

Fragrance from heaven

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FRAGRANCES FROM HEAVEN: THE RELEVANCE OF SMELLING IN UNDERSTANDING THE EARLY HISTORY OF ISLAM

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Abstract

This paper explores the social life of smell in the early period of Islam. It is part of the efforts to awaken the historical awareness of the senses in the discipline of Islamic history and to contribute to the emerging field of sensory studies in which the senses are incorporated into our understanding of the past. The study applies the sensory history technique in investigating the context in which Muslim noses smelled in the past; in particular, their use of aromatic materials. The main question of the study is: how did fragrance function in religious practices, and the daily lives of early Muslim society? After analyzing the Quran and the hadith as the primary sources, the study finds that religious rituals and practices have encouraged the massive use of fragrance products such as musk, ambergris, camphor, and saffron. Fragrance became one of the most needed commodities in early Muslim markets. The status of fragrance also shifted from luxury goods afforded only by the aristocrat classes as simply necessity goods due to the increase in demand by ordinary Muslims. However, the use of fragrance is also gendered. The study finds discrimination and restriction for men and women in applying perfumes. The prohibition against women from wearing strong fragrance in public was for protection, because the Arabian tribal society in the seventh century associated women with lower status, and they were more frequently subjected to sexual harassment. This initial research of the smell of fragrance is expected to broaden our horizon of how early Muslim societies lived and what their world smelled like in the past.

Keywords: *Sensory history, history of the senses, smelling, fragrance*

نبذة مختصرة

تستكشف هذه الورقة الحياة الاجتماعية للرائحة في فترة الإسلام الأولى. إنه جزء من الجهود المبذولة لإيقاظ الوعي التاريخي للحواس في مجال التاريخ الإسلامي، والمساهمة في مجال الدراسات الحسية الناشئة التي تدمج فيها الحواس في فهمنا للماضي. تطبق الدراسة أسلوب التاريخ الحسي في دراسة السياق الذي كانت رائحة المسلمين في الماضي خاصة في كيفية استخدامهم للمواد العطرية. والسؤال الرئيسي للدراسة هو: كيف يعمل العطر في الممارسات الدينية، والحياة اليومية للمجتمع الإسلامي المبكر؟ بعد تحليل الآيات القرآنية والحديث كمصادر أساسية لهذه الدراسة، وجد البحث أن الطقوس والممارسات الدينية شجعت الاستخدام المكثف لمنتجات العطور مثل المسك والعنبر والكافور والزعفران. أصبحت العطر واحدة من أكثر السلع المطلوبة في الأسواق الإسلامية المبكرة. تحولت حالة العطر أيضا من السلع الفاخرة التي لا توفرها إلا الطبقات الأرستقراطية باعتبارها مجرد سلع ضرورية بسبب زيادة الطلب من قبل المسلمين العاديين. ومع ذلك، يتم استخدام العطر بين الجنسين أيضا. وجدت الدراسة التمييز والقيود المفروضة على الرجال والنساء في استخدام العطور. كان الحظر المفروض على النساء من استخدام العطر القوي في الأماكن العامة من أجل حمايتهم، لأن المجتمع القبلي العربي في القرن السابع ربط النساء بمكانة متدنية، وكثيراً ما تعرضن للتحرش الجنسي في كثير من الأحيان. من المتوقع أن يوسع هذا البحث الأولي لرائحة العطر أفقنا حول كيف عاشت المجتمعات الإسلامية المبكرة، وما يشبه عالمهم في الماضي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التاريخ الحسي، تاريخ الحواس، الرائحة، العطر

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi kehidupan sosial penciuman pada periode awal Islam. Tulisan ini merupakan bagian dari upaya untuk membangkitkan kesadaran historis penggunaan sensorik dalam disiplin sejarah Islam dan untuk berkontribusi pada bidang studi sensorik di mana indera digunakan dalam pemahaman kita tentang masa lalu. Studi ini menerapkan teknik sejarah sensorik dalam menyelidiki konteks penciuman Muslim di masa lalu; khususnya, penggunaan bahan aromatik. Pertanyaan utama dari studi ini adalah: bagaimana fungsi wewangian dalam praktik keagamaan, dan kehidupan sehari-hari masyarakat Muslim awal? Setelah menganalisis Quran dan hadis sebagai sumber utama, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa ritual dan praktik keagamaan telah mendorong penggunaan produk-produk wewangian secara masif seperti misk, ambergris, kapur barus, dan safran. Wewangian menjadi salah satu komoditas yang paling dibutuhkan di pasar Muslim awal. Status wewangian juga bergeser dari barang-barang mewah yang sebelumnya hanya digunakan oleh kelas aristokrat menjadi barang kebutuhan biasa karena meningkatnya permintaan oleh umat Islam. Namun, penggunaan wewangian juga bersifat gender. Studi ini menemukan diskriminasi dan pembatasan bagi pria dan wanita dalam penggunaan wewangian. Larangan bagi perempuan untuk mengenakan wewangian yang kuat di depan umum pada dasarnya adalah untuk perlindungan perempuan, karena masyarakat suku Arab pada abad ketujuh mengasosiasikan perempuan dengan status lebih rendah, dan mereka lebih sering mengalami pelecehan seksual. Penelitian awal tentang aroma wewangian ini diharapkan dapat memperluas cakrawala kita tentang bagaimana masyarakat Muslim awal hidup dan seperti apa dunia mereka di masa lalu

Kata kunci: Sejarah Sensorik, sejarah indera, penciuman, wewangian

INTRODUCTION

How did the Arabian world smell like in the seventh century? The Arabian Western Coast before the seventh century was known as a caravan traveling route that passed the ancient cities Mecca and Medina. Both cities provided caravans that came from far away with goods and water. The caravans brought trade commodities including spices and fragrances. This made trading of fragrance very important to the economy of the Arabs before Islam.¹ Mecca was also the center of the spice trade where commodities traded included perfumes were then exported to the East and the West.² Aromatic products were Arabia's most famous export, in particular, frankincense and myrrh since they were extremely effective in expelling bad odors and pestilential insects. From the physical purification purpose, these two aromatics were adopted into ceremonial purification as they became an integral part of religious rituals in many pre-Islamic societies.³

¹ Donald Lee Berry, *Pictures of Islam* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 10; Arlene López-Sampson and Tony Page, "History of Use and Trade of Agarwood," *Economic Botany* 72, no. 1 (March 2018): 113.

² Michael Bonner, "3. The Arabian Silent Trade: Profit And Nobility In The 'Markets Of The Arabs,'" in *Histories of the Middle East* (BRILL, 2011), 29.

³ R G Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*, Ancient Peoples Series (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 103.

The Muslim historian, Asma'i, describes the use of fragrance by Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan, the ruler of the Arabs, when 'Abd al-Muttalib, the grandfather of Prophet Muhammad, entered to deliver a speech to him. The whole body of Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan was scented with ambergris and musk. In her work about imported aromatics in Arabic culture, Anya King describes five principal aromatic substances found in the Arabic culture namely ¹ musk (*misk*), ambergris (*'anbar*), aloeswood (*'ud*), camphor (*kafur*), and saffron (*za'faran*). According to King, aloeswood, musk, and camphor were not of Arabic origin. Ambergris was produced around the Indian Ocean and imported through the ports of South Arabia. Only saffron was an original product of the Near East, although the best saffron was imported to Arabia from Persia. King admits that these fragrances of foreign origin were repeatedly mentioned in the most important Islamic sources, the Qur'an and the hadith, as well as in various Arabic poems.⁴ However, King concentrates only on the poetry aspect in her research by emphasizing the erotic aspects of fragrances. She concludes that Arabic poetry is abundant with the symbolism of aroma and perfume. Among the most valued and important aromatics are musk and ambergris because they are rare and expensive goods imported from outside the Arabian Peninsula and at that time could be afforded only by the aristocrat class.⁵ Hence, fragrance in this period was among the luxury goods, applied in special occasions by high-class people.

The use of fragrance before Islam was widespread among aristocracy within the Arabian community. For example, the fragrance was used in local culture during the wedding ceremony or when someone proposed the marriage. It is mentioned in a narrative that in 595 CE, the richest widowed woman in Mecca, Khadija, wanted to marry Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him, PBUH). She made her father drink a lot of wine until he became drunk. Then she prepared a party by slaughtering a cow, perfuming her father with fragrances and wearing him in a Yemeni dress. When he was awake, he said surprisingly, "What is this meat? What is this perfume? What is this Yemeni dress?" Khadija said, "You married me to Muhammad ibn Abdullah."⁶ Khadija's father had always refused her previous suitors. Therefore, she made a plot to obtain his approval for the marriage, perfuming him as a way of persuasion. Although Al-Waqidi explains that this version of the marriage story of Muhammad and Khadija is not fully true, the scenting with aromatic perfumes was a common practice within the Arabian aristocrat families.⁷

When Muhammad (PBUH) reached the prophethood and he began the teachings of Islam; fragrance and Islam became something that could not be separated. Besides, during this period it was

⁴ Anya King, "The Importance of Imported Aromatics in Arabic Culture: Illustrations from Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Poetry," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 67, no. 3 (July 2008): 175–76.

⁵ King, "The Importance of Imported Aromatics in Arabic Culture: Illustrations from Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Poetry."

⁶ L.A.I.S.N. Calder et al., *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 32.

⁷ M Reda and M Salami, *Mohammed (S) The Messenger of Allah* (Beirut: Dar Al Kotob Al Ilmiyah, 2013), 85.

regarded as both hygienic and therapeutic because it could strengthen the senses. Most importantly, the use of fragrance could distinguish Muslims from Jews and Christians,⁸ as well as reinforce gender distinctions and restrictions during the early period of Islam.⁹

One of the dilemmas of the historiography around the use of fragrances during the early period of Islam is the availability of published materials from this period. There is a possibility that some authors have not read everything that is theoretically available especially on the religious use of fragrance during the classic period of Islam. I assume that the topic is not well represented in the Islamic sensory history and more research in the field is still necessary to be undertaken contribute to knowledge. Therefore, this article is an attempt to investigate about the use, production, and circulation of fragrance during the emergence of Islam in the seventh century based on Islamic sources, the Qur'an and the hadith (the tradition of the prophet).

The main question I ask in this article is how did fragrance function in religious practices and daily lives of early Muslim society in the seventh century? By figuring out the answer to this question from the primary Islamic sources the Qur'an and the Hadith, I want to develop an understanding of how as a religion Islam has influenced the use of fragrance among its followers from the very beginning in the seventh century. In addition, I want to analyze the position of aromatic products in the society during the early period of Islam. My purpose in this article is to provide a description of the religious beliefs and practices concerning to the use of fragrance in the early period of Islam and to contribute in the development of Islamic history of the senses by studying the early period of Islam comprehensively from a sense: the smell of heavenly fragrances.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

Although the smell of heavenly fragrances may be repeatedly mentioned in the Qur'an, the hadith and also in other various Islamic literature, the understanding of this particular period based on the aromatic "smell" has not yet well established in the Islamic history and in particular the Islamic history of the senses as the new intriguing way of understanding the past. This article employs sensory history as a technique to investigate and understand this period. According to Mark M. Smith, sensory history "stresses the role of the senses" in explaining past experiences. Focusing on the smell as one of the senses,

⁸ J P Rhind, *Fragrance and Wellbeing: Plant Aromatics and Their Influence on the Psyche* (London: Singing Dragon, 2014), 107.

⁹ Rhind, 108.

we can present the past as smelled by the nose of people in that era and perhaps we can show the “prejudices and values” residing in that nose.¹⁰

The principal written sources of this sensory history study are the Qur’an and Hadith. The Qur’an is the scripture for Muslims that was revealed upon Muhammad (PBUH) through the meditation beginning in 610 CE. The Qur’an consists of 114 chapters, each divided into verses.¹¹ The Qur’an has become the primary text of Islam since its revelation to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The Qur’an that was codified not long after Muhammad (PBUH) passed away is considered the most reliable source of the Islamic practices in the seventh century.

Another important source is hadith which is a report of the deeds, sayings, and agreements of Muhammad (PBUH). The hadith also includes similar actions of the prophet’s companions. The collections of these reports were codified from around 720 CE and they provide the basis for the understanding of early Islamic history. The two most authentic and famous collections of hadith are *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Saḥīḥ Muslim*. In addition, four other collections are: *Sunan Abu Dāwūd*, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, *Sunan Al-Nasā’iy* and *Sunan al-Tirmizi*, which make a total collection of six authoritative hadith collections. Due to the importance of hadith in all aspects of the Muslim community, a branch of learning known as the science of hadith became one of the major branches in Islamic thought with the purpose to evaluate the chain of authentication by examining the lives of hadith reporters.¹²

The Qur’an and hadith are written in classical Arabic, so proper translation from Classical Arabic to English is required. To ensure the accuracy, I refer the translations of Qur’anic verses in this article to the English translation made by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, the second Muslim to translate the Qur’an into English and his version is the most widely used to date. From all the written sources I deal with, I focus on thematic verses of the Qur’an and hadiths providing narratives around the use of fragrance. The direct reference to the Qur’anic and hadith verses makes this article appears different from the previous scholarship on similar topic such as the previous Anya King’s study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the spread of Islam began in 613 CE, the fragrance became an important part of religion due to its heavenly reward if one lives following its teachings and principles. The ultimate goal of every

¹⁰ Mark M Smith, “Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (June 1, 2007): 842–43.

¹¹ G Newby, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, Concise Encyclopedias (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013).

¹² Newby, 69–79.

Muslim is to achieve heaven. Paradise characteristics and rewards that will be given to Muslim are described in the Qur'an in Surah al-Mutaffifin (83: 22-26):

“Most surely the righteous shall be in bliss. On thrones, they shall gaze. You will recognize in their faces the brightness of bliss. They are made to quaff of a pure drink that is sealed (to others). Its seal is a fragrance of musk. And to that (blessing of Paradise), then, let all those who aspire (to things of high value) aspire as if in a race (with each other).”¹³

The word *misk* in this verse was translated as musk. It is mentioned in the Qur'an as the substance with which the pure drinks of Paradise are sealed. This means that musk was regarded as the purest and noblest scent by Muslims because even God printed his name on the seal. Since musk was considered as the most prized scents at the time, it is reasonable that the Qur'an also mentions musk among the rewards that will be given to Muslims who enter Paradise. Nevertheless, musk was not a product of Arabia. According to Constance Classen, musk was among the scents of animal origin and it was extracted from the scent gland of the musk deer, which was native to India and China.¹⁴ During this period, the fragrance of musk is the best of all fragrances.

Another term related to the paradise is al-Kawthar. It is mentioned in Surah al-Kawthar (108:1) “We are giving you *al-Kawthar*.” Al-Kawthar is a heavenly river running under the throne in Paradise. The color of its water is brighter than milk, its taste is sweeter than honey, and its scent is better than musk. Its pebbles are like pearls, sapphires, and coral. The soil of Paradise is like pungent musk and its herbs are like saffron.¹⁵ In a hadith reported in Sahih Muslim the soil of Paradise was described as follows:

“Ibn Shayyād asked the Prophet (Muhammad): What about the soil of Paradise? He replied: It is of fine clear white musk that is special.”¹⁶

The verse of the Qur'an and the hadith narrative explain that the soil of Paradise consists of musk, the flowing air in Paradise is scented with musk, and vast rivers in Paradise are of pure water, milk, honey, and wine. Paradise is also covered with vast trees with aromas that can be smelt up to 1000 years' journey away.¹⁷ The hadith also narrates that there is a market of fragrance in Paradise:

¹³ See the translation in Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, Classics of World Literature Series (Hertfordshire, England: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000).

¹⁴ C Classen, D Howes, and A Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 71.

¹⁵ N Calder, J Mojaddedi, and A Rippin, *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 113. See also Sahih Bukhārī, hadith 6581.

¹⁶ Muslim Al-Nisābūrī, *Sahih Muslim* (Beirut: Dar Al Fikr, 2003), v. 2928.

¹⁷ Aziz Azmeh, *The Times of History: Universal Topics in Islamic Historiography*, CEU Studies in the Humanities (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), 177.

“It is narrated from Anas Ibn Malik, that (Muhammad) Messenger of God said: Indeed In Paradise there is a market, you will come there every Jumu’ah (Friday Congregation), there will be sent a northern wind, which you will like the fragrant smell of it, which will scatter on your faces and your clothing and that will increase you in beauty and charm, and then they will return to their family, after having increased in beauty and charm, and their family would say: ‘By Allah (I swear by God)! You have increased in beauty and charm after leaving us’, and they would say: ‘By Allah! You have also increased in beauty and charm after we’ve left you.’”¹⁸

A market in Paradise means beauty salons, a place to which the inhabitants of Paradise will come every Friday. “The north wind will blow and would scatter fragrance on their faces and their clothes and would add to their beauty and loveliness.”¹⁹ In addition to depicting Paradise characteristic with a lot of mention of musk, the Qur’an also mentions another kind of fragrance, camphor, in Surah al-Insan (76:5-6):

“Verily, the Abrār (pious, who fear God and avoid evil), shall drink a cup (of wine) mixed with water from a spring in Paradise called Kāfūr. A spring wherefrom the slaves of God will drink, causing it to gush forth abundantly.”

In this verse, the Qur’an mentions *kāfūr* or camphor. Muhammad Zafar Iqbal describes that camphor has two basic properties: coolness and its fragrance is pleasant. In the water of Paradise river, as portrayed by the Qur’an, there will be a fragrance of camphor and it will seal with musk which will cause peace and coolness to the people in Paradise.²⁰ Camphor was produced from camphor trees that can be found in many places in Asia. It was found in white, transparent and solid states. The best camphor trees were planted in Southeast Asia, specifically in Sumatra Island. According to King, Camphor was not famous in Arabia during the classical period of Islam. She quoted an anecdote made by Al-Balādhurī (d. 892) that when the Arabs conquered Persia they discovered camphor in the Sasanian palace and used it as spices in their cooking pots thinking it was salt.²¹

Every Muslim believes that their soul would enjoy the best fragrance in paradise. There was a report from Al-Barra’ ibn ‘Āzib that when the companions went out with Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

¹⁸ Al-Nisābūrī, *Sahīh Muslim*, v. 2833.

¹⁹ R Swarup, *Understanding the Hadith: The Sacred Traditions of Islam* (New York: Prometheus, 2002), 168.

²⁰ Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, “The Full of Wisdom: Qur’an and the Science,” n.d., 4.

²¹ King, “The Importance of Imported Aromatics in Arabic Culture: Illustrations from Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Poetry,” 181.

for the funeral of a man from Ansār community, then the prophet mentions about the “perfume of Paradise,”

Verily, when the believing slave is about to depart this world and enter the Hereafter, there come down to him angels from heaven with white faces, as if their faces are sun. They bring with them one of the shrouds of paradise and some of the perfume of paradise.”

The hadith continues after the Angel of Death inquires the soul,

“Then he takes the soul, and no sooner does he seize it but they take it and place it in that shroud of perfume. Then out of it comes the most excellent fragrance of musk to be found on the face of the earth. After passing the inquiry by the angels, the soul eventually hears a voice from heaven that he has spoken the truth and the paradise door is open for him. And he will feel its breeze and smell its fragrance, and his grave will be widened for him as far as his eye can see. Then a man with a handsome face, beautiful clothes and a pleasant fragrance will come to him and say Good news! This is the day that you were promised.”²²

The Qur’anic verses about Paradise and reward for Muslims with the best fragrance of musk that can be found on earth indicates the importance of fragrance in Islam. The fragrance was the best way to describe the beauty of Paradise to the early followers of Islam because it was a sign of luxury attached solely to Arabian aristocracies.

The noble Qur’an orders Muslims to perfume their bodies before attending prayers in mosques. The verse in Surah al-A’raf (7:31) says:

“O children of Adam, take your adornment at every *masjid*, and eat and drink, but be not excessive. Indeed, He likes not those who commit excess.”

In a hadith verse reported by Abu Sa’id, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) told that, “the taking of a bath on Friday is mandatory for every male Muslim who has reached the age of puberty and also the cleaning of his teeth with *Siwak* (tooth stick), and the using of perfume if it is available.”²³ Based on this report, it was preferred for any Muslim – man or woman, an elderly or young person, a traveler or resident – who wants to attend Friday prayer or any gathering of the people to cleanse, wear best garments, apply perfume and brush teeth.²⁴

²² For the complete version of this hadith, see M S Abdul-Rahman, *Islam: Questions and Answers: Islamic History and Biography* (MSA Publication Limited, 2003), 112–13.

²³ al-Imām Abī ‘Abd Allah Muḥammad ibn Ismā’il Al-Bukhārī, *Sahih Bukhārī: Wa Huwa Al-Jāmi’ Al-Musnad Al-Saḥīḥ* (Cairo: Dār al-Tāsil, 2012), v. 5.

²⁴ Sayyid Sābiq, *Fiqh Al-Sunnah* (Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 2004), 208.

Since all Muslims needed to apply perfume before attending the religious ritual, the use of perfume became widespread among ordinary people in Medina during the early period of Islam. Before Islam, the fragrance was among the luxury goods which could only be afforded by the aristocracy. When Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) commanded Muslims to apply perfume before performing worships and rituals, this has marked the shift of use of previously expensive aromatic products from the aristocracy to the ordinary people which started in the seventh century.

Although the use of fragrance was encouraged in Islamic rituals, the application of perfume was not allowed for men performing pilgrimage (*hajj*) rituals in Mecca. In a report of Ibn ‘Umar, the prophet (PBUH) told Muslims, “He should not wear...clothes which are stained with saffron or Wars (a kind of perfume).”²⁵ The use of any kind of fragrance after getting dress during this religious ritual would result in a penalty as detailed in the hajj manual. However, the use of fragrance was permissible before initiating the hajj ritual. During the Farewell pilgrimage in 632 CE that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself applied some perfume on his body before getting the dress to conduct the *hajj* ritual. Al-Mubarakpuri reports more detail in a hadith,

On a Saturday of the last four days of Dhul-Qa‘dah, the Prophet started the departure preparations procedure. He combed his hair, applied some perfume, wore his garment, saddled his camel and set off in the afternoon. Before performing the noon prayer, he bathed for *Ihrām* (ritual consecration), and ‘Aishah (his wife) perfumed him on both his body and head with her hand with a *Dharira* (a plant) and with a perfume containing musk. The thick sticky layer of perfume could be seen among his parts of hair and beard. He left it unwashed, wore his loincloth and garment. He performed the noon prayer shortened, two rak‘a.²⁶

Thus, fragrance and Islamic religious practices were inseparable. The application of fragrance before performing religious rituals is very important in Islamic practice as in other religions such as Judaism. Mark M. Smith supports this view, “smell played an important part in Hebraic theology and practice, meditated between spirit and body, and infused daily ritual.”²⁷

The likeness of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) towards fragrance can be proved in many sources. The fragrance has always been the choice of Muhammad (PBUH) before he started the teaching of Islam to the people. He always applied perfume and kept with himself a container of musk.

“From Anas Ibn Mālik: The Prophet (Muhammad) had a *sukkah* (container of musk) from which he would anoint perfume.”²⁸

²⁵ Al-Bukhārī, *Sahih Bukhārī: Wa Huwa Al-Jāmi' Al-Musnad Al-Sahih*, v. 362.

²⁶ S R Mubarkpuri, *The Sealed Nectar (Biography of the Prophet)* (Riyad: Darussalam Publications, 2002), 208.

²⁷ Mark M Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 61.

²⁸ Sulaymān ibn al-Asy'ats al-Sajastānī Abū Dāwud, *Sunan Abī Dāwud* (Beirut: Dar Al Fikr, 2006), v. 4162.

As Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) loved fragrance and never rejected gifts of perfume, it became the most suitable choice of gift. He also recommended Muslims to present perfume as a gift to each other. This explains to us how one of the early societies treated each other with aromatic products as their gifts.

“It was narrated from Abī Hurayrah that the Messenger of God (Muhammad) said: If someone is offered perfume do not reject it because it has a good scent and easy to wear.”²⁹

Many Muslims regarded the bodily characteristics of Muhammad (PBUH) as the fragrance itself. The attitude of the community can be described as the depiction of his cousin, Ali ibn Abī Tālib, about Muhammad (PBUH) body, “the perspiration of his face as if it were pearls and the fragrance of his sweat was better than musk.”³⁰ One of the prominent companions of Muhammad (PBUH), Anas ibn Mālik, described also similar characteristics of the prophet of the people. He found that the fragrance of musk and ambergris as sweet as the fragrance of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself. This made Anas’ mother, Umm Sulaym, used to collect the Prophet’s sweat in a bottle container. She told Muhammad (PBUH), “That your sweat which we mix in our perfume and it becomes the most fragrant perfume.”³¹ Anas explained that, “When the prophet had already slept, his mother would take some of his sweat and hair and collect it in a bottle and then mix it with *Suk* (a kind of perfume) and that while he was still sleeping.” When Anas became old and about to die, he ordered to mix some of that *Suk* with his *Hanut* (perfume for embalming the dead body).³²

Perhaps the extensive use of perfume by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his fondness for perfumes made his body fragrant with the same smell all the time. This might be true due to his affection for fragrance as we explain earlier. David Howes et.al., argue that “the extensive use of deodorants and the suppression of odor in public places results in a land of olfactory blandness and sameness that would be difficult to duplicate.”³³ Hence, it is difficult for Muslims in this period to distinguish between the real bodily smell and the perfumed smell of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

To explain this, the prophet’s wife Aisha admitted that she used to rub the best fragrance to the body of her husband. “I used to perfume the Messenger of Allah (Prophet Muhammad PBUH) with the

²⁹ Abū Dāwūd, v. 4172.

³⁰ Boas Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Tabarī’s History* (Leiden: BRILL, 2004), 13.

³¹ Swarup, *Understanding the Hadith: The Sacred Traditions of Islam*, 131. Also see Al-Bukhārī, *Sahih Al-Bukhārī*, hadith number 3561.

³² Al-Bukhārī, *Sahih Bukhārī: Wa Huwa Al-Jāmi’ Al-Musnad Al-Saḥīḥ*, v. 298.

³³ David Howes, Anthony Synnott, and Constance Classen, “Anthropology of Odor (1990-1994),” Concordia University Montreal Canada, accessed August 1, 2019, <http://www.david-howes.com/senses/Consert-Odor.htm>.

best scent available till I saw the shine of the scent on his head and shine beard.”³⁴ The hadith indicates that perfumes were applied to the whole body of a man. The hair and beard were perfumed and oiled with the best scent of the time: musk and ambergris. Before any perfumes were applied, however, the body must be washed and clean. This narrative also provides an understanding of how the Muslim societies in the seventh century applied perfumes to their bodies.

The use of fragrance is also gendered because discrimination and restriction were also applied for men and women in applying perfumes. Men were preferred to use a strong fragrance and women should use light fragrance so that its smell did not reach strangers and only their husbands could detect the scent. Women were prohibited from leaving their home wearing perfume to prevent men’s attraction. During the early period of Islam, a perfumed woman near a group of men would be considered adulteress and her action can lead to slander.³⁵ Thus, not all kinds of fragrances were permissible and accessible to women.

The evidences to support this view are in the hadith reported by Abū Dāwud:

“Prophet Muhammad said: I do not ride on purple, or wear a garment dyed with saffron, or wear shirt hemmed with silk.” Pointing to the collar of his shirt al-Hasan al-Basri (642-728), a Muslim scholar, said that the Prophet continued: “The perfume used by men should have fragrance but no color, and the perfume used by women should have a color but no odor.”³⁶

In other narrative,

Narrated by Abī Mūsa that Prophet Muhammad said, “If a woman uses perfume and passes the people so that they may get its fragrance, she is so-and-so, meaning severe remarks.”³⁷

Um ‘Atiya also reported that during the mourning time for a dead person, women were not allowed to put *kohl* (eye powder cosmetics) in their eyes or to use perfumes or to put on colored clothes. Women were allowed to apply only very light fragrance when taking a bath after their period is over and also they were forbidden to attend the funeral procession.³⁸

The prohibition of women from wearing strong fragrance in public was to protect them from being harassed in the Arabian tribal society where women were considered of low status or even worse. Strong fragrance can evoke strong desires and emotions that can enhance attraction in the opposite sex. In the seventh century, Islam was at the stage of creation of a new culture wherein this culture, desires,

³⁴ Al-Bukhārī, *Sahih Bukhārī: Wa Huwa Al-Jāmi’ Al-Musnad Al-Sahih*, vv. 5923, 5928.

³⁵ Rhind, *Fragrance and Wellbeing: Plant Aromatics and Their Influence on the Psyche*, 108.

³⁶ Abū Dāwud, *Sunan Abī Dāwud*, v. 4037.

³⁷ Abū Dāwud, v. 4173.

³⁸ Al-Bukhārī, *Sahih Bukhārī: Wa Huwa Al-Jāmi’ Al-Musnad Al-Sahih*, v. 1130.

romances, and seductions were put as private affairs. At home, behind closed doors, seductions and desires were encouraged and considered part of religion with heavenly reward. Classen agrees that the discrimination between fragrance used by men and women “was part of a general cultural insistence at the time that the sexes appear in all ways to be different.”³⁹

Throughout the centuries, religious and pleasurable pursuits have been the main causes of the phenomenal growth of fragrances. Similar attitudes towards aromatic products also exist in other great world religions other than Islam such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Zoroastrianism also employed fragrance in pursuit of their worships.⁴⁰ To sum up, although the use of fragrance was also found in the rituals and practices of other religions, only Islam has encouraged its followers to apply fragrance extensively as we can understand from the experiences of the early Muslim communities.

CONCLUSION

The results and discussions of the fragrance phenomenon in the early Muslim societies of the seventh century differ slightly from some published studies on perfume in Islam because this study focuses on the smell itself and is more consistent with the Qur’anic and hadith sources in explaining about the smell. This initial research on fragrance and smell in Islamic society is expected to add up to the Islamic history of the senses.

This study finds that the religious use of fragrance in early Islamic society marked the important shift of fragrance use from the aristocrat class of the Arabian community to ordinary Muslim. The fragrance was not deemed as a luxury good anymore, but it has become an affordable personal adornment. For instance, the fragrance became a precious gift in the early Islamic society of the seventh century.

As an effort to develop the Islamic history of the senses, and by applying the sensory history method in studying the period of classical Islam, this study attempts to challenge the monopoly of Islamic history discipline which has long exercised. As our understanding of the use of religious fragrance in early Islamic society has been broadened, we can explore further how the Arabian society lived and what their world smelled like in the seventh century. As stated by Smith, smells can be used to portray groups, races, genders, classes, ethnicities, and nationalities. Olfaction and scent were also believed to be “an

³⁹ Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, 84.

⁴⁰ David H. Pybus, “The History of Aroma Chemistry and Perfume,” in *The Chemistry of Fragrance: From Perfume to Consumer*, ed. Charles Sell (Cambridge, UK: RSC Publishing, 2006), 3–4.

authenticator of truth, a source of knowledge and a reliable indicator” of the society from which the true state of faith can be understood.⁴¹

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⁴¹Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History*, 74.

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