



Kolonya Renaissance: Disinfection, Healing, and the Role of Eau de Cologne during the early COVID-19 Crisis in Turkey and its Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the debate on material religion, the body, and the senses by focusing on the uses and reconfigurations of cologne in Turkey and its German diaspora during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eau de Cologne, which emerged in Western Europe during the second plague pandemic, was localized as *kolonya* in Turkey during the nineteenth century. In the early COVID-19 crisis, it regained its early association with purity and healing in spite of its high concentration of alcohol, which is a problematic substance in Islam. Moreover, it became a biopolitical agent in the government's attempt of dealing with the crisis, revitalizing and transforming long-standing *kolonya* cultures. Drawing on ethnographic material and media debates, the article outlines the role of *kolonya* as an "intra-active" substance traversing the boundaries commonly drawn between the secular and the Islamic in Turkey. It illustrates the entanglement of olfactorial hygiene, sociality, and healing in present-day Turkey and beyond. In taking the role of *kolonya* as a starting point, the article engages with material perspectives to argue for greater attention to be given to the olfactorial aspects of experiential Islam.

Keywords: Eau de Cologne, perfume, body techniques, disinfection, hygiene, COVID-19, experiential Islam, Turkey

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Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The same day, Turkey confirmed its first coronavirus patient, and its Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca publicly announced that citizens should use alcohol-based *kolonya*, Turkish for cologne, to protect themselves from the coronavirus. Following his announcement prices soared almost immediately, and the next day news outlets all over Turkey reported that stores had run out of supplies. While *kolonya* has a long history in Turkey as a sign of care and hospitality, for example, being offered to guests in private homes, travelers on long-distance buses and the ill during hospital visits, by the early 2000s its use had declined sharply. This article examines the recent *kolonya* renaissance in Turkey by paying attention to its multiple genealogies, its everyday usages, and affective doings in the early COVID-19 pandemic. It shows how *kolonya*, which contains alcohol, a problematic substance in Islam, traverses the boundaries commonly drawn between the secular and the Islamic in Turkey, becoming a paradoxical agent in the government's attempt to fight COVID-19. It argues that as a multisensorial cultural artifact, *kolonya* permits deep insights into the current socio-political state of affairs in Turkey and its diaspora.

Eau de Cologne or cologne, in Turkish *kolonya*, takes its name from the German town of Cologne, where it originated as a branded product in the early eighteenth century. It emerged in Western Europe during the second plague pandemic in the fourteenth century, when European alchemists learned how to produce concentrated ethanol by distillation and subsequently developed a number of ethanol-containing healing waters based on aromatic plant extracts from thyme, lavender, neroli or rosemary, whose healing and antibacterial capacities were well-known in the pharmacies of European monasteries and cloisters, where these waters were first sold (Rosenbohm 1951). At the Ottoman court, locally produced rosewater was commonly used alongside such scented waters from Europe, which were widely marketed by French producers from the late seventeenth century (ibid., 136ff.). Thus, in his 1855 publication *The Art of Perfumery* the London perfumer Septimus Piesse already mentions the "Oriental" gesture of hospitality by offering perfumes and scented waters (quoted from Jung 2011, 4). Ahmad (or Ahmet) Faruki, an Istanbul resident of Egyptian origin, produced the first local product (*odikolon*, later *kolonya*) in the late nineteenth century, which he sold alongside other cosmetics and fragrances in his own chic boutique in the modern district of Feriköy (Yentürk 2015). Another local producer of *kolonya* was Eyüp Sabri Tuncer, born in 1898 to a Bosnian family, who in the 1920s began selling his lemon-scented fragrance in the new capital of the republic, Ankara (Süngü 2020). In present-day Turkey, most producers are micro- and small-scale enterprises that produce *kolonya*

alongside other products such as soaps, washing powder, and, to a lesser extent, cleaning materials and cosmetics (Özey and Çalışkan 2018).

Whereas in contemporary American English usage “cologne” is a common term for fragrances marketed to men, in Turkey, both historically and in the present day, its use is commonly regarded as gender neutral. Its classic scents are lemon, lavender, and tobacco, with different towns and regions producing their own typical aromas, often marketed with regional or urban motifs. Across Turkey, bottles of kolonya were long considered prestige souvenirs from travels elsewhere in the country, something one would bring (home) as a gift. In early Republican Turkey, fragrant waters marketed as kolonya were luxury products and their use formed part of a “modern” and, by implication, “secular” body technique, becoming more affordable and popular only once synthetic substances entered the market. By the end of the twentieth century, kolonya had moved out of the secular middle class and become a common asset in the living room cabinets of Turkish private homes, but also of sales counters and offices across the country. In these contexts, it functioned as a means of sociality rather than a fragrance for personal adornment.

Drawing on discussions in material religion and feminist science and technology studies, this article puts forward an understanding of kolonya as a powerful material substance involved in “intra-action” (Barad 2003) with the human body, including the olfactory nerves it stimulates, and the viruses it inactivates due to its high ethanol content. Moreover, it adopts a material perspective to call for greater attention to be given to scents and the olfactory in material religion as well as to the affects and the senses in their entanglement with cultural notions of hygiene and healing.

Research for this article is based on ethnographic field research in Turkey and among its diaspora in Germany, including thirteen face-to-face interviews with kolonya and perfume users and producers in 2020. The article also relies on systematic archival research about kolonya in the online archives of four major mainstream newspapers in Turkey, namely *Hürriyet*, a liberal mainstream daily; *Posta*, a mass-market tabloid; *Yeni Şafak*, a conservative Muslim daily; and *Sabah*, a right-wing mass-market paper.¹ In addition, the hashtag #kolonya was tracked on social media (Twitter and Youtube), especially around the time of the Muslim holiday of *Ramazan Bayramı* (Eid al-Fitr) in May 2020. Not least, research draws on earlier ethnographic research and ongoing rapport with interlocutors in Turkey since 2011 (Liebelt 2019a, 2019b, 2023).

In what follows, I put forward an understanding of kolonya as an “intra-active” substance with a wide range of meanings and bodily effects. Secondly, I will outline its role as a contested agent of experiential religion, with its scents being conceptualized as healing matter in prophetic medicine, but also debated

in its permissibility due to its alcohol content. Thirdly, I will show how in present-day Turkey, kolonya regained its early association with purity and healing in the government's biopolitical dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, drawing on ethnographic material on the everyday uses and meanings of kolonya in Turkey and its diaspora, I will reflect on its bodily doings as a fragrant matter and signifier of social relationships, creating olfactory belonging and distinction on highly affective grounds.

Kolonya as an "Intra-Active" Substance

Kolonya is a cultural artifact in Turkey and as such has a rich social life of its own. Cultural anthropology has long considered material objects as socially meaningful, proposing that the analysis of their historical trajectories and everyday usages allows for deep insights into cultural transformations and meaning-making processes (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Latour 1999, 2005). Igor Kopytoff (1986) proposes that we study the "social lives" and "biographies" of things, moving beyond a clear-cut separation between seemingly inanimate, passive objects and active, living persons. Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars such as Bruno Latour (1999, 2005) took this approach one step further, recognizing the agential capacities of things as "actors" or "actants" within a network of diverse institutional, technological, and "social" factors. Actor-network theory (ANT) may indeed offer a useful perspective for the understanding of cologne as a substance which, according to Latour (1999, 151), "gathers together a multiplicity of agents into a stable and coherent whole." From this perspective, cologne is an evanescent chemical composite, composed of a fragrant blend of aromatic extracts, ethanol, and water, each embedded in their own institutional, technological, and indeed, theological networks.

Moreover, kolonya is bodily consumed—commonly absorbed by the skin, but historically, and sometimes, accidentally, also drunk—and engages with the human body with various outcomes. As has been pointed out by new or neo-materialist scholarship (cf. Alaimo 2010; Barad 2003; Grosz 1987, 1994; Massumi 2014), the focus on the networks of material objects-as-actors has important implications for the conceptualization of bodily practices and the human body itself. From such a perspective, the materiality of the body is something that is "less an entity than a relation, [one that] cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living" (Butler 2016, 19). As the feminist STS scholar Karen Barad (2003, 828) points out, the human body is not just in, but materially "of the world," affecting it and being affected by it, modifying it and being modified by it. As a trained physicist, Barad is interested in how exactly "matter matters" (2003, 803). She coins the notion of "intra-activity" (ibid.) to emphasize how matter becomes an active participant in the embodied process of world-making. This conceptual perspective is particularly

helpful for studying highly affective fragrances such as kolonya: Once it evaporates from its flacon, kolonya is no longer “just” a material substance but, through the act of smelling and its bodily effects becomes a relational part of the human body. In its emergent and fleeting sense, it enfolds a wide range of material, theological and sensory effects, from dehydration to remembrance and relaxation. As the following will show, its meanings are not reducible to one single political or theological logic, but are multiple, like the human body itself.

Kolonya as a Contested Agent of Experiential Religion

In her influential inaugural lecture at the University of Utrecht, Birgit Meyer (2014) proposes the study of material processes of articulation, mediation, and performance in the anthropology of religion, emphasizing the things that people use to “do religion” and how these relate to them in a process of embodied self-formation. In recent years, anthropologists of Islam have indeed paid special attention to the embodied aspects of Islamic piety and the sensorial registers of ethical formation. In the wake of Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* (2004) and Charles Hirschkind’s *Ethical Soundscape* (2006), much has been written on the politics of sartorial choices and bodily comportment, sound and images, as well as sonic and visual experiences in Islam. Different kinds of scents and fragrances, however, have been conspicuously absent in this debate, in spite of the fact that they play a crucial role in ethical formation as well as for notions of bodily comportment and hygiene across the Muslim world and more generally in religious practice.

In his article on prayer beads in a Khaksari Sufi order in Iran, Younes Saramifar (2018) pays close attention to the materialities involved in manufacturing a “religiously and spiritually loaded” object (370). The materiality of material culture is important, Saramifar writes, but religious objects such as the prayer beads carved by Mullah Habib, a Sufi murshid and Saramifar’s key interlocutor, also “sustain a surplus” (379). Thus, for Mullah Habib, the prayer beads forge “ways of soul,” eventually turning into nonhuman “companions of rituals and prayers” (486). Like the prayer beads studied by Saramifar, kolonya has sensual-material qualities that go beyond its symbolic representation. Its spiritual “surplus,” I argue, is tied to the aromatic extracts that it contains.

Thus, in Muslim history and within Islamic or Prophetic Medicine, scents are endowed with great significance, with good scents being considered media of protection and of divine presence. During the so-called Golden Age of Islam, scholars and physicians such as Ali Rabban at-Tabarī (fl. ca. 805–870 AD), al-Kindī (801–873 AD), al-Mas’ūdī (fl. ca. 895–957 AD) and al-Zahrāwī (936–1013 AD), being expected “to have knowledge on the preparation of perfumes” (King 2017, 5), ascribed healing powers to particular scents. In his fourteenth-century treatise of prophetic medicine, the theologian

and physician Ibn Quayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350 AD) lists several scents—including musk, aloe wood, ambergris, and frankincense—as medical substances, stating that perfume (Arab., *tīb*) preserves the health, because “it makes the heart rejoice, pleases the soul and revitalizes the spirit” (Ibn Quayyim al-Jawziyya 1998, 199). Scents are more generally regarded highly as among the “beloved things” of the Prophet, also functioning as demonifuge according to Ibn Quayyim due to the fact that “[g]ood spirits love a beautiful scent, while evil spirits like an evil smell” (ibid., 200).

In present-day Turkey, different kinds of scents and fragrances continue to be used in religious everyday rituals, including as substances that support prayer or as stimuli for the transcendence of everyday life. For example, *esanslar*, oil-based perfumes that are also sold by street vendors in front of large mosques, may be applied to the skin before prayer or to objects of everyday ritual use, such as prayer mats or beads. Locally produced rose water is used in large quantities on ceremonial occasions in mosques and during public events such as political rallies by the ruling AKP party or the opening of mosques (*Cumhuriyet* 2021). At the same time, scents are part of everyday grooming practices and of the individual’s quest for a clean, pure, sensitive, and sensually attuned body. These attributes are considered important bodily effects of kolonya. Nevertheless, due to its alcohol content, kolonya is certainly *not* a religious object, firmly placed within the confines of religion. Thus, while alcohol as a substance itself is not prohibited, its consumption as an intoxicating liquid commonly is (Shahab 2016, 57).²

Similar to qat and coffee, substances that have likewise been debated in their permissibility and bodily effects by Muslim scholars and users (Stevenson, Fitzgerald, and Banwell 1996; Kirli 2016), as a sign of hospitality in Turkey, kolonya is closely tied to norms of sociality, including in ritualized contexts. Like the drinking of coffee or the chewing of qat, the offering, passing on, and smelling of kolonya is an embodied activity in which a potentially intoxicating substance is used as a means of sociality. This becomes especially clear during holidays, such as Eid al-Fitr, in Turkish *Ramazan Bayramı*, which marks the end of four weeks of fasting during the month of Ramadan.

Celebrating the Scented Feast of Sweets in 2020

In Turkey and the Turkish-Muslim diaspora, the holiday is also commonly known as *Şeker Bayramı*, the “Feast of Sweets,” due to the fact that when visiting relatives, friends or neighbors, one is given candy, chocolates, and other sweets such as Turkish Delight. One is also commonly offered kolonya. In advance of the holiday in May 2020, the Turkish government announced a strict curfew to reduce the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths. Instead of the usual festive mood, during the holiday

towns all over Turkey fell silent and empty, with police units patrolling the streets to enforce the curfew. In one video posted on YouTube by a local news agency,³ a team of Turkish Red Crescent volunteers can be seen walking through the emptied town of Hakkari on the Turkish-Iraqi border. They are carrying trays with colorful sweets and bottles of kolonya, which they offer to the few persons they meet outside: the police, the security forces, two elderly men. These readily accept, having the kolonya poured into their outstretched hands and rubbing it first on their hands and then on their hair or neck.

In the weeks preceding the holiday in 2020, many fragrance producers launched advertisements that directly referred to the COVID-19 related changes. For example, a video commercial for a lemon-scented kolonya produced by a family firm in Izmir stated:

This holiday, in our cologne [*kolonya*], there's not only your beloved smell of lemon. This holiday, it also includes the scent of your beloved grandparents and great-grandparents that you cannot go to visit. It also includes the scents of the feast table. It also includes the scents of sweets from your homeland [*memleket*], where you cannot go. This holiday, our cologne includes the scents of our loved ones, the ones we miss, and the ones we wait for as well as of wonderful days in the future. [Brand name] wishes a happy holiday to all of Turkey!⁴

And indeed, many families still went shopping for candies and kolonya in preparation for the feast despite the COVID-19 regulations. As attested to by the countless social media postings under the hashtag #kolonya in the days preceding and during the holiday, kolonya assumed a special significance that year. Like many others, interlocutors sent or posted their holiday greetings alongside pictures of their personal assortment of kolonya. Many of these postings were nostalgic in tone and invoked celebrations of former times. A clip frequently re-posted on Twitter ahead of the holidays from Turkish state television in 1988 featured holiday greetings from national celebrities and a typical *bayram* scene, with younger family members ritually greeting older relatives by kissing their extended hands and bringing them to their foreheads and girls offering candies and kolonya to groups of seated guests. Thus, for many of those celebrating *Ramazan Bayramı*, kolonya continued to form an inseparable element of their multisensorial experience of the holiday, even if there were no guests to be hosted.

Kolonya as a Biopolitical Agent in the Early COVID-19 Crisis

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, epidemiological lines of conflict mirrored the political rift in Turkey: whereas Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of the largest Turkish city, Istanbul, from the major oppositional party, CHP, called for an urban

lockdown early on to contain the growing health crisis, the conservative and pro-Islamic government of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was reluctant to impose containment measures mainly for economic reasons. In one controversial step, the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyamet) kept all mosques open until after COVID-19 had been declared a global pandemic and its first coronavirus patient had been admitted, allowing millions of men to gather and pray the Friday *salat* on March 13 (Alyanak 2020). In late March and early April 2020, according to the John Hopkins University's COVID-19 map, Turkey ranked among the top ten countries with the highest number of confirmed cases globally, in spite of its low testing and systematic under-reporting of COVID-19 cases (Kisa and Kisa 2020). Subsequently, kolonya took an important aspect of what Heather Paxson (2008) has called “microbiopolitics,” namely the conflictive politics over “how to live with microorganisms”—or viruses, for that matter—which commonly reflects “disagreement about how humans ought to live with one another” (ibid., 16).

The day after the Ministry of Health's announcement that citizens should use kolonya to protect themselves from coronavirus, the demand for hand sanitizer increased fifteen-fold, and the demand for kolonya more than tripled (Eser 2020). The minister's announcement was supported by the Turkish Medical Association, which in a press release on how to protect against COVID-19 stated that if soap or liquid soap were unavailable, “alcohol-based hand sanitiser or kolonya should be used” (TBB 2020). Subsequently, it was reported that shopkeepers sold more kolonya in one hour than they usually did in a year (Hürriyet 2020a), even though individual sellers rationed the number of bottles their customers were allowed to buy (Hürriyet 2020c). While toilet paper was stockpiled in Germany, kolonya was stockpiled in Turkey. Turkish media websites published videos and posted picture galleries of overcrowded sales offices of kolonya-producing firms and showed long lines of customers waiting to be served in front of stores selling kolonya. In one report about a small producer in the town of İzmit, the owner was quoted saying that “if the situation goes on like this, we will have to produce at night” (quoted from Hürriyet 2020b). Indeed, this is what happened in many kolonya-producing factories across the country: in September, *Sabah* (2020a) described a factory in the Black Sea region of Düzce that ever since March had been producing kolonya 24 h a day. Similar extensions of production were reported from large kolonya factories in Edirne, in eastern Thrace (*Sabah* 2020b), and Kayseri in central Anatolia (*Sabah* 2020c).

Moreover, a thriving black market grew up, also selling products based on cheaper, but potentially hazardous methyl-alcohol instead of ethanol. In late March, *Hürriyet* (2020f) reported a large raid in 25 cities across the country launched by

the Minister of Interior, Süleyman Soylu, which resulted in the detention of 71 and the arrest of four persons involved in the illegal production and sale of hand sanitizer and kolonya, as well as the confiscation of 65,000 boxes of disinfectant, 750 bottles of kolonya, 4,375 liters of ethanol, 340 liters of methyl alcohol, and eleven tons of other chemical substances. Indeed, explanations and recipes for home-made kolonya and disinfectants were shared not only in talk shows, among friends and social media, but also in mainstream print media (for example, *Hürriyet* 2020d). Not least, the boom in kolonya sales and production was not restricted to Turkey. In mid-August, the Turkish Statistical Institute reported that, during the first half of 2020, Turkey had sold kolonya to 86 countries worldwide, and exports had hit a record high of over thirteen million US dollars (see *Hürriyet* 2020g).

Given that its main ingredient was alcohol, the use of kolonya in Muslim-majority Turkey was potentially controversial and indeed, after the Ministry of Health's announcement all eyes were on the Diyanet, the Directorate of Religious Affairs: would it condone the use of kolonya? Three days later, on March 14, the Diyanet declared that spirit, kolonya, and other alcohol-based liquids were *caiz*, that is, neither prescribed nor prohibited if used for cleaning purposes (cf. *Timeturk* 2020). While this interpretation was widely accepted among religious scholars in Turkey, a few conservative voices raised concerns. For example, Nurettin Yıldız, a Sunni Orthodox scholar and preacher who runs his own media outlet, was quoted saying that he was concerned about alcoholic substances lingering on the believer's body during prayers and urged Muslims to wash after using kolonya for purposes of disinfection.

In Turkey, contestations over the place of alcohol have a long history and indeed, Turkey has been presented as a case of "extreme" permissiveness regarding alcohol consumption and regulation in Muslim majority countries (Michalak and Trocki 2006). Studying the contested place of alcohol in early Republican Turkey, Evered and Evered (2016, 49) note that "the alcohol question is still central within religious-secular tensions and thus provides unique opportunities to engage with today's geopolitics of public health and population." Nevertheless, like the geopolitics of alcoholic beverages in early Republican Turkey, the biopolitics of kolonya in the early COVID-19 crisis did not comply to a simple Islamist-secularist dualism: even the most staunchly conservative Muslim voices were not in favor of an outright prohibition, but rather issued directions for a responsible usage of and possible substitutes for kolonya. For example, the pro-Muslim media published articles on the cleansing effects of non-alcoholic rosewater, which has powerful theological connotations in Islam, suggesting that it also destroyed "microbes" and was antibacterial (for example, *Yeni Şafak* 2020a). While the proponents of rosewater did not call for an outright ban of kolonya or even denied its positive effects, much in line

with Islamic medicine, they emphasized the overall healing and purifying capacities of the rose (see Başer, Altıntaş, and Kürkçüoğlu 2012).⁵

Thus, kolonya became the quasi-official national cure for dealing with the crisis. Beginning in early April, millions of care packages, including facial masks, a bottle of kolonya, and a letter from the President, were distributed to the elderly and chronically ill as part of a COVID-19 emergency kit from the government. In politicians' accompanying statements, it took on the meaning of a deeply embedded cultural form of everyday hygiene and a nationalist symbol for self-sufficiency. The campaign and the first days of distribution in Istanbul were covered extensively in the news. Newspaper websites offered picture galleries and even videos (for example, Günal 2020) showing teams of policemen knocking on residents' doors and handing out care packages. In the pro-government newspapers, these packages were closely associated with President Erdoğan himself and occasionally called "Erdoğan's hygiene packages." The campaign was part of the regime's attempt to affect the image of an all-powerful government taking good care of its citizens. In its wake, kolonya became a patriotic symbol, part and parcel of Turkish nationalism on the rise.

Kolonya as a Substance of "Healing" to the People

The entanglement between kolonya and patriotic sentiments can be sensed from the reporting of the pro-government *Yeni Şafak* (2020b) about a factory in Düzce, where in early April workers labored for ten days without proper sleep to meet a government order for 300,000 bottles of kolonya for the emergency kit campaign. *Yeni Şafak* did not comment on the horrendous working conditions but emphasized the workers' "heroic" efforts instead. The accompanying pictures depict almost exclusively female workers uniformly dressed in dark pants, headscarves, and wine-red overcoats waving national flags as trucks decorated with "Homeland First" banners leave the premises of the factory to distribute the first shipment. The factory's executive manager is quoted saying that the orders from the President and Minister of Health were so dear to them that they were prepared to continue the same pace of production for another three or five months. One of the workers is described as weeping upon seeing the first trucks leaving the factory; he is quoted as speaking of the workers' personal effort to fulfill the state order and his hope that it will provide "healing" (*şifa*) for the people. He also declares his "love" for Turkey and says he is ready to sacrifice his life for the homeland (*vatan*).

This new connotation of kolonya as a signifier of health and healing was shared widely among interlocutors, including those who were otherwise critical of the Justice and Development Party rule. This became clear from an interview with Necile, a long-time acquaintance in her late sixties. During our interview in August 2020, Necile remembered how she received one of

the first emergency packages from the Turkish government in early April. It was delivered to her by two policemen, who came knocking on the door of her apartment building in Istanbul's central Cihangir district. In the weeks preceding the delivery, she and other elderly neighbors had asked the concierge to buy facial masks and kolonya for them, but everything was sold out. Accordingly, Necile felt relieved when she received the package and remembered her neighbors (for some reason, she was the only person who received such a package in the building) jokingly telling her that they were "jealous." As soon as the package arrived, she invited her sister and elderly mother, both also classed as persons at risk, to share the three facial masks that came as part of the package. When they arrived, Necile offered kolonya to her mother, who smilingly said: "In the old days, we always used to do this!"

While drinking tea, they indulged in reminiscences triggered by the scent of the fragrance. It had been years since they had last used kolonya. Neither of them stored any at home. "At home, I used to be responsible for offering kolonya to our guests," Necile told me. "My mom used to signal with her eyes that it was time to offer kolonya, and I would jump to my feet to catch it."⁶ They wondered why it was that at one point in the late 1990s or early 2000s everyone had stopped using kolonya. For Necile, the disappearance of kolonya formed part of a creeping Islamization of society in that period, but was also related to its individualization, with fewer women inviting their female friends for a regular *kadın günü* (lit. "woman's day," the Turkish equivalent of an afternoon bridge club).

During the interview, which took place in Necile's second home in Berlin, the kolonya that had arrived with the package, a lemon-scented bottle of the Eyüp Sabri Tuncer brand stood half empty on her coffee table. Upon entering her flat, one could smell it. As a secular critic of the current government in Turkey, Necile nevertheless half-jokingly called it "Erdogan's kolonya." While by now medical or non-scented disinfectant agents had become readily available again in Germany and Turkey, she still occasionally used it as a hand sanitizer or to disinfect objects of everyday use (doorknobs, keys, her phone) as well as objects that entered the house from outside, especially food packages. Her hygienic usage of kolonya resonated with what other research participants reported from Turkey. In an ethnographic article on domestic cleaning practices in Turkey during the early COVID-19 pandemic, Pelin Efiltili and Özge Merzali Celikoglu (2022) likewise describe how their research participants took "extraordinary precautions" (2022, 7) to implement new hygiene procedures such as the disinfection of food packaging brought into the house by spraying them with kolonya. As a result, kolonya and its scent now formed part of the everyday life of many households in Turkey and its diaspora once more. It is easy to see that for Necile and many others, it was not simply or exclusively the disinfectant quality of kolonya that mattered

during a particular moment of global health crisis, but also its social, sensual—not to say spiritual—capacities as a signifier of (social) healing.

Kolonya as a Fragrant Signifier of Social Relationships

As has been argued by proponents of an anthropology of senses (see Classen 2010; Corbin 1986; Howes 2003), like material objects, sensorial modalities are produced by and with effects on social relations, practices and meanings, operating in distinct ways across time and space. While the kolonya renaissance in Turkey and its diaspora in the early COVID-19 crisis can be linked to various practical reasons, its earlier disappearance is less easily explained. Like Necile, other interlocutors linked its gradual disappearance from Turkish homes and public spaces to the rise of an Islamic movement, which was critical of its high alcohol content; the individualization of Turkish society; or the growing import of Western perfumes and wet wipes, following Turkey's economic liberalization and inclusion into an increasingly global market since the 1980s. Perhaps most of all, kolonya had suffered a *symbolic* decline and was commonly associated with elderly persons and as something used in rural or traditionalist rather than urban or cosmopolitan settings. The devaluation of kolonya became especially clear from research with Turkish immigrants and their children in Germany.

In May 2020, I met up with Gülperi and Sakine in Berlin, who grew up in villages in southeastern Turkey in the 1970s later following their parents to Germany to attend primary school. In these villages, they said, kolonya was still an indispensable item of everyday life, sitting on the shelves of living-room cabinets, hidden away from smaller children, and commonly offered to guests. In Berlin, Gülperi and Sakine both worked in the offices of a large Turkish wholesaler and in the early COVID-19 crisis had experienced the scarcity and panic-buying first of “medical” hand sanitizers, and then of kolonya first-hand. As an accountant in this wholesale market, Sakine had ordered large quantities of kolonya from Turkey, which sold out quickly. They had both acquired and used kolonya as a hand sanitizer, carrying bottles with them in their handbags. By then, Turkish-owned shops across Berlin had likewise taken to storing and selling kolonya imported from Turkey and Turkish cafés and restaurants routinely offered it for disinfection purposes in place of more acrid-smelling hand sanitizer (see also, *Hürriyet* 2020e). As a result, different fragrances of kolonya were in the air throughout the city and could routinely be smelled in the public space. This was not welcomed by everyone, and indeed many non-Turkish residents commonly commented on the “intrusive” and “irritating” qualities of these colognes.

In Berlin, the trope that (Turkish) immigrants, especially men, used “too much” cologne is closely tied to the racist stereotype that they do so to conceal bad smell or dirt. The olfactory othering of Turkish immigrants in Berlin is linked to processes of

distinction through taste, but also tied to the racialization of particular corporealities and sensorialities. Like other interlocutors in Berlin, Gülperi and Sakine were well aware of these racialized forms of othering and emphasized the bodily efforts they took to counter not only bad smells, but also tropes of the “smelly immigrant.” Accordingly, they had mixed feelings about using kolonya and before the outbreak of the pandemic had refrained from using it, unless offered as a part of sociality. They especially abhorred its tobacco note, *tütün kolonyası*, considered a classic scent of (elderly) Turkish men, who also used it as an aftershave. For Sakine, a self-proclaimed feminist, *tütün kolonyası* signified “the smell of Turkish patriarchy.”⁷ She even claimed that she refused to accept it when offered, a potentially offensive and certainly impolite gesture. This illustrates the role of kolonya as a signifier of social relationships that are always already embedded in larger power dynamics.

As an embodied fragrance, this shows, kolonya is a tool for effecting forms of olfactory belonging, exclusion, and distinction in Turkey and its diaspora. Thus, in the early pandemic crisis kolonya underwent a dramatic change in use *and* in value, with COVID-19 fears trumping fears over kolonya as social signifier, similar to its curbing of religious anxieties over its potentially problematic effects. In that sense, kolonya’s intra-active, more-than-material capacities traversed multiple, socially entrenched binaries, related to, but also clearly transgressing religious–secular binaries in Turkey and its diaspora.

Conclusion

Despite its alcohol content, which is problematic in Islam, kolonya became a biopolitical agent in the pro-Muslim Turkish government’s attempt to deal with the early COVID-19 crisis. By recognizing the biochemical effects of ethanol-based kolonya, Turkey’s Islamic authorities have accommodated the challenges brought by the COVID-19 crisis in the fashion of a truly discursive tradition. Resorting to kolonya as a supposedly national cure, they resorted to a longstanding but more recently neglected connection between scents, health, care, and healing in Muslim, but also in European-Christian history prior to the changes brought about by Pasteurism (Latour 1988). Whereas in early Muslim history, scents and fragrances were considered part and parcel of theological approaches to healing and medicine, they (temporarily) moved away from such understandings to be considered objects of (secular, cosmetic) consumption. However, as shown in this article, in the early COVID-19 crisis kolonya traversed the boundaries commonly drawn between the secular and the Islamic as one of many socially entrenched binaries of present-day Turkish society.

Recent studies in material religion have shown that both religion and secularism are far from being immaterial ideas, as they both form embodied material realities (Scheer, Fadil, and

Schepelern Johansen 2019). This should lead us to consider more comprehensively the sensual underpinnings of everyday (religious) experience, including the olfactorial. If we think of evidence as embodied and “the religious” as the extraordinary, disrupting the usual flow of everyday life, as suggested by Meyer (2014), we will certainly learn much from a deeper understanding of the moral configuration and the affective power of scents and fragrances. Fleeting and ephemeral in their materiality, invisible, yet perceptible, they draw attention not only to the relationality of the material and spiritual worlds, but also to that of the human body. They are transgressive, “intra-active,” in the way that they intrude on our embodied reality and the boundaries we create for ourselves; they may linger on in the form of sensations and may haunt us as the mediators of memories—both nostalgic ones, of long-gone Muslim holidays, and dreaded ones, in the case of Sakine quoted above, of patriarchal structures one would rather flee or change.

Whereas some fragrances—for example, rosewater—clearly qualify as a means of Muslim ethics—cherished “companions” of prayer and ritual, in Saramifar’s words—the case of kolonya is more complicated. Due to its alcoholic content, it is not a religious object *per se*, and most users would not even see it as religiously loaded. Yet it is clearly a signifier and means of sociality and healing, including in ritual contexts. Moreover, kolonya may be part of a person’s moral and material boundary work, creating a clean and pure body. As a fragrant relational substance, it gives rise to sacred and not so sacred life-worlds—operating, much like religion and transcendence, on highly affective grounds. As a biopolitical agent and cultural artifact, it became a more-than-material matter of healing during a particular pandemic moment in Turkey and its diaspora, traversing secular–religious binaries among other socially entrenched binaries.

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notes and references

¹Due to the fact that during the Justice and Development Party rule, critical news outlets have been closed and journalists imprisoned (Kanver 2018), these papers do not represent a wide political spectrum in Turkey but can be considered pro-government in varying degrees.

²However, see Tamimi Arab (2022) for a discussion of "Muslim drinking," which points to the fact that there are "ambiguous or outright contradictory attitudes" regarding the consumption of alcoholic drinks among people of Muslim background.

³"Red Crescent team makes the security forces' holiday," uploaded to Youtube on 24 May 2020 by Hakkari News (Hakkari Haber, 22,000 subscribers). Accessed 17 September 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbZnDHLzB0Q> (853 clicks).

⁴"Selin Kolonya – Bayram Filmi," uploaded to Youtube on 22 May 2020 by Rafineri Advertisement Agency. Accessed 17 September 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tm2r2H-MAHWQ> (2160 clicks).

⁵In the world of Islamic poetry and everyday religious practice, the rose is a symbol of the divine, and rose-scented fragrances or waters (*gül suyu*) are commonly used for ritual purification. Moreover, Turkey is a major global producer of rose fragrances and annually sends a share of its products to Mecca for ritual purification of the holy sights (Yalçın-Heckmann 2016). It is typically used for *ghusl*, the full-body ritual purification mandatory before particular prayers, or after ejaculation and menstruation, as well as during mourning ceremonies in mosques to relax and calm the grieving.

⁶Interview with Necile, 12 August 2020.

⁷Interview with Sakine, 5 June 2020. The following quotations by Sakine are also taken from this interview.

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