Olfactories of (sacred) Hygiene: the moral and material configurations of *kolonya* during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey and its Diaspora

Claudia Liebelt

I Introduction

Hi everyone, I'm Claudia Liebelt, assistant professor and Heisenberg fellow at the University of Bayreuth in Germany. As you can see from my slightly changed title, instead of talking to you about the social, material and moral configurations of perfumes under the title of *Olfactories of (divine) beauty*, due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, travel restrictions and my subsequent inability to conduct fieldwork in Turkey, I had to somewhat adapt my research. I will now focus on Eau de Cologne (in Turkish, *kolonya*), seeking to contribute to the debate on mediation, materiality and transcendence in everyday life with insights from Turkey and its diaspora during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to its high alcohol content and disinfectant effect, *kolonya* has recently assumed the role of a staple in everyday life in Turkey and subsequently, local demand and prices have been skyrocketing. While Eau de Cologne used to be offered to guests in private homes –especially during Muslim holidays– as well as in restaurants, long-distance buses or shops as a gesture of welcome and as a sign of hospitality, by the early 2010s its use had declined sharply. Many of my younger interlocutors stated that until recently, they had associated *kolonya* with their grandparents or else, with traditional village life, and (no longer) stored it at home. Now they did. My research assistant, who was on one of the first planes from Istanbul after the lockdown in June told me that except for the cigarette smell, the plane smelled of Eau de Cologne much like the long-distance buses had 20 or so years ago. So while traveling or the celebration of Muslim holidays have changed significantly due to the COVID-19 related regulations, *kolonya* has returned as an integral part of these activities.

In what follows, I will first outline my material-olfactorial approach to experiential religion and secondly, describe how the Covid-19 pandemic affected and was dealt with in Turkey. Finally, I will present some preliminary research on the moral and material configurations of *kolonya*, i) during the holiday of Eid al-Fitr in late May and ii) as a signifier of self fashioning.

II Towards a Material-Olfactorial Approach to Experiential Religion

In recent decades, it has repeatedly been claimed, the Anthropology of Religion underwent a major turn, away from a focus on belief, (theological) content and meaning towards the study of materiality, embodiment and emotion. In her influential inaugural lecture to the University of Utrecht, Birgit Meyer (2014) analyses the long-standing focus on belief within the Anthropology of Religion as a 'Protestant' legacy or bias, a 'mentalistic' approach, proposing instead the study of material processes of articulation, mediation and performance in the field of religion. Such an approach, she writes, is concerned with the things employed by people to "do religion" and how these relate to them in a process of self-formation.

Unlike Christianity, Islam is not grounded in a theory of the body as divided into mortal matter and immortal soul but rather, as pointed out by Talal Asad, anchored in specific notions of an embodied self. The bodily comportment and purity are seen as central for exercising belief and effecting proper Muslim conduct. Therefore, it is perhaps of little surprise and not necessarily linked to the material turn analysed by Meyer and others that the most prominent students of Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind both paid special attention to the *embodied* aspects of Islamic piety and the sensorial registers of ethical formation in their works. In the wake of their work, much has been written on the politics of sound and images, as well as on sonic and visual experiences in Islam in recent years. Different kinds of smell, however, likewise function as a mediating force and scents and fragrances have indeed long been seen as crucial for ethical formation in Islam.

In Muslim history, scents are given a great significance with good scents being considered media of protection and of divine presence. In the medieval Islamic world, Anya King (2017) notes in her history of musk, 'aromatics took physical forms very different from modern "perfumes" and were more a part of medicine' (p. 2). The famous Muslim scientists and physicians, including At-Tabari, al-Kindi, al-Masudi or al-Zahrawi were all expected 'to have knowledge on the preparation of perfumes' (p. 5) and it is from their treatises that we know a great deal of the preparation, the uses and the trade with aromatics in the medieval Islamic world. These scholars ascribed healing powers to particular scents and clearly considered fragrances not only as stimuli for transcending everyday life, but as potent and material mediating forces. For example, in southeastern Turkey's Diyarbakır, the Safa Mosque is also named the İpariye, the "musk-scented," because 'it had seventy loads of musk ... mixed into the mortar for its walls' (King 2017: 1, quoted from Çelebi 1988: 136). With the scent of musk –

the Prophet's favourite, it is recorded– wafting through the mosque during the morning prayer especially, the believer senses the presence of Allah in a very tangible and material form.

Different kinds of scents and fragrances continue to be extensively used in religious rituals, offerings and are commonly applied to objects of everyday ritual use, such as prayer mats or prayer beads in Turkey and across the Muslim world. At the same time, they are also part of everyday beautification practices and of individuals' quest for a clean, pure, sensitive, and sensually attuned body. In taking the role of Eau de Cologne as a starting point, my research seeks to analyse the entanglement of wellness, beauty, purity, health and the sacred on the one hand, while also making a case for paying more attention to the embodied materialities and namely, the *olfactories* of experiential religion.

But let me now go on to outline the role of *kolonya* in Turkey's dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

III Covid-19 in Turkey and the Role of *kolonya*

As of today (July 7), the number of COVID-19 cases in Turkey stands at 206.844 confirmed cases and 5.241 deaths. Peaking in mid-April, Turkey's Coronavirus curve has clearly been flattened, with less than 1.000 new cases a day in early June and about 1.300 new cases a day in late June/early July. While this is comparatively low as compared to other states ruled by right-wing populist leaders such as Brazil, the US or the UK, in late March and early April, Turkey was among the top ten countries with the highest number of confirmed cases, in spite of its low testing. For quite some time, it was the Middle Eastern country most affected by COVID-19 in regard to confirmed cases.

Whereas the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoğlu, candidate of the major oppositional party, early on called for a lockdown of Turkey's largest city Istanbul, the pro-Muslim conservative government under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was reluctant to impose it due to economic reasoning. On 21 March, a total curfew for those 65 years of age or older and the chronically ill was imposed, which extended to those under the age of 20 in early April. Also in early April, a series of weekend lockdowns were announced rather hastingly, which created panic buying and mass gatherings in all major towns across Turkey. In early May, a so-called 'normalization process' began with the declared goal to stop the spread of the virus by the end of Ramadan (in late May). Since, feminist organisations and research centres warn of a steep increase in cases of domestic violence; the detainment of critical reporters and severe media censorship is ongoing; and the situation for more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees, illegalized

migrants and asylum seekers at this border of the EU is especially worrisome with xenophobia and anti-refugee sentiment on the rise, migrant workers being sacked from their jobs in large numbers and welfare provisioning and aid for refugees largely collapsed in late March.

As Alyanak (2020: 1) outlines, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey 'all eyes were on Diyanet, the Directorate of Religious Affairs': Would they close down mosques? They eventually did, but only after millions of men continued to pray the Friday *salat* on March 13 (ibid.). At the same time, Turks also wondered, how Diyanet would react to the Ministry of Health's advice to use alcohol-based *kolonya* as a hand sanitizer. Would they condone the use of *kolonya* given the fact that its main ingredient was alcohol, a substance clearly prohibited in Islam?

Thus, on March 11, on the background of a scarcity of medical hand sanitizers, Turkey's Minister of Health publicly declared that citizens should use *kolonya* instead, in order to protect themselves from the Coronavirus. Subsequently, prices soared and the next day, news outlets all over Turkey reported that stores had already run out of supply. A week later, a ban on the export of *kolonya* and ethanol was announced. By the end of March, the price of a kilo of lemon, the most popular fragrant ingredient in *kolonya* had also increased threefold and papers reported about a lemon export ban.

On March 14, Diyanet declared that spirit, *kolonya* and other alcohol-based liquids were *'caiz'* (i.e. neither prescribed nor prohibited) if used for cleaning purposes (see, for example, *Timeturk* 2020). While this interpretation was widely accepted among religious scholars in Turkey, a few conservative voices were not completely convinced. For example, Nureddin Yıldız, a rather Orthodox preacher with his own large media outlet in Istanbul, was quoted saying that he was concerned about alcoholic substances lingering on the believer's body during the prayer and urged Muslims to wash after using *kolonya* for disinfection.

Nevertheless, *kolonya* became the quasi-official national cure for dealing with the crisis: In early April, millions of Turkish citizens aged 65 and older started receiving Eau de Cologne as part of a COVID-19 emergency kit from the government; in politician's accompanying statements, it assumed the meaning of a deeply embedded cultural form of everyday hygiene and a nationalist symbol for self-sufficiency. Not least, throughout March and April, the history of Eau de Cologne in Turkey –dating back to at least the sixteenth century and produced locally since the 1880s– was repeatedly outlined in the Turkish media; reports on the facilities that produced *kolonya*, often family businesses, were aired; and the state television produced history shows on the importance of cleanliness in Islam and in Turkey as well as cooking shows that explained how to produce hand sanitizers and Eau de Cologne at home.

IV Olfactories of Hygiene

In the following, I would like to give two brief examples from my recent research, namely i) on the role of *kolonya* as a material agent in the celebration of Eid al-Fitr, Ramazan Bayramı in Turkish, in late May and ii) as a strong affective, yet invisible signifier of "Religion" for the secular, at least in its rose-scented version. As mentioned before, I was unable to conduct fieldwork in Turkey during spring and summer as originally planned. Instead, I resorted to participant observation within the neighbourhood in Berlin, where I live (home to large Turkish and more recent Arab communities), as well as virtual ethnography. For example, in late May I set up a bilingual online survey under the title of "Cultures of Hygiene," now completed by 211 participants. I've also recruited a dozen participants for a smell-related diary project that now goes into its sixth week. Not least, I embarked on a journey of auto-ethnography, sharing obvservations and memories with relatives and friends about different smell-related encounters. Finally, I engage in ongoing participant observation in social media such as facebook, youtube, and twitter, tracking for example the hashtag #kolonya during Ramazan Bayramı.

Celebrating the Feast of Sweet Scents during Corona times

From 23–24 May, Muslims all over the world celebrated Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of four weeks of fasting during the month of Ramadan. In Turkey and the Turkish-Muslim diaspora, the holiday is commonly known as Ramazan Bayramı or Şeker Bayramı, the "Feast of Sweets," due to the fact that upon visiting relatives, friends and neighbours, one is awarded candy, chocolates and other traditional sweets such as Turkish Delight. As mentioned above, visitors are also awarded *kolonya* in a traditional gesture of welcome and as a sign of hospitality. Due to a complete lockdown over the holiday this year in Turkey, households were not supposed to host guests or go visit relatives, friends or neighbours.

Nevertheless, in preparation of the feast, families still went shopping for candies and Eau de Cologne. As the youtube video postings of one urban middle class family shows, the shopping was now done with rubber gloves and masks. Left alone at home due to the Covid-19 regulations, the couple's daughter directs her parents' buying decisions via WhatsApp. Filming his tour through the supermarket with his smart phone, the father disappointedly exclaims: 'I would have loved to get some nice scents for the holiday, but there's nothing left. Should we get some lemon *kolonya*, then? The daughter, via the mother's smart phone, agrees and he picks one for 14 TL.

Moreover, *kolonya* assumed a new significance during the holiday, as was confirmed by countless twitter postings under the hashtag of #kolonya in the days preceeding and during the holiday. As one user, Mine Karakoç expresses on twitter on Bayram eve, 'This holiday, *kolonya* has a different meaning!' Like many others, journalist Ercan Kücük posted his holiday greetings on twitter (on 24 May 2020, 3:39 pm) alongside a picture of his personal *kolonya* assortment.

Many *bayram* postings under the hashtag of #kolonya invoked celebrations of former times, such as a user named Bihter Fidangül, who posted a Turkish state television spot from 1988 wondering 'where have the old *bayram* celebrations gone?' The spot features holiday greetings from a number of Turkish celebrities as well as a typical *bayram* scene, with younger family members ritually greeting older relatives by kissing their extended hands and touching their forehand as well as a female host offering candies to a group of seated guests.

In the weeks before the holiday, many producers of fragrances and scents launched advertisements that directly refered to the Covid-19 related changes. For example, the video commercial for *Selin Limon Kolonyası*, a lemon-scented Eau de Cologne produced by a family firm in Izmir, states:

> This holiday, in our Eau de Cologne, there's not only your beloved smell of lemon. This holiday, it also includes the smell of your beloved grandparents and great grandparents, who you cannot go to visit. It also includes the smell of the feast table. It also includes the smell of sweets from your homeland [*memleket*], where you cannot go. This holiday, our Eau de Cologne includes the scents of our loved ones, the ones we miss and the ones we wait for as well as of upcoming beautiful days. Selin Eau de Cologne wishes a happy holiday to all of Turkey!

Finally, I would like to mention a youtube video of a team of the Turkish Red Crescent, walking through the emptied town of Hakkari on the Turkish Iraqi border on a rainy day, offering drops of Eau de Cologne and candy to those they meet outside, mostly soldiers and policemen. I find these images rather haunting: they speak of the paramedics' attempt to transcend the atmosphere of ghostly tristesse with their multi-sensorial gifts amidst a crisis, visible in the huge military and police presence in the town; the complete lack of women and children in public space; of an imminent economic breakdown that will certainly affect Hakkari long before it will be felt in Istanbul or Ankara.

***Everyday Uses, Connotations and Effects of* kolonya**

According to a bilingual online survey that I currently conduct on the "Cultures of Hygiene" in Germany and Turkey, completed by 211 persons so far, 83.0% agreed or agreed strongly with the statement that an agreeable smelling environment was important to them. The pre-Pasteurian assumption that things that smelled bad most often contributed to ill health was shared by almost a third of respondents. On the other hand, almost 60% agreed with the statement that scents could function in therapeutic ways and contribute to one's health. For 79% of respondents, scents did play a role in the choice of cleaning agents; it was less important for respondents' choice of hand sanitizers. Thus, over 60% agreed with the statement that hand sanitizers should rather be odourless. Nevertheless, about the same percentage of respondents stated that they regularly used Eau de Cologne, which corresponds to the number of respondents residing and being born in Turkey. Of those claiming to use *kolonya*, almost forty percent recently started doing so. Two thirds (67.7 %) said they used *kolonya* due to its disinfectant quality, followed by smell (66.9 %), its cheap price (as compared to perfume, 30%) or out of custom (20%).

Asked about the kind of *kolonya* they used, Turkish-speaking respondents listed a large variety of well-known brand names in Turkey, such as Eyüp Sabri, Selin, Duru, Rebul, Boğazici and Haci Sakir, but also scent preferences. Most stated that they prefered 'light' scents, most importantly lemon (mentioned 43 times), but also lavender (mentioned 3 times) or rose (mentioned twice), as opposed to 'heavy' scents, such as tobacco. One female respondent stated that she produced her own Eau de Cologne at home. There were remarkable differences between German and Turkish-speaking respondents in regard to the connotation of Eau de Cologne: whereas Turkish-speaking respondents listed overwhelmingly positive feelings, such as *ferahlık* (alleviation), German-speakers listed rather negative ones ('unpleasant,' 'irritating', 'strange'); in 10 out of 29 responses given in German, elderly persons were mentioned (as in the old, the elderly, my grandmother, grand-aunt, elderly gentlemen, or pensioners). Thus, one respondent stated that for them, Eau de Cologne was associated with 'elderly persons whose sense of smell has weakened, pungent, obtrusive, reckless, covering up bodily insecurity'.

Among friends and neighbours in Berlin, who were born in Turkey, a general aversion of *kolonya* was rare, but aversions of particular scents did come up in interviews. For example, tobacco, *tütün kolonyası,* widely considered a classical and somewhat male scent was rejected by one feminist friend as 'the smell of Turkish patriarchy'; she 'hated' smelling it in public space and even refused to accept it when offered, a rather impolite thing to do. Most pronounced was secular interlocutors' aversion to rose-scented *kolonya*. Rose-scented *kolonya* or rose water (*gül suyu*) may be said to have a particularly religious connotation: it is typically used for *ghusl*, the

full-body ritual purification mandatory before particular prayers, or after ejaculation and menstruation. Rose water (often imported from Turkey, one of the large producers of rose water and rose oil for the international market, see Yalçın-Heckmann 2016) is also used to ritually purify the holy sights in Mekka. Not least, it is commonly used during mourning ceremonies at mosques to relax and calm the grieving and many secular Turkish friends indeed associated it with funerals.

For example, Sakibe, a secular Turkish friend and neighbour in her sixties, said she felt reminded of death and griving, as well as of her rather strict and pious grandmother (her father's mother, *babaanne*), whenever she passes by an "Arab" perfumery in our neighbourhood. The perfumery, operated by a long-bearded Saudi, has recently taken to deodorise the street with rose waser, using an electric diffuser. 'It makes me shiver,' Sakibe confided. It made her remember her grandmother, a very religious and strict woman, who had lavishly used rose water, (- she had a bottle which she had brought back from the *hajj* to Mekka) and used to threaten her and her sisters with the fires of hell. These days, whenever forced to pass by the street of the Arab perfumery (one of several in that street!), Sakibe takes to the other side to be spared this olfactorial assault.

Likewise, Elif, a left-leaning Kurdish-Turkish activist told me that while she used lemon-scented *kolonya* as a hand sanitizer, she 'hated' the smell of rose-scented ones, because it brought to her mind the very conservative and religious. Elif recounted a scene on a public bus while commuting to her office in one of Berlin's large Turkish wholesale markets in Beusselstraße: probably recognizing that she was Turkish, an elderly Turkish couple sat right next to her. Smelling strongly of rose, Elif felt the urge to vomit and could not help but get up and open the window, realising that this must have come across as extremely offensive.

V Conclusion

Resorting to Eau de Cologne as a supposedly 'national' cure during the global pandemic, Turkish citizens resorted to a longstanding connection made between fragrances, healing, purity and health in Muslim, but also in European-Christian history prior to the changes brought about by Pasteurism. By recognising the medical effect of Eau de Cologne, Islamic authorities in Turkey have accommodated the challenges brought up by the COVID-19 crisis in the fashion of a truly discursive tradition.

Both religion and secularity are far from immaterial ideas, but form material realities. This should lead us to conceptualise more thoroughly the sensual underpinnings of religious

experience, including the olfactorial. If we think evidence as embodied and "the religious" as that which is extraordinary, disrupting the usual flow of the everyday, as suggested by Birgit Meyer, we will certainly learn much from a deeper understanding of the moral configurations and the affective power of scents and fragrances. These are of a fleeting and emphemeral materiality, invisible, yet perceptible. They draw attention not only to the relationality of the material and the spiritual worlds, but also to that of bodily matter. They are transgressive in the way that they intrude our embodied reality and the boundaries that we create for ourselves; they may linger on in the form of sensations and they may haunt us as the mediators of memories – both nostalgic ones, of long-gone Eids, and dreaded ones, of funerals or encounters one would rather like to forget. They require embodied capabilities, even training, for both perception and articulation. They may be part of a person's moral and material boundary work, creating a clean and pure body, and more generally sacred or not so sacred life-worlds, operating, much like religion and transcendence, on strongly affective and embodied grounds.

References

Alyanak, Oğuz 2020. 'Faith, Politics and the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Turkish Response,' *Medical Anthropology*, DOI: 10.1080/01459740.2020.1745482

King, Anya H. 2017. *Scent from the Garden of Paradise: Musk and the Medieval Islamic World*. Leiden, Boston: Brill.

Meyer, Birgit 2014. 'Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Toward a Material Approach to Religion,' *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 5 (2014): 205–254. DOI:10.3167/arrs.2014.050114

Meyer, Birgit, ed. 2009. *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*. New York: Palgrave.

Timeturk 2020. 'Kolonya abdesti bozar mı? Koronavirüse karşı kullanılan kolonya caiz mi?' *Timeturk*, March 14, https://www.timeturk.com/kolonya-abdesti-bozar-mi-koronaviruse-karsi-kullanilan-kolonya-caiz-mi/haber-1390449 (16 June 2020)

Yalçın-Heckmann, L. 2016. 'Pecunia Non Olet but Does Rose Money Smell? On Rose and Rose Oil Prices and Moral Economy in Isparta'. *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers Series,* No. 178.