polluting because it was a controlled event, not an unregulated eruption of bodily processes into the community.

This concept of uncontrolled bodily fluids as a sign of moral or social instability is also evident in Ethiopian Christian Amhara beliefs. Hannig (2013) describes strict taboos regarding bodily fluids such as menstrual blood, runny noses, diarrhea, anal fistulas, open wounds, and even an accidental fly entering the mouth, all of which exclude individuals from participation in the Eucharist. In this context, a person's inability to contain their bodily fluids is seen as a lack of moral integrity, as it links them to the "larger world" and signifies that the individual is "leaking" inappropriately into social space (Hannig 2013, p. 302).

Similarly, in Islam, Popenoe (2004) discusses how the body is viewed as sacred and cherished by Allah when it is not soiled by bodily discharges. Islam forbids prayer when there is any discharge from a woman's body, as this is seen as a manifestation of the uncontained, unbounded body. The pure and desirable body, in contrast, is viewed as whole and closed (Popenoe 2004, pp. 60–61; in Hannig 2013, p. 308).

While menstruation, childbirth, and death are processes beyond human control, two key points limit this interpretation. First, despite the broad cultural similarities in viewing these bodily fluids as polluting, there is a notable exception in the case of fluids like diarrhea, vomit, or mucus, which are rarely mentioned as impure—except in the Ethiopian Christian context. Does this mean that these other fluids are somehow more controllable? Are they not also examples of sudden bodily eruptions? Second, adopting this interpretation risks reinforcing the idea that women are inherently closer to nature and have less control over their bodies—a subtle ideology that is often criticized by several authors[4].

2.2. Classification Systems

According to Mary Douglas, the body symbolizes society as a whole: orifices and fluids must be interpreted in relation to the social system they represent, and the organic explanation is therefore to be rejected. Like Leach (1964), Douglas showed that every classification always leaves some elements "unclassifiable" because they contain characteristics of several categories or because they transition from one category to another. Thus, the impure is what is out of place, what crosses borders, and in doing so, threatens classification (Douglas 1966). This explanation of impurity by "liminality" is found in many authors, such as Veena Das (1976), who, as we have seen above, associates the pure and the impure with the sacredness of life and death, in a relation with liminality: the concept of purity corresponds to the appropriate state for dealing with the cosmic when it is experienced as integrated with the social. Conversely, the symbolism of impurity delimits liminal situations, characterized by birth and death, i.e., when a person sees their

social world separated from the cosmos. In this case, a ritual reintegration is necessary (through rites) to allow them to experience society and the cosmos as forming a whole again. Each birth and each death must be legitimized by integrating them into the social and cosmic system. Ritual integration therefore serves to redefine these events, not as accidents (threats to order) but as designs of the cosmos. Other situations related to death, however, are not affected by impurity, such as annual rites offered to ancestors. This is because, in these cases, the order (socio-cosmic) has already been restored; thus, there is no discrepancy between the social group and the cosmos, no disruption in the cosmicization of social reality, no liminality. As summarized by Mullin (1996, p. 515), impurity is always associated with a rupture of order, whether it be communal classification systems, bodily boundaries, moments of social transition, sexual transgressions, or idolatry that threaten community integrity. Impurity is therefore an expression and mechanism for restoring stability while reaffirming classifications, whether they are social, cosmic, religious, or related to age categories throughout an individual's life cycle.

While Douglas's approach has greatly advanced the understanding of impurity and classification systems in general, its limitations must be emphasized. Liminality is much broader than impurity. It is true that all classification systems always leave some unclassifiable residues, and that all societies give these elements a particular status, but it is not always impurity: these elements can also be considered monstrous, magical, or blessed. They are always given special treatment: being suppressed, operated on, feared, revered, or placed into a new category. These are intersex individuals, bisexuals, platypuses, shamans, chimeras, or mestizos. However, all these unclassifiable and, therefore, liminal elements are not considered impure. We can therefore qualify Douglas and Das's interpretation by saying that impurity is *one way* of dealing with liminality. So, what is the specificity of this type of liminality compared to others? Douglas gives the example of dirty underwear being considered impure because it is not in its place in the kitchen. But a clothespin or a coat would not be in their place either. What makes the underwear impure in the kitchen is its association with sexuality. Its presence in this place brings together two domains that should be separate: sexuality and food. Why should they remain separate, and not laundry and food? This is because of the idea of contagion (physical, moral, association of ideas) being found in impurity and not in other "out-of-place materials". Douglas insists that the system must be analyzed rather than the contents of each category; however, a system should not be conceived as a static and rigid classification, but rather as dynamic and plastic. Therefore, the focus should be on the relationship between categories: how do they affect each other? With what causal force? With what consequence? In the emic understanding of the analyzed systems, there is constantly a transfer from one category to another. The impure is not simply the presence of things that are out of place or that by their mere existence represent or constitute a threat: it is neither their existence, nor their presence, nor their incorrect place, because many things are out of place and yet are not impure. For it to be labeled impure, it must threaten categories by transmitting between them; there must be a transfer of "qualities" (abilities, morals, spirituality, etc.) in a hierarchically ordered system. There is therefore a relationship with order, although this should not be understood as "everything in its place" but rather as "from whom to whom, in what direction". The underwear in the kitchen could give some "out-of-place ideas in the kitchen", and an idea can be considered a contagion. Valeri also emphasizes that Douglas's theory's fault is to put too much emphasis on the classification system rather than pollution (contagion of impurity): "pollution is a much more relational notion than Douglas assumes. The disorder of which pollution is the sign is not so much the residue of a generic order as the violation of a system of specific compatibilities and incompatibilities. The subject is not polluted by coming into contact with "residues of the classification system" that are foreign

to it, but by neglecting the implications of the classification position in which it finds itself. What is polluting for some is not for others. And what is polluting at one time and place is not at another. . . Speaking of the "system", of "form", or of "order" as if they constituted one and the same thing is therefore quite inappropriate" (Valeri 2000, p. 71; in Petrovic and Petrovic 2016). As Agamben argues (Agamben [2008] 2012; in Duschinsky and Robson 2013, p. 5), "order is an empty concept, or, more precisely, it is not a concept".

Mixing and Homogeneity

Following the analysis initiated by Douglas, some authors (Carson 1990, p. 158; in Mullin 1996, p. 513; Forth 2018) argue that impurity arises from mixture. Purity is seen as a primordial unity, an essence of the category (whether it is a social group or the sacred), and mixing with external elements represents the disintegration or dilution of this purity. In the same line of reasoning, some authors assert that the pure is always homogeneous, while the impure is qualitatively heterogeneous (Duschinsky and Robson 2013; Duschinsky 2011). "The pure will be what conforms to an established taxonomy; the impure will be what disturbs it, establishing a mixture and disorder" (Kristeva 1980).

However, two objections need to be raised. Firstly, in all analyzed belief systems, mixtures are possible only in one direction. Since purity and impurity are relative (to people, places, and moments), substances considered equal or superior can generally be integrated[5], while mixing with inferior substances should be avoided. Secondly, the example of various nationalisms[6] shows that heterogeneity is compatible with purity. Munasinghe's (2002) analysis of the construction of the nation of Trinidad illustrates that purity can be composite and heterogeneous. This means that it is achieved through a mixture of various origins without requiring this mixture to form a homogeneous mass. Different origins are still easily recognizable in all cultural aspects, without preventing the Trinidadian nation from being considered pure. What matters is the rejection of certain origins (in this case, Indian).

Finally, the problem with all these symbolic analyses, in my opinion, is that they consider almost everything to be "metaphors": for example, Douglas considers food as a "metaphor" for kinship. This tends to completely ignore local representations, for whom these things are material and not metaphorical. In many societies, such as in India (Van den Bogaert 2018), kinship is also formed around practices that are not specifically related to blood or semen: although many researchers tend to label the bond created through shared meals as "fictive kinship", it is "material" in the emic perspective, as also seen in the Guatemalan community where Yates-Doerr worked (Yates-Doerr 2015, p. 315).

Despite their usefulness, these theories can then be critiqued for their ethnocentrism, which leads them to prioritize signs and ignore matter. Indeed, in the works of many authors, there is a distinction between inert matter, devoid of meaning and agency, and language (textual and visual) that gives existence to this matter through its representation (for example, Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Milliken 1999; Campbell 1998; in Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams 2015). The distinction between these two aspects (substance and meaning) has long led to the privileging of the latter over the former. This can, in part, be explained by the history of Western philosophy, which has focused on issues such as "language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, mind, and soul" (Coole and Frost 2010), presenting them as distinct from matter, thus marginalizing materiality (Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams 2015, p. 12). According to Karen Barad: "representationalism is the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing. That is, there are assumed to be two distinct and independent kinds of entities–representations and entities to be represented" (Barad 2003, p. 804; in

Stephens 2014, p. 195). This is why it is interesting to turn to "New Materialism", which not only restores prominence to the material (fluids, substances, things, forces, human, and non-human) in power relations or discourse analysis but also does not presuppose a distinction between language (representation, interpretation, text in its broadest sense) and materiality. Derrida and Foucault had already pointed out that matter and language are so tightly intertwined that we cannot separate them or even speak of their "interrelation", as this would again imply a prior distinction: they are mutually constituted (Derrida 1988, 1990; Foucault [1961] 2006, [1969] 2003; in Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams 2015). So, the focus on matter in New Materialism should not lead us to privilege it at the expense of human subjectivity and cultural construction: it is one and the same thing, which is continuously produced and transformed. As suggested by Yates-Doerr, the goal is not to study the "material" in addition to the "symbolic," but rather to analyze the ways in which various materialities come to matter and the situations in which they do so. Materiality is always tied to practices that are historically and geographically contingent, rather than being something stable and easily transferable from one context to another (Yates-Doerr 2012, p. 15).

3. Disgust as a Language

Many authors have attempted to define the polarity of pure–impure based on the content of its categories, including death, women, organic matter, and the sacred. However, impurity cannot be defined by the nature of the objects to which it applies. What defines it is its logic: impurity is first and foremost a language of exclusion. It is primarily a non-verbal language: even though impurity has its specific vocabulary, in practice, it is more of an implicit language, made up of looks, gestures, grimaces, and avoidance. This language instills certain avoidance rules through its inscription in the body and its senses, notably through emotions like shame, fear, anxiety, and, above all, disgust (Speltini and Passini 2014, p. 210; Olivelle 1998, p. 214; in Torella 2015, p. 9). Emotions are not simply bodily reactions, as interpreted by Descartes (Descartes [1649] 1985) or Hume (Hume [1739] 1964); they involve judgments and specific ways of perceiving the world (Sartre [1939] 1962, p. 9; in Ahmed 2004, p. 5). They are both bodily sensations and forms of cognition, which does not imply that these are two distinct aspects of emotion (Jaggar 1996, p. 170; in Ahmed 2004, p. 5).[7] As Ahmed emphasizes, emotions should therefore not be seen as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; White 1993, p. 29; Rosaldo 1984, pp. 138, 141; Hochschild 1983, p. 5; Kemper 1978, p. 1; Katz 1999, p. 2; Williams 2001, p. 73; Collins 1990, p. 27; Ahmed 2004, p. 9). Among the emotions most involved in notions of impurity is disgust. Disgust is considered a basic emotion, recognizable across cultures (Ekman 1992). It is an emotion that protects "the body and soul from contamination, impurity, and degradation" (Horberg et al. 2009, p. 964; in Speltini and Passini 2014, p. 213). Some authors argue that disgust is a survival mechanism to protect living organisms from contact with or the incorporation of dangerous, toxic, or unhealthy substances (Navarrete and Fessler 2006; Curtis 2013, p. 21–40; in Kazen 2015). The emotion of disgust provokes grimaces, nausea, and the sensation that something is sticking to us or has entered us: for feelings and emotions have a "weight"; they are, in a certain sense, "material", as Ahmed (2004, p. 84) emphasizes, and therefore act directly on the body.

It is precisely this "material" dimension of emotions that prompts us to reconsider how affect plays a role in impurity. Affect, as Newell argues, is a force that operates independently of subjective consciousness and intentionality. Affects are transmitted through bodily sensations, sometimes without conscious awareness, and are capable of influencing social and cultural perceptions. As Newell notes, "affective force can also be

found lodged in signs and that this is actually the principal manner in which affect transmits between bodies. Furthermore, it is precisely this semiotic transmission of affect that allows the social to permeate the thinking of persons without their conscious awareness" (Newell 2018, p. 2). In this sense, impurity is not simply about cognitive understanding or articulated signs—it involves a broader, more embodied form of semiotic communication.

To understand this more comprehensively, we must adopt a definition of language that extends beyond spoken words, written text, and visuals. Language, in this context, is better understood as a semiotic ideology, encompassing not just traditional signs but also sound, touch, taste, smells, pain, and other somatic experiences (Keane 2018, p. 65). This broader definition of language underscores that bodily sensations themselves can be signs, and that they can convey affective and somatic reactions that influence our understanding of impurity. The distinction between materiality and representationality, therefore, becomes untenable, as affect and emotion are transmitted through both the body and social signs, seamlessly interwoven.

The association between disgust and impurity is found universally (Kazen 2015). This is why the impure is often equated with the dirty, the bad, the abominable (Douglas 1966), or the abject (Kristeva 1980). Through disgust, the norm can circulate alone and very effectively, without the need for further explanation. To better illustrate this point, we will compare it with the notion of ridicule. Ridicule changes according to the geographical and historical context. Its targets can be clothing, hairstyles, grimaces, gestures, behaviors, or ideas. The object of ridicule is each time "out of place": my swimsuit is appropriate at the pool but is ridiculous for giving a lecture; singing out of tune is appropriate in my shower but ridiculous on stage. This indicates a certain pre-existing order, a system. At the same time, the order itself is constantly created by ridicule, which indicates what is "normal" or "correct". Ridicule is related to social hierarchies (it is seen as more ridiculous for a man to dress as a woman than vice versa, and it is seen as more ridiculous for a serf to imitate a nobleman than vice versa). Therefore, ridicule cannot be defined by its objects (which vary enormously), by the system of order that it jeopardizes (which is a tautological explanation since the order itself is created by ridiculous things), or by hierarchies (which ridicule protects and teaches, but which do not exhaust the causal explanation). The feeling of ridicule is an effective tool of social control (imposition of norms) due to its psychological aspect (the individual) being associated with social rejection, which works through the "language" of mockery. Impurity is also a language of social control, which is learned through its somatopsychological aspect (disgust reaction), and which is effective through societal punishment (social rejection because it implies a notion of contagion).

Impurity is always a language of exclusion. This exclusion is sometimes individual (the impurity of murderers, for example), but it is very often social: a person is impure because they are a member of another group (race, caste, class, gender, nationality, religion, culture, mental state[8], or illness[9], but also because the individual belongs to a kinship in which a member has just been born or deceased). Impurity must therefore be analyzed in terms of groups, kinship, axes of power, and socio-political order. This explains why impurity is not absolute but relative and is therefore never two-way: it is always one category that is impure to the other, but not vice versa. Impurity is always one-way because it implies hierarchy. As Ahmed points out, disgust creates more than a relationship between a subject and an object: it also creates a community of those who are united by disgust (Ahmed 2004, p. 94).

Finally, this language not only relies on affects and emotions, but also very often on the notion of the sacred, which is supposed to punish offenders. This sacred can be represented by gods or by other secular notions of the sacred, such as the Nation. Osborne interprets beliefs in purity as instruments of social control, acting alongside shame and law. While

the law requires coercive measures, and shame acts by internalizing the voices of others, pollution "externalizes this other, putting the gods in their place". Pollution comes into play where the law is ineffective and where the community is not sufficiently cohesive for shame alone to regulate behavior (Petrovic and Petrovic 2016, p. 24).

4. Contagion

Many texts emphasize the separation between categories, but the observation of impurity rules in all the belief systems reviewed shows that, in practice, contact between categories is inevitable and, at times, necessary. By emphasizing the importance of maintaining separate categories, these systems also reveal the underlying possibility and necessity of their interaction. The very possibility of transmission—whether of impurity, contagion, or power—must be controlled, as it can always occur. As Ahmed states, following Kristeva's theory of abjection, disgust functions as a threat, implying the potential for crossing boundaries. She argues, "Perhaps the ambiguity relates to the necessity of the designation of that which is threatening: borders need to be threatened in order to be maintained, or even to appear as borders, and part of the process of "maintenance-through-transgression" is the appearance of border objects" (Ahmed 2004, p. 87). This perspective suggests that impurity, while threatening, is necessary for reinforcing boundaries and maintaining the social order.

The concept of contagion is, therefore, central to the understanding of impurity: not only can one person transmit their condition—whether disease, misfortune, or degeneration—to another, but this transmission can also spread further, potentially resulting in an epidemic. This idea is reinforced in various cultural and religious contexts. For instance, Scheid notes that in 10th-century Japan, "pollution is contagious like a disease" (Scheid 2020, p. 534), emphasizing the pervasive belief that impurity, much like illness, can spread uncontrollably.

In a similar vein, Chouraqui, in his French translation of Leviticus, chose to render the Hebrew word *tame* not as "unclean" or "impure," as traditionally used, but as "contagious," reflecting the idea that impurity can be transmitted in much the same way as a disease. According to Chouraqui, a tame animal is therefore considered contagious (Chouraqui 1993; in Douglas 1998). This choice of language underscores the deep connection between impurity and social or physical contagion.

Moreover, the language used to describe impurity reveals cultural and social biases. In studies of caste impurity in India, for instance, upper castes typically use terms like *ashuddha* or *jhûtha* ("impurity" or "dirtiness"), which emphasize the polluted state of the individual. In contrast, the lower castes often use the term *chuachhut* ("not to touch"), which reflects the fear of contagion and the act of rejection. This distinction between terms highlights how the vocabulary chosen to describe impurity can reveal significant biases and reflect the social dynamics between groups.

Further supporting this view of contagion, Nemeroff and Rozin's research on contagion found that "physical contact between source and target leads to the transfer of an effect or quality (essence) from source to target," reinforcing the idea that impurity is often perceived as something that can be transmitted from one entity to another (Feder 2013, p. 155). This emotional prejudice, leading to an irrational fear of contamination, can be observed in everyday behaviors. For instance, people who pick up a piece of fecal matter or a cockroach with a plastic bag often feel compelled to wash their hands afterward, even when there has been no direct contact with their skin.

This fear of contagion extends beyond physical illness. Calvez (1989) observed that nurses disinfected a television screen to avoid contamination from AIDS patients, as if the disease could be transmitted through the eyes alone (Calvez 1989; in Douglas 1998).

Similarly, Jodelet's research on the contagion of mental illness reveals how the belongings of psychiatric patients are treated separately—plates and laundry washed apart—to prevent the spread of perceived "madness" (Jodelet 1989; in Speltini and Passini 2014, p. 211). These examples show how the fear of contagion shapes the ways in which impurity is socially constructed and managed.

However, this transmission is not always something to avoid, as in the case of fear-driven contagion. Sometimes, transmission is necessary but must occur in the correct direction, according to the prescribed social order. Bean (1981) demonstrates this in her semantic analysis of impurity in India, where it is not strict separation but transmission in the right direction that is emphasized. "Correct order", "correct execution", and "proper order" are central to the concept of purity, while "disorder" and "non-proper order" are intrinsic to the concept of pollution. Mosse (1996) illustrates this dynamic by showing that, in both Hindu and Christian rituals in India, there is a transmission of both positive and negative substances. For example, funerals involve the transmission of positive substances (purity and good omens) to certain relatives, while individuals of lower castes are required to accept the transmission of negative substances (impurity and bad omens). This exchange[10] reinforces and reflects power relations, as accepting another's bodily fluids or pollution is often a sign of respect[11] or submission (Apffel Marglin 1977). As Hocart (1938) argued, the idea of service is central to this transmission: receiving "polluted" substances is understood as a duty within a relationship of subordination.

5. Concepts of the Body: Openness and Porosity

If it is possible to be "contaminated" by impurity and therefore carry it, it is because of a particular conception of bodies: they are never considered sealed or impermeable, but rather porous and open. They can absorb "particles", germs, or whatever name is given to them: invisible matter. That is why impurity requires not only purification rites but also strict rules of closure (of the individual body and therefore of the group). In 16th-century Europe, it was customary not to wash, to keep the body well sealed, and thus not to contract diseases (Vigarello 1985; in Speltini and Passini 2014, p. 205). Hindus consider the human body to be a relatively porous container through which substances, experiences, and influences circulate. It is open both to refinement and contamination through external influences (Menon 2002, p. 143). Not only do bodies and things (clothes, houses, food) have different degrees of porosity[12], but some bodies open more easily than others. I have shown in a previous article (Van den Bogaert 2016) how in India this logic of openness/closure cuts across the caste and gender system: lower castes are considered to have more open bodies, and so are women. When menstruating, a woman is "open" and vulnerable to multiple influences, while during pregnancy she is considered "closed" and not impure[13]. Therefore, we find Douglas's central idea when she talks about boundaries and passages from one category to another, but I suggest considering these boundaries in a material, corporeal sense, rather than as symbolic or metaphorical, adopting the emic point of view.

6. The Ontology of Moral Substantiality

Studies in the religious domain generally differentiate between material impurity (involving the body and its fluids, illness, food, and sexuality) and moral, ethical, spiritual, religious, or ritual impurity, which is considered "metaphorical". For instance, Kazen asserts that "The Hebrew word for impure/impurity (*ṭāmēʾ*, *ṭumʾâ*) and its cognates from the ancient Near East suggest a very concrete sense: dirtiness. Only references to blood, pus, or genital discharge come close to the literal (concrete) sense. Any other usage of impurity language is inevitably metaphorical. This means that most of what we generally

call "ritual impurity" represents a metaphorical use of language" (Kazen 2018, p. 18). This interpretation is again based on ethnocentrism, ignoring local conceptions of bodies and laws of cause and effect, and only considering the recent Western concept of division between matter and sign, between substance and morality, or between body and mind, distinctions that do not apply in other contexts[14]. This is because impurity, whether in religion (Judaism, Hinduism), categories of exclusion (racism), or identification (nationalism), is always both material and moral. This was finely analyzed by McKim Marriott in India (Marriott 1976), speaking of "substance-codes", meaning that everything (bodily fluids, gaze, speech, thought) is a matter that can be transmitted, a matter that always incorporates the morality of the transmitting agent. Even in a context distant from India (although partly inspired by it), such as in the community of L'Arche, for example, material purity cannot be separated from spiritual purity: spiritual purity can only be attained through material purification (a restricted diet, controlled and cooled sexuality, and a simple lifestyle): "The meat eater, by participating even indirectly in this crime, commits an impure act. This impurity is also expressed through the effects caused by such eating: 'Meat food brings worry, desires, harshness, and aggressiveness from the animal' (Lanza del Vasto 1978, p. 178). Consuming meat would be to assimilate these negative humors and would make the human pass to the side of the animal. This fear of contamination makes meat consumption an obstacle to the spiritual development of man" (Coulomb 1998, pp. 19, 33). Petrovic also emphasizes the both bodily and moral dimension of impurity in ancient Greek religion (Petrovic and Petrovic 2016, p. 9), and Feder asserts that among the Hittites and Akkadians, pollution was not symbolic or religious, but rather "real" (sic) (Feder 2016, p. 112). Therefore, the various societies that have a notion of impurity are based not only on a conception of porous and open bodies but also on an ontology in which the transmission of substances (fluids, thoughts, gazes, and emotions) includes a moral aspect. This is not about emphasizing that substances *carry* moral codes, but rather that substance and moral code are one and the same. Not only do I see no distinction between matter and "spirit", but my text is also based on the *emic* perspectives of the systems analyzed. In India, in particular, the context I am most familiar with among all the cases presented in this article, there is no distinction between matter and "consciousness" or morality: everything is substance that can be transmitted (gazes, emotions, etc.); everything is material (even the mind and consciousness are conceived as materialities, finer and subtler than flesh and blood, but still material nonetheless). Therefore, it is not about conceiving of substances as "carrying" morality (which would imply a distinction between the two), but interpreting impurity from the *emic* perspective, which does not distinguish between matter and morality.

7. Intentionality

Not only does impurity always convey a moral aspect that can contaminate the receiver, but its contagion generally depends on another moral factor: the respect—or lack thereof—for established rules. In other words, intentionality is often central to the consequences of impurity[15]. An impure act committed by mistake or out of ignorance is usually considered less severe (and hence is less punished by society and religious authorities[16]) than one committed knowingly[17]. The severity of impurity, therefore, is largely determined by disobedience to societal or religious norms[18].

For example, Bouillier, in his study of sanctions within the 1853 Nepalese legal code, highlights that the consequences of polluting actions depend directly on the agent's awareness and intention to transgress: "[. . .] pollution being irreparable only if it is voluntary; the distinction is made between a passive, polluted, and purifiable body, and an active mind, a will that makes the transgression unpardonable" (Bouillier 2002, p. 432). In similar ways,

Olivelle (1998, p. 71) points out that within the Dharma discourse, intentionality plays a central role in rules concerning impurity.

This concept of intentionality can be found across diverse religious traditions. In ancient Greek religion, for example, a murderer was not deemed impure until declared guilty; the act of murder alone did not create impurity. Only after the public proclamation (*prorrhêsis*) of guilt did the individual become impure (Bendlin 2007, p. 185).

These examples illustrate a broader point: impurity is not just about the act itself but about how the act is interpreted and understood in context. This is where Keane's concept of semiotic ideology becomes relevant. Keane (2018, p. 66) suggests that semiotic ideology shapes not only how signs are interpreted but also the consequences of manipulating those signs—politically, legally, or materially. In the case of impurity, it is not just the sign (the act itself) that matters, but how its interpretation influences whether it is deemed intentional or accidental—and, consequently, whether it will carry punishment.

In line with this, we see that there are varying degrees of impurity and different purification techniques depending on severity—ranging from simple washing with water, offering a sacrifice, or even exclusion from the community. A single misstep may be forgiven, while repeated offenses signal a refusal to adhere to social norms and thus lead to definitive condemnation.

8. Reproduction

Impurity seems to have, directly or indirectly, a connection with the reproduction of the group, whether it be sexual, dietary, cultural, or ritual reproduction. We have seen that impurity is a contagion of agents generally considered dangerous, often associated with death, disintegration, or liminality. However, it is not solely about particles capable of entering bodies and causing degeneration, as in that case, toxic substances would be considered impure. Yet, they are not. Impure things (fluids, thoughts) are those that threaten the reproduction of the group (caste, class, race, nation, culture, priesthood, masculinity, humanity). In India, commensality (what is eaten, how, where, and especially with whom) is one of the situations leading to impurity. Why? Because food manufactures fluids, which in turn manufacture individual bodies and thus social bodies (family, clan, caste): food is one means of group reproduction. If in some societies the focus of impurity is placed on ritual (sacred texts not to be defiled, or sacred texts that can "contaminate" those who touch them, as in the Jewish tradition), then one must question whether the group "reproduces" ritually, meaning if the ritual is an important point in defining the group. An argument that leads us to affirm the link between reproduction and impurity is that, despite great cultural diversity, we find three situations that are commonly considered impure in all analyzed societies: menstruation, childbirth, and death[19]. However, these three events are linked to group reproduction. They are also linked to death in general (Milgrom 1989), to liminality (Das 1976), and to organic fluids (Yalman 1963; Dumont 1967), but above all, they involve reproduction. One can therefore suggest that this constitutes the first hardcore nucleus that the notion of impurity is supposed to protect, and this precaution around group reproduction is subsequently applied to other reproductive criteria, including various social hierarchies.

What is group reproduction? It is to maintain, despite arrivals and departures (births, marriages, deaths, exchanges of fluids), its identity, i.e., the element(s) that the group chooses to distinguish itself from others. If it were strictly about separation between groups, contagion, or moral criteria, then violating a lower woman (by caste or "race," for example) would be impure for the rapist. Yet, this is generally not a source of impurity for him (Patil 2016). Sexuality is a source of impurity only when it affects reproduction, not understood as sexual reproduction according to our current Western definitions but

according to emic definitions[20]. Taboos (sexual, dietary, ritual, or otherwise) are a means by which "a group asserts boundaries between itself and other ethnic or religious groups in order to preserve its identity" (Forth 2018). This thus confirms Duschinsky's (2013) interpretation, which asserts that purity is self-identity.

However, the criteria that each group (caste, class, nation, religion) chooses as identity markers are always linked to a moral idea. Impurity uses matter (blood, semen, saliva, food, contagion. . .) and emotions (disgust) to function as a separating mechanism, but what it protects are the moral rules that each group chooses to define its identity. It is therefore likely that impurity (impure objects, as well as the logic of contagion) changes according to the moral rules of society, although traces of older rules can certainly be found. This allows us to integrate certain interpretations that have observed correctly but have failed to explain impurity, including all symbolic analyses. Take, for example, the impurity of the pig in Judaism: for Douglas (1966), this is due to its liminality[21], and for Ruane (2015), its mode of reproduction[22]; in either case, the pig would be impure because it would constitute a bad model of behavior for humans. It would not constitute a general model of conduct in everyday life, but specifically a model of reproduction (belonging to multiple classificatory categories, or having multiple paternities). Furthermore, if one accepts the ontology in which everything is a moral substance (both fluids and glances, words, and thoughts), one can consider a model as a kind of idea that can be contagious[23]. We can then rehabilitate all these symbolic analyses, provided we replace their "metaphorical" interpretation with a conception of the "material" contagion of substance-codes.

9. Women

Not all impure objects are directly related to women (impurity related to certain texts in Jewish traditions or the impurity of pigs, among others), but in all societies where a notion of impurity exists, there is one related to women. Of course, men can also be impure, but women are more often so, due to their connection with menstruation and childbirth[24]. Frandsen (2007, p. 81) notes that "so-called menstrual taboos are widespread and generally considered almost universal". Restrictions concerning menstruating women have been imposed in a large number of societies, ancient and modern, from indigenous societies of North America (Claassen 2011; Galloway 1998; Wright 2003), South America (Clastres 1972; Belaunde 2006[25]), India (Ferro-Luzzi 1974), Indonesia (Hoskins 2002), and New Guinea (Lindenbaum 1972), to Africa (Erlich et al. 2003, pp. 337–9; Strassman 1992) and the Muslim world (for example, Delaney et al. 1988), as well as ancient Mesopotamia (the ancient Babylonians, Assyrians, and Hittites: Marsman 2003, p. 488–9; van der Toorn 1994, pp. 51–55), the ancient Egyptians (Frandsen 2007; Marsman 2003, p. 488), and the Arabs (van der Toorn 1994, p. 53; Faust and Katz 2016, p. 2).

There is therefore a gender factor to analyze. In what sense? Either impurity, being a central concept in the culture of this group, applies to everything, every relationship, every categorization, and thus also necessarily applies to the relationship between men and women, or, conversely, the foundation of impurity is directly related to the relationship between men and women, and from there it is gradually applied to other relationships and objects (things, animals, gods, and ritual instruments). We can therefore establish a link between impurity and gender relations, in the sense that, in the societies analyzed, women are always more impure than men, transmit more impurity than them, and receive more impurity than them.

The impurity of women is not explained by the blood of menstruation and childbirth (organic interpretation), but by the openness of their bodies. In all concerned societies, women are considered receptacles, gateways to the group. This has several consequences. First, the analysis must always be intersectional and localized, and the impurity of women

must be understood in relation to other existing social hierarchies in the society in question. In the case of India, gender and caste are so intimately linked that they cannot be analyzed separately: many studies attest to sexual violence as caste violence or trace the history of the degrading conception of women in relation to land appropriation by certain castes: "The purity of women ensured the purity of caste and thus of the social order itself" (Chakravarti 1993, pp. 580–5). Secondly, a menstruating woman (or one who has just given birth) is considered open, and it is therefore important to keep her away from the sacred. The language used is that of impurity (the woman could contaminate the divine), but observations show that it is a more complex exclusion: an open body can easily be possessed[26], and it is, therefore, fundamental to keep women away from the possibility of being possessed by the gods, even if only momentarily, as this would give them too much power. Thirdly, menstruation is associated with sexuality, and it is important in these various societies to separate sex and food. Menstruation is considered a fluid-rejection, polluting for others but generally purifying for the menstruating woman[27]. The blood she ejects is itself created by the fluids she has absorbed (through food and sexuality). Women's bodies are receptacles that should not contain "essences" from other males (other families, other clans, other religions), but which also should not "spread" their fluids in food. This is why they are generally kept away from the kitchen. So why is it so important to separate sex and food? There are two reasons: firstly, so as to not blur the boundaries between groups (especially in an ontology where everything is substance), and secondly because, in a society that considers commensality as one of the means of reproduction, associating sex with it would be similar to incest. Therefore, there are often different rules depending on the status of women in households. In the Jalori valley (India), where I conducted long-term fieldwork, all women are kept away from the kitchen on the first day of their menstruation, but married women can then resume cooking, while unmarried girls must wait until the end of their bleeding[28]. The married woman, even if she is open, can "receive" "particles" from her new family: this is natural, as she is the receptacle of her husband and his family. The unmarried girl cannot receive fluids from her family of origin: this would be incest. This link between the impurity of menstruation and incest is also emphasized by the Khumbo, a Tibetan community in Nepal, where the impurity of birth and death is justified by a myth recounting an incest between a son and his mother, an emanation of the earth-mother. Having wanted to return to where he came from, the son had to die, and the earth opened up. Since then, both birth and death have been marked by impurity (Diemberger 1998, p. 270).

Later, theological explanations related to sin (Langenberg 2015, p. 9) or death may have been added to this protection of "open gates," but these discourses cannot be the causal explanation of the menstruation taboo. In many systems where menstruating women are kept apart, there is no notion of sin[29], nor are there conceptions associating menstruation with death (fetal murder). In my interpretation, it is rather about reproduction in a system where bodies are considered open[30]: women must be kept away to prevent them from absorbing fluids (from their family of origin or the divine) but also from spreading them (kitchen, fields, communal meals).

10. Conclusions: Towards a New Perspective on Impurity

Impurity thus functions as a language (mostly non-verbal) that bodily inscribes power relations and subordination (between social groups, but also between ontological or cosmic categories such as the sacred and the profane), in order to develop automatic somatopsychological mechanisms (disgust, fear) to avoid the contagion from the lower stratum to the upper stratum. Impurity only makes sense in an ontology of moral substantiality with a

conception of the body that implies openness[31]. The impure is what cannot be integrated into the process of reproduction, whether sexual, alimentary, or ritual.

The belief in impurity is based on a notion of contagion and is therefore primarily a "knowledge" of natural laws. It is an ancient language, akin to taboo, which gradually extended to other domains, employing the same mechanism of inclusion/exclusion. Thus, a certain logic is found in all affected fields, a logic that is also found in various epochs and contexts, but this does not imply coherence!

When analyzing the purity–impurity polarity in a concrete system, it is necessary to do so in light of data on the local conception of the human, person, body, fabrication of bodies, circulation of fluids, and modes of group reproduction. It is urgent to move beyond purely symbolic interpretations and understand that, for many societies, what we take for metaphors is substantial. Otherwise, our ethnocentrism constitutes a barrier to our study. As Feder (2013, p. 158) points out, "a comprehensive appreciation must acknowledge the existence of metaphysical patterns that presume dynamics such as the contagion of misfortune are ontologically real".

Since it is a language that appeals to emotions and bodily sensations, it would be beneficial to approach it, among other things, with an anthropology of affects and emotions, but also to be more interdisciplinary, including psychology. It is also necessary to study impurity with a historical approach, in order to understand how this language has adapted to conceptions of the body in each particular context, and how conceptions of the body have been affected by it, i.e., how conceptions[32] of the body and the language of impurity are co-constructed in each particular context, and the relationships between these constructions of bodies and axes of domination.

Finally, given the link between impurity and women, it is necessary to analyze the purity–impurity polarity from a gender perspective: if impurity is related to reproduction (in the broad sense), then it always has a certain relationship with gender, directly or indirectly, whether it is a reproduction including women (thus needing to control them) or a reproduction among men, excluding women precisely[33]. Whether closely or remotely, gender is always at the heart of the impure[34].

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Notes

1 For Hinduism, see (Hocart 1938; Mosse 1986 in Mosse 1996; McGilvray 1983; Srinivas 1984; Yalman 1963; Dumont 1967; Marriott 1976; Das 1976; Apffel Marglin 1977; Bean 1981; Glucklich 1984; Deliège 1992; Sekine 2002; Saglio-Yatzimirsky 2002; Urban 2003; Bean 1981; Das 1976; Mosse 1996; Chakravarti 1993; and Menon 2002). For Judaism, see (Douglas 1966; Milgrom 1991; Feder 2013; Ruane 2015; Faust and Katz 2016; Schwarz 1998; and Duschinsky 2011, 2013). For Buddhism, see (Scheid 2020 and Langenberg 2015). For Shintoism, see (Scheid 2020). For Ancient Egypt, see (Kazen 2015, 2018). For Christianity, see (Hannig 2013 and Blidstein 2017). For Zoroastrianism, see (Kazen 2015). For Islam, see (Delaney et al. 1988; Lemos 2009; and Popenoe 2004). For ancient Greek religion, see (Petrovic and Petrovic 2016). For the Hittites, see (Kazen 2015). For Akkadians, see (Feder 2016 and Kazen 2015). For Papua New Guinea, see (Meigs 1978). For Indonesia, see (Valeri 2000). For the Puritans, see (Mullin 1996). For colonialism, see (Burk 2019). For nationalism, see (Stolcke 1995; Munasinghe 2002). For racism, see (Warren 2003). For aporophobia, see (Speltini and Passini 2014, p. 204). For psychiatric patients, see (Jodelet 1989). For individuals with AIDS, see (Calvez 1989).

2 For example, in Himachal Pradesh (India), possessed individuals of lower castes often emphasize that they are much more effective than those of higher castes, and that their "lesser gods" are much more capable of helping humans than the "greater gods" (Van den Bogaert 2018). For the relationship between impurity and power, see (Douglas 1972) (in Langenberg 2015).

3 In the caste system in India, for example, middle castes may reject the lower castes, but they do not consider themselves "pure" either.

4 See, among others, (Le Naour and Valenti 2001; de Gasquet and Gross 2012; Krygier 1990; and Thapan 1997).

5 Except in the case of Judaism, in which contact with sacred texts (superior to humans) pollutes them (Friedman 1993; in Duschinsky and Robson 2013).

6 See also Alexander's analysis, Alexander (1977), of Jamaica, or the construction of the British nation, as pure due to its mixture of the "5 races" (in Munasinghe 2002).

7 Ahmed also proposes the term "impressions" because it helps avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion, and thought, as if they could be "experienced" as separate realms of human experience (Ahmed 2004, p. 6).

8 The "insane".

9 AIDS patients, associated with the gay category.

10 Glucklich uses the term "transferability". (Glucklich 1984, p. 26).

11 India provides us with various examples again, such as the respectful greeting, where one touches the feet of a person of higher status before touching their own forehead; the case of the wife eating the leftovers of her husband's meal; and the case of devotees consuming the remnants of food offered to the gods.

12 In India, gold is considered much less porous than ceramics, making it more resistant to impurity; fried food is less "absorbent" than boiled food, so it transmits less impurity: that is why it is the only food that can be consumed at fairs without risking contamination by the cook's caste.

13 Krygier also notes that a menstruating woman is in a state of "openness," although she does not use this term but rather speaks of vulnerability: a menstruating woman is more susceptible to attacks by ghosts as well as external pollution (Krygier 1990, p. 96).

14 In India, the mind is just as material as the body: it is another organ, like the heart or the liver. (Bouillier and Tarabout 2002).

15 Regarding impurity related to social hierarchies, the impurity of birth, childbirth, and death does not depend on any intentionality.

16 Hindu gods, Japanese Kami, etc.

17 That is why in India, children cannot carry impurity home, even if they receive fluids from lower-status children while playing (sharing the same glass, for example). Their innocence protects them from impurity and thus prevents its spread within their family (Van den Bogaert 2018).

18 For some examples from the Indian Himalayas, see (Van den Bogaert 2018).

19 Menstruating or postpartum women are not allowed to cook, enter temples and other sacred places, participate in marriage rites, or approach priests. Individuals who have recently lost a loved one are also considered impure for a certain period (ranging from a few days to several years, depending on the degree of kinship, whether the deceased is an adult or a child, and especially whether the grieving person is a man or a woman) and must avoid eating with the rest of the community or approaching sacred places. (For Hinduism, see Dumont 1967; Ferro-Luzzi 1974; Parry 1985; Mines 1989; Krygier 1990; Chakravarti 1993; Mosse 1996; Menon 2002; and Van den Bogaert 2018. For Judaism, see Douglas 1966; Feder 2013; Ruane 2015; and Faust and Katz 2016. For Islam, see Delaney et al. 1988 and Popenoe 2004. For ancient Greece and Rome, see Parker 1983; Bendlin 2007; Feder 2013; and Petrovic and Petrovic 2016. For Christianity, see Hannig 2013 and Blidstein 2017. For Buddhism, see Langenberg 2015. For Amazonian societies, see Belaunde 2006).

20 In India, a man can have a mistress from a lower caste without becoming impure, provided that he does not eat food cooked by her and does not eat with her. This is because commensality is equivalent to marriage (Van den Bogaert 2018). Dumont also observed that commensality and marital status do not always coincide (Dumont 1967, p. 181).

21 The pig, due to its diet and its hooves, does not fit into any category (Douglas 1966).

22 High fertility, multiple possible fathers at the same time, and impossibility to designate a "first-born" (Ruane 2015).

23 According to Freud, the origin of the taboo is the temptation to carry out something forbidden. And this temptation can be contagious (Freud [1913] 1971). See Ahmed (2004, p. 84): "disgust is deeply ambivalent, involving desire for, or an attraction towards, the very objects that are felt to be repellent".

24 But not breastfeeding.

25 Similar notions of impurity can also be found in the Amazon, particularly the taboo surrounding women's blood (menstruation and postpartum), which is believed to cause illness, prevent men from hunting, neutralize poisons, or render objects unusable (Belaunde 2006). However, it seems essential to caution that, in our opinion, interpreting these restrictions as impurity is a hasty move in our analysis, first of all because the terminology used does not imply a "pure–impure" dichotomy, but also because the restrictions related to menstruation apply both to women and their partners, and because these taboos do not suggest any subordination of women to men (Murphy and Murphy 1974; Jackson 1992; Ladeira 1997; Franchetto 1999; Lasmar 2002; Coimbra and Garnelo 2003; Garnelo 2003; in Belaunde 2006). Nevertheless, this issue warrants further exploration, as gender studies remain relatively unpopular among Amazonian anthropologists (Descola 2001; in Belaunde 2006).

26 (Van den Bogaert 2016); For Ethiopian Christians, see (Hannig 2013).

27 For example, for India, see (Langenberg 2015, p. 13).

[28] In households that keep clan deities, unmarried girls are secluded in the stable (Van den Bogaert 2018).

[29] See, for example, Belaunde's (2006) work, which provides a synthesis of conceptions surrounding women's blood in the Amazon: a powerful blood, capable of causing illness and poor hunting, yet in no way associated with any notion of original sin.

[30] Another hypothesis would stem from the relationship between women's blood (menstruation and childbirth) and hunting, because, in all societies, women have gradually been excluded from hunting, which is reserved for men. If men were to "pollute" themselves, they would have less success in hunting. This holds true even in societies that do not have a purity–impurity polarity (cf. the Guayakis studied by Clastres 1972 or Belaunde 2006).

[31] And porosity, which is a kind of openness.

[32] In the plural, for it is necessary to take into account the diverse conceptions of the body according to the various groups (castes, gender, generations, etc.) within the same society.

[33] Transmission of sacred knowledge among men or rites of passage among men, for example.

[34] This aligns with Kristeva's interpretation, in which the impure is always related to the mother (Kristeva 1980).

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