

A Fragrant Spiritual Heritage. Some Considerations on Perfumes in Islam

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Abstract

A passion for perfumes has been a constant throughout Islamic history. We can see it when we walk through the markets of the Middle East or the huge malls of the Gulf cities. Further evidence is provided by the recent opening of a museum, the 'House of Perfumes' (*Bayt al-ʿuṭūr*) in the historic centre of Dubai, in a traditional district known as al-Shindagha, facing Dubai Creek. This essay proposes a few considerations on the cultural importance of perfumes in Islamic society, from earliest times until today, beginning with the use of the words *rīḥ*, *ṭīb* and *ʿitr* in the foundational texts.

Keywords

rīḥ – *ṭīb* – *ʿitr* – *ʿarf* – *tafsīr al-Qurʾān* – *Bayt al-ʿuṭūr* (Dubai)

Foreword

A rekindled focus on cultural identity is emerging throughout the MENASA area. For many the re-evaluation of indigenous traditions, and their associated value systems and local social structures is very much on the agenda, as a reaction against the various foreign models that, in recent centuries, have challenged their centrality, or sometimes even supplanted them. And the perfume industry is certainly following this trend. Taking the United Arab Emirates as

an example, a market research study conducted in late 2024¹ highlighted the importance of perfumery not only on account of the sector's huge turnover and burgeoning growth expectations, but also due to an increasing demand for fragrances rooted in local and region-specific traditions, particularly those based on *ūd* – a resin extracted from lign-aloe trees or *Aquilaria* – both for personal use or for public occasions such as weddings and religious ceremonies. Similarly, there is a growing demand among both men and women for oil- rather than alcohol-based perfumes, although alcohol, when it does not appear in a beverage, but in perfumes, or in detergents and pharmaceuticals, is considered permissible by all four Sunni *madāhib*.²

Emblematic of the same trend was the mid-2020 opening in the Emirate of Dubai of a museum called 'The House of Perfumes', *Bayt al-ūṭūr*, in the traditional Al Shindagha district, with its more than 200 historic buildings, many dating back to the 19th century and some already designated as heritage museums, counterbalancing the fantastical skyscrapers overlooking the city's pulsating artery. Multiple regional, national and international news outlets³ greeted its opening with fanfares, homing in on the immersive experience welcoming the viewer and the particular building chosen, the residence of Šayḥa bint Sa'īd ibn Maktūm (d. 2017), the sister of Rašīd ibn Sa'īd Āl Maktūm, late ruler of Dubai (d. 1990), herself a great perfumery enthusiast and an expert in their preparation.⁴

The interest in traditional perfumes for personal use, which, as noted above, is part of a general rediscovery of heritage, has its roots in the founding texts of Islam and the traditional medieval but also contemporary ethical-legal literature that relates to them, which are the main focus of this essay.⁵ This

1 www.kenresearch.com/industry-reports/uae-fragrance-market#Research_methodology. All sites can be taken as consulted on 7 April 2025.

2 <https://www.dar-alifta.org/en/fatwa/details/5922/can-i-use-perfumes-which-contain-alcohol> (*fatwā* dated 24 July 2013) which defines the position of the Egyptian Dār al-iftā', in line, for example, with the Kuwaiti Dār al-iftā'.

3 For example, the newspapers *Al-Bayān* based in Dubai (<https://www.albayan.ae/five-senses/mirrors/2019-06-09-1.3579490>), Arab News, based in Riyadh (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1508726/lifestyle>), and *Al Arab*, based in London (alarab.co.uk/بيت-العطور-في-دي-يسرد (-تاريخ-التطيب-عند-العرب)).

4 On perfume in the UAE see Kanafani, *Aesthetics* and Kanafani-Zahar, "Le Parfum".

5 With the arrival of 'sensory anthropology' and the so-called 'sensorial turn' of the 1990s (on which, see for example Howes, *Sensual Relations*), interest in smell and odours in relation to Islam has also been growing steadily among scholars writing in Western languages. I note here, for their importance, two recent miscellanies: Bonnéric, "Réflexions", in particular the contributions of Paoli, Buquet, Le Maguer, Ducène, Balda-Tillier, Shinikov, Bonnéric; and the later Lange & Bursi, *Islamic Sensory*, especially the contributions of King, Koloska, Lange,

preliminary survey forms part of a broader research project that seeks to investigate the interplay between religious texts and the cultural significance of the personal and domestic use of fragrance in the contemporary Arab-Islamic world.⁶ As such, it adopts a descriptive approach and does not seek to problematise its subject matter at this stage.

1 Joseph's Scent

The Qur'ān contains very few mentions of the sense of smell, compared with the frequency of sight and hearing references.⁷ The most significant is to be found in the Joseph (Yūsuf) sūra (12:93–96); his father Jacob realises that Joseph must still be alive because he smells his “*rīḥ*” – a simple bodily aroma, neither pleasant nor unpleasant: “Later, when the caravan departed, their father said, ‘You may think I am senile, but I perceive Joseph’s scent (*innī la-ağidu rīḥ Yūsuf*)’” (Qur 12:94).⁸

The episode of Joseph is the only occasion when the term *rīḥ* appears in the Qur'ān with reference to smell, as in all other circumstances it means ‘wind’: in the context of storms or sailing (*rīḥ ṭayyiba*, *rīḥ ‘aṣīf*, Qur 10:22), absent in a dead calm (cf. *in yaṣa’* [*Allāh*] *yuskinu al-rīḥ*, Qur 42:33); subjugated by Solomon (Qur 21:81; 34:12; 38:36); an instrument for the castigation of the people of ‘Ād (Qur 46:24; 51:41; 54:19; 69:6); hostile to unbelievers (Qur 3:117; 14:18; 22:31) and

Van Gelder. For an outline of the state of research on smell and scent focusing on the Gulf states – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – see the recent Gray, “A Case and Research Agenda”, with a timely literature review of scent and perfume in the Gulf. Also, generally: Marīn, “Odors and Smells”; Stewart, *Smells*. As an example of the interest in perfumes in the contemporary Arab world, Ġannābī, *al-‘Iṭr*; Yāsīn & Bārū, “al-Hady”; and Ḥalawī, *Lamasāt*. In a comparative perspective, Thurlkill, *Sacred Scents*. I should also mention, though less germane to this essay, the major classical Arab texts on the composition of perfumes, *Kitāb Ġawāhīr al-ṭīb al-mufrada* by the Christian Yūḥannā al-Māsawayh (vii–ix C), and al-Kindī’s *Kitāb al-Taraffuq fi l-‘īṭr* also known as *Kitāb Kimiyā’ al-‘īṭr wa-l-tas’īdāt* (9th C). To these should be added the *Kitāb al-Ṭīb* by al-Ḥāzin (11th C) on which Qosī, *Kitāb al-Ṭīb*. And further: the *Kitāb Funūn al-ṭīb* by Ibn al-Ġazzār and the *Ṭīb al-‘arūs wa-rayḥān al-nufūs* by al-Tamīmī (both 10th C) on which Qosī & Salīmī, “What should you expect”, particularly p. 471–472; see also Talal, “Fragrances from Heaven”, p. 35–48.

6 For an introductory of early usage of perfumes in Islam see Zohar & Lev, “Trends in the Use of Perfumes”.

7 Marīn, “Odors and Smells”; Stewart, “Smell”. Unlike the eyes and ears, which are mentioned repeatedly, the nose appears only once, and not as an organ of smell but as a part of the body prone to exchange under the law of retaliation, together with the eye, tooth, ear and life in general, Koloska, “The Senses”, p. 20–21.

8 Qur’ānic translations are mostly based on Abdelhaleem, *The Qur’an*.

propitious for Muslims (Qur 8:46; 33:9); representing a sign from God insufficient to sway those who will not believe (Qur 30:51).

In fact, even in Joseph's case the 'smell' sense is confused or combined with that of 'wind'. If the modern commentators like Ibn Āšūr (d. 1393/1973), al-Ša'rāwī (d. 1419/1998) or Ṭaṭāwī (d. 1431/2010),⁹ immediately gloss *rīḥ* or 'wind' as signifying *rā'iḥa*, 'pleasant smell' or 'perfume', the older exegetes maintain the ambiguity and make smell an aspect or form or variety of wind, less an odour borne on the wind than the wind carrying an odour as part and parcel of itself.

As noted by, for example, Muḥammad ibn Ġarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), relying as was his habit on the most ancient sources, the wind – *rīḥ* – asked permission of its Lord to waft Joseph's odour – *rīḥ* again – to Jacob before the actual bearers of the good news came to him. God assented, and the wind brought Jacob the smell of Joseph. According to some sources, it arrived with an advantage of eight nights' travel, or seven, or eight days, the journey time separating, say, Basra from Kufa, or by traveling at high speed some eighty parasangs, given that Joseph was in Egypt and Jacob in Canaan.

Another important commentator, Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), similarly reports the disagreement among the ancients as to how the wind and/or odour reached Jacob.¹⁰ Basing himself on the 'follower' or *tābi'* Muḡāhid ibn Ḡabr (d. 103/722 or 104/723), al-Rāzī posits that a gust of wind (*rīḥ*) blew across Joseph's robe in such a way that its odours (*rawā'iḥ*, plural of *rā'iḥa*) spread from Paradise to the earth, eventually reaching Jacob, who recognised their celestial origin. Perhaps the robe in question was the same that the Angel Gabriel had given Abraham to protect him from the flames (see Qur 21:68), and which had passed down through the generations, from Abraham to Isaac, thence to Jacob, and finally to Joseph. The all-but-instant arrival of a smell from so far off was certainly a miracle (*mu'jiza*) performed by a prophet – al-Rāzī continues – and as such was outside the normal course of events (*munāqida li-l-āda*); a miracle that God conceded to Joseph, or more probably to Jacob. He winds up with the observation that according to "the scholars of [Qur'ānic] meanings (*ahl al-ma'ānī*)", God was bringing about a thing of great difficulty in causing a smell to arrive from so far away, when he could have much more easily brought the father closer to the son. The fact that Joseph's scent reached Jacob at the end of a period of tribulation (*miḥna*) shows how even easy things

9 All in explanation of Qur 12:94. For consultation of the Qur'ānic commentaries, reference was made to the website of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought of Amman, www.altafsir.com/.

10 Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, commentary on Qur 12:94.

are difficult in adversity, and conversely difficult things are easy when good fortune reigns. Physicality, whether in relation to smell or to wind, becomes almost completely extraneous to spiritual readings. Among these is that of al-Quṣayrī (d. 465/1072), who argues that only those who love recognise the smell of their loved ones, only those who suffer from their absence, are able to discern it; as for those who are not close to us (*al-aḡānib*), the author states that the issue is complicated and asks instead: but how can a human being even have such a wind/smell (*annā yakūn li-l-insān riḥ*)? His solution is to propose a wider meaning for *riḥ*, as ‘hint’, ‘suggestion’, ‘presentiment’ or ‘suspicion’, and cites the Arab expression *la-aḡidu riḥ al-fitna* – “I sense the odour of discord”.¹¹

2 Smell, Taste and Beatitude

Another term similar to *riḥ* also appears in the Qur’ān, deriving from the same root, that is *rayḥān*. It is twice cited among the rewards of Paradise reserved for the blessed: in the Lord of Mercy (Qur 55:12) and in the That Which is Coming sūras (Qur 56:89). Here again, a reference to the sense of smell is not unanimously accepted by the commentators. Glossing the first instance (Qur 55:12), Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī reads *rayḥān* as “fragrant leaves” (cf. *waraq mā yuṣammu*) or even ordinary basil, or flowering plants generally, when used in making medicinals. But according to the above-mentioned al-Ṭabarī, the majority of ancient commentators did not consider the scent from plants at all but explained *rayḥān*, at least in this case, as subsistence goods (*rizq*) or more straightforwardly food (*ṭa’ām*), or green plants (*ḥuḍrat al-zarā’*) generally, or those with stems (*mā qāma ‘alā sāq*). Al-Quṣayrī, too, again arguing from linguistic usage, favours “subsistence goods”, reminding us that the Arabs say: “We went out in search of the fragrance of God” (*rayḥān Allāh*), meaning that they went looking for the necessities for survival.¹²

The second case, from the That Which is Coming sūra (Qur 56:89), is even more subject to debate, as *rayḥān* is paired with another, graphically similar term, *rawḥ* or ‘calm’ – also, in another reading (*qirā’a*), *rūḥ* or ‘spirit’ or ‘gust’ – both cited as rewards for “those whom God has drawn close to himself (*li-l-muqarrabīn*)”. To read *rayḥān* here as fragrant plants would clearly be to stray too far from “calm” or “spirit”; and for this reason, the commentators

11 Quṣayrī, *Laṭā’if* commentary on Qur 12:94.

12 All these commentators are glossing Qur 55:12.

generally prefer to explain *rayḥān* as meaning comfort or ease,¹³ grouping it with *rawḥ* rather than *rīḥ*, and removing therefore any reference to smell.¹⁴

Continuing the theme of rewards in the afterlife, we find references to *misk* (musk),¹⁵ to *zanġabil* (ginger) and to *kāfūr* (camphor), but in these cases it is unclear if they are present for their smell, or their taste, or for both together.

Looking first at the mention of musk, in the Those Who Give Short Measure *sūra* (Qur 83:26); it has to do with a wine called *rahīq*, kept sealed (*maḥtūm*), where the seal in question is of musk rather than the clay stoppers used on earth, as explained by al-Ṭabarī after ‘Abd Allāh ibn Zayd (d. 182/798). Al-Rāzī, following the older exegetes Muqātil (d. 150/767) and Qatāda (d. 117/735), suggests instead that when the blessed finish drinking, they are left with both a smell and a pleasing taste of musk in the mouth (*ḍakā’ al-rā’iḥa ma’a ṭīb al-ṭa’m*). Among the modern writers, Ibn ‘Āšūr only reads taste (cf. *ṭa’m al-misk bi-ma’nā nakhatihi*) while Ṭanṭāwī reads only smell (*rīḥ*).¹⁶

In the Man *sūra* (Qur 76:17) the blessed are given a cup of wine “mixed with ginger”. Again, we are dealing with a drink, and the exegesis does not really help us to resolve any ambiguity between taste and smell. It could be that the drink is mixed with ginger in the sense that it reminds the blessed of what they drank on earth, or at least that is the line taken by al-Ṭabarī from Muġāhid; although as al-Rāzī emphasises, following ‘the father of Qur’ānic exegesis’ Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687), every thing in Paradise mentioned in the Qur’ān shares its name and no more with the analogous object or phenomenon on earth.¹⁷

Camphor also makes its appearance in the same Man *sūra* (Qur 76:5) once again in a drink context to indicate its good smell (*ṭayyib al-rā’iḥa*); as interpreted by al-Ṭabarī.¹⁸ Al-Rāzī’s analysis goes deeper and worries away at the question: since a drink in which camphor is mixed is most unlikely to be in any way delicious, why is it listed among the rewards of Paradise? His answer is that the passage does not refer to a drink at all, but to a spring in the celestial

13 As in, among others, Abdelhaleem’s translation, p. 357: “If that dying person is one of those who will be brought near to God, he will have rest (*rawḥ*), ease (*rayḥān*), and a Garden of Bliss”.

14 All these commentators are glossing Qur 56:89.

15 The musk referred to in the traditional sources was extracted from the scent glands of musk deer. On the origin and the provenance of musk and its medical properties, quoting al-Mas’ūdī and al-Nuwayrī, Dietrich, “Misk”. On the primacy of musk among aromatics in Islamic culture, economically, politically, socially and symbolically, King, *Scents*, particularly p. 325–365 (ch.7). On the different kinds of musk known to the Prophetic Tradition, Ġannābī, *al-Itṭir*, p. 24–26; Qosī, *Kitāb al-Ṭīb*, p. 15.

16 All the commentators quoted are glossing Qur 83:26.

17 Both, commentary on Qur 76:17.

18 Ṭabarī, commentary on Qur 76:17.

Garden whose name is *kāfūr*, a spring of water as white as camphor, and similarly smelling and refreshing (*rā'iḥa*, *bard*), but without its taste (*ta'm*) and of course its harmful effects; the beverage of the blessed has then, he suggests, been mixed with the water from this spring. Another possible solution, based on the philosophical reasoning of the classical *kalām*, goes as follows: the smell of camphor is an 'accident' (*araḍ*) and can only exist in relation to a 'body' (*ǧism*); now, if God infused the body of a drink with the smell of camphor, that body would still be called 'camphor', even if it tasted good. A final alternative, this time dictated by faith in the omnipotent creativity of God: why would He not be able to create a heavenly camphor that tasted sweet and delicious?¹⁹

The root *ʿitr*, another name used both in antiquity and today to denote perfume, does not itself appear in Islam's sacred Book, but we do find, on dozens of occasions, the root *ṭīb*, which expresses the whole range of goodness, agreeableness and deliciousness, if without direct reference to the sense of smell. It is a different story, however, in the Prophetic Tradition.

3 The Prophet's Own Perfume

In the Sunna, smell and taste are clearly demarcated; and perfume – *ʿitr*,²⁰ *ṭīb*²¹ or *ṭayyib al-rā'iḥa* – is also differentiated from smell more generally – *rīḥ* or *arf*, – in particular bodily odour, what makes one person recognisable from another (cf. *ʾarafa*, *ma'rifa* etc.). In this regard, the Prophet himself represents an exception.

There is a whole section dedicated to the Prophet's odour in *Subul al-hudā wa-l-rašād fī sirat ḥayr al-ʿibād* or 'The Paths of Guidance and Good Conduct, on the Biography of the Best of Men', by Ibn Yūsuf al-Šālīḥī al-Šāmī (d. 942/1536),²² a Damascus Traditionist valued for his meticulous approach. The

19 Rāzī, commentary on Qur 76:17. Less interesting are other commentators, modern ones included.

20 On the particular meaning of the verb *ʾaṭara*, which expresses a good smell in general, and its opposite *natuna*, expressing a bad smell, see Paoli, "Le Lexique", p. 83–84.

21 The root *ṭīb* also appears in a saying – considered doubtful – which a number of authors repeat from Ibn al-Musayyab; for example, Maǧd al-Dīn ibn al-Aṭīr (d. 606/1210), on whom see Lange, "Ibn al-Athīr", p. 82 and 86: *Allāh al-Ṭayyib yuḥibbu al-ṭīb* [...]. This saying follows the pattern of others, which refer to divine names, and therefore to the qualities of God, and the consequent love of God for those who embody the same qualities. In this particular case, any 'perfuming' on the part of the divinity is alluded to extremely rarely. See, none the less, the passing on of the saying in question by Buṣīrī, *Ithāf*, on the authority of Sa'd ibn al-Waqqāṣ, where the editors vocalise *Allāh al-Ṭīb* [...].

22 Šāmī, *Subul*, II, p. 85–90.

section opens with the testimony of the Companion Anas ibn Mālik (d. 91/709 or 93/711), who was also Muhammad's servant: "The Prophet²³ used to sweat freely (*kāna kaṭīr al-ʿaraq*), and I have never smelt a musk (*misk*) or perfume (*ʿitr*) more pleasant than his odour (*riḥ*)."²⁴ Again according to Anas:

When the Messenger of God went to Umm Sulaym for his siesta, she would spread out a leather sheet for him to sleep on, and he sweated profusely. She would collect his sweat to put it in a perfume (*ṭīb*) and in bottles. Once the Prophet woke and asked her: What are you doing, Umm Sulaym? – She answered: This is your sweat. I make my perfume from it, and it is the best of perfumes (*atyab al-ṭīb*).

According to another version, she answered: "This is your sweat. I mix it with my perfume".²⁵ This physical peculiarity of Muhammad's is confirmed by many, including the future caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb (d. 23/644): "The odour (*riḥ al-ʿarf*) of the Messenger of God was like the smell of musk [...]. I have never known anything like it, before or after." Another story comes down from his wife ʿĀʾiṣa bint Abī Bakr (d. 58/678):

The sweat of the Messenger of God was like pearls on his face and resembled the strongest smelling musk. The palms of his hands were like the palms of a perfumer, whether or not he was wearing perfume. When he shook hands with someone, they could smell his perfume the whole day long. If he laid his hand on the head of some boy, you could pick him out from the others from the perfume on his head.²⁶

Or this from the Companion Abū Hurayra (d. c. 58/679):

A man went to the Prophet and said: Messenger of God, I have just given my daughter in marriage, and I wonder if you can help me in some way? – I have nothing to give you – he replied – but bring me a bottle with a wide mouth and a stick of wood (*ʿūd ṣağara*). The man brought him the two

23 The traditional eulogy of the Prophet has been omitted from all translations, for brevity's sake.

24 Passed on, as the author himself notes, by the two *Ṣaḥīḥ*, by al-Tirmidī and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal.

25 Ṣāmi, *Subul*, II, p. 85.

26 *Ibid.*

items and the Prophet began to decant his sweat into the bottle until it was full. He said: – Take this and tell your daughter to dip the stick in the bottle and use it to perfume herself. – Every time she perfumed herself with it, the folk of the city appreciated the odour of that perfume (*rāʾḥat dālika al-ṭib*).²⁷

And from Anas again: “When the Messenger of God approached we immediately recognised him from the fragrance of his odour (*ṭib riḥi*)”.²⁸ Or from a Medina Companion, Ḡābir ibn ‘Abd Allāh (d. 78/697): – The Messenger of God had certain peculiarities (*ḥiṣāl*): when he walked down a street, whoever came after him could smell the perfume of his sweat (*‘araq*) – or perhaps said ‘of his smell’ (*‘arf*) – that he had passed that way before him”.²⁹

Having rehearsed the traditional stories he was aware of, Ibn Yūsuf al-Šāmī concludes with some general observations: the odour of the Prophet was pleasant without his needing to perfume himself, and this was one of the ways that God had chosen to honour him.³⁰ None the less, he did make ample use of perfumes,³¹ amplifying his own fragrance “to meet with the angels, receive divine revelations or to sit down with Muslims”.³² Ibn Yūsuf maintains that this was evident from the time of the Night Journey,³³ after which Muhammad “smelled like a bride (*riḥuhu riḥ ‘arūs*) or better than one.”³⁴ He dismisses, however, like others before him, the widespread popular myth that roses

27 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

29 *Ibid.* A story recorded by al-Buḥārī and al-Dārimī.

30 *Ibid.* p. 88, passed on by al-Nawāwī.

31 Almost too well known is the story from Anas – which the author does not mention – according to which, among the things of this world, the Prophet loved women and perfumes, but his solace was in prayer (*‘ḥubbiba ilayya min dunyā-kum al-nisā’ wa-l-ṭib wa-ḡu’ilat qurrat ‘aynī fī l-ṣalāt*”), passed on by al-Nasā’ī. On the Prophet’s own sense of smell, and the use of perfume among his Companions, Lange, “Ibn al-Athīr”, particularly p. 80–85.

32 Šāmī, *Subul*, II, p. 88.

33 The author also wrote a work on the Night Journey and the Ascension, *al-Isrā’ wa-l-mī’rāj*, and another on the Prophet’s wives, *Kitāb Azwāj al-nabi*.

34 Comparisons of the Prophet to a young woman are not uncommon in Tradition. I could point, for example, to the issue of modesty (*ḥayā*); al-Buḥārī reports that “the Prophet was more modest (*ašadd ḥayāʾan*) than a virgin behind her curtain, and when he saw something which bothered him, we could tell as much from his face”. Allow me to mention in this context Zilio-Grandi, “Modestia”, p. 175.

originated from Muhammad's sweat: This is entirely false, he writes, and without foundation.³⁵

We could continue in this vein at length, drawing on many other works devoted to the Prophet's characteristics, such as the medieval *Kitāb al-Šifā bi-ta'rif huqūq al-muṣṭafā* or 'The book of healing by defining the rights of the Chosen One' by the Andalusian *qāḍī* 'Iyāḍ (d. 544/1149), who devotes a chapter to the bodily perfections of Muhammad (cf. "*takmil Allāh lahu*") and his fine physical and moral (*ḥalq^{an} wa-ḥuluq^{an}*), as well as his religious and worldly (*al-dīniyya wa-l-dunyawiyya*) qualities. Within the chapter, there is a section on his natural fragrance and the extraordinary absence of any "bodily uncleanness or shamefulness" (*nazāhatuhu 'an al-aqdār wa-'awrāt al-ğasad*) in him.³⁶ The author reports much of the material that would be found in the later work of Ibn Yūsuf al-Šāmī, and others, and adds some more crude or even macabre examples: for instance, he writes that when the Prophet defecated or urinated he left no unpleasant odour behind him – on the contrary; and that, in answer to 'Ā'īša's wonder at the fact, he explained to her that under those circumstances the earth opened up for him, as indeed it had for all the prophets before him, and then immediately closed again.³⁷ The *qāḍī* 'Iyāḍ even reports that a woman – one Baraka, a servant of his – drank his urine because she was thirsty. The author is at pains to emphasise that this is a story passed down by al-Buḥārī; and records that afterwards the Prophet did not order her to rinse her mouth or forbid her to do so again.³⁸ These accounts, all exemplifying the uniqueness of the Prophet, reflect the importance that perfume had in Islamic society from its earliest days; and allow us to hypothesise that the scant attention paid to perfume by the Holy Book may in fact indicate its obviousness, an aspect of life so unquestioned that it does not merit insisting on.

4 Perfume, Beauty and Health: Lessons for Contemporaries from the Tradition

Muslim scholars continue to this day to remind their co-religionists of the importance of perfume and the need to conform to Prophetic custom in this

35 Šāmī, *Subul*, 11, p. 88–89.

36 Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ, *Kitāb al-Šifā*, p. 62–66.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 63–64.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 64–65. The author also cites the Medina Companion 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr who drank some of his blood extracted during a wet cupping or *ḥijāma*.

regard. In the wake of the authors already given as examples – the *qāḍī* ‘Iyāḍ in the 12th century and Ibn Yūsuf al-Šāmī in the 16th – we will now take a look, by way of confirmation, at a thorough, if brief, contemporary work, also arranged in accordance with traditional criteria: *al-Hady al-nabawī fi l-ṭīb*, ‘The Prophetic Guide to Perfumes’ (2017). The authors are Islām Yāsīn and Rūhayzān Bārū, researchers at the Sultan Zainal Abidin University, in Malaysia. The sources they mainly rely on are the Six Books, with occasional reference to the works of Ibn al-Aṭīr (d. 630/1233)³⁹ and Ibn Ḥaḡar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449),⁴⁰ along with various Qur’ān and Tradition commentaries. Alongside these, the authors call on contemporary science, underlining the usefulness of perfume in the light of medicine and psychology. Yāsīn’s and Bārū’s contribution is more than relevant: it demonstrates on the one hand a continuity of interest in the subject matter and its importance in the contemporary Islamic world, and on the other, the possibility of building on the foundations of the Tradition not as mere amplifiers of the past, but by rendering classical reflections contemporary while adding original material.

Their essay opens with the observation that Islam is the religion of beauty (*dīn al-ḡamāl*) in all its manifestations, material and immaterial (*māddiyya*, *ma’nawiyya*).⁴¹ It is a religion that exhorts believers to smell good when they are among other people, and the Law prescribes procedures for them to maintain such a state. This encouragement to perfume oneself (cf. *ṭīb*, *tatyīb*) derives from perfume being thought a “food for the spirit” (*ḡaḍā’ al-rūḥ*): it helps to keep one in good health, wards off pain, and is important for the natural energy (*al-quwwa al-ṭabī’iyya*) it contains; this, at any rate, is the teaching of the theologian and jurist Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyya (d. 751/1350) in his well-known *Zād al-ma’ād* or ‘Provisions of the Hereafter’.⁴² Yāsīn and Bārū remind their readers of the many positive effects of perfume on the psyche, its ability to relieve sadness and dispel anger, to stimulate concentration and strengthen memory,⁴³ and emphasise the usefulness of aromatic oils (*al-zuyūt al-‘itriyya*) – whether

39 Ibn al-Aṭīr, *al-Nihāya*.

40 Ibn Ḥaḡar, *Faḥḥ al-bārī*.

41 On beauty as an Islamic value, may I direct the reader to my own essay: Zilio-Grandi, “Dio è bello”.

42 Yāsīn & Bārū, “al-Hady”, p. 132; for a direct comparison, see Ibn Qayyim, *Zād al-ma’ād*, iv, p. 308–309. On the connection between perfume and health, Biesterfeldt & Rowson, “Abū Zayd”, from *Maṣāliḥ al-abdān wa-l-nufūs* by al-Balḥī; and King, “Ibn al-Jazzār”, from Ibn al-Ġazzār’s *Kitāb Fī l-funūn al-ṭīb wa-l-‘itr*.

43 In this regard, they also refer to an interesting publication dedicated to the uniqueness of the Sunna from a scientific point of view, Naḡḡār, *al-Iḡāz*.

inhaled, used for massage or as ingredients in cosmetics and pharmaceutical creams. They also maintain, again citing Ibn Qayyim, that a good smell makes angels welcome while a bad smell makes devils welcome, because good spirits love good smells and bad spirits bad smells.⁴⁴ Finally, they state that they undertook their research project precisely out of respect for the importance the Prophet attached to perfumery.⁴⁵

The relationship between perfume, beauty, and health is highlighted many times throughout this essay, and there are numerous stories attesting to the Prophet's love of perfumes, while the importance of the Prophetic example in relation to fragrance is also frequently stressed. They quote, among other things, a famous saying – “The Prophet would never return a perfume” (*kāna al-nabī lā yaruddu al-ṭīb*)⁴⁶ – which means that perfume given as a gift should never be refused.⁴⁷ Yāsīn and Bārū then expatiate on the usefulness of perfume from a contemporary medical perspective – how it has properties beneficial against migraines, for respiratory problems, smoking, digestive problems, insomnia, and more besides⁴⁸ – and go on to list the principal perfumes mentioned in the Sunna.⁴⁹

5 Musk and More

Top of the list is musk, which takes pride of place as the best of perfumes (*aṭyab al-ṭīb wa-aḥḍaluhu*, from Muslim)⁵⁰ and also serves as a touchstone, as

44 Yāsīn & Bārū, “al-Hady”, p. 132; for a direct comparison, Ibn Qayyim, *Zād al-ma’ād*, IV, p. 245.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

46 Recorded by al-Buḥārī, al-Tirmidī, al-Nasā’ī and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal among others, always on the authority of Anas.

47 Yāsīn & Bārū, “al-Hady”, p. 137. This saying has been handed down on the authority of Anas and is also accepted by Abū Dāwūd. According to another similar saying reported by the authors, which refers, however, to fragrant plants, “Whoever receives *rayḥān*, let him not return it, for it is a light thing and has a pleasant smell (*aṭyīb al-rā’iḥa*)”, after Abū Hurayra. They also pick up from a commentary by al-Mubārakūrī (d. 1253/1935) on al-Tirmidī’s work another prophetic saying: “Three things should not be refused: cushions, ointment (*dahn*) and milk, ointment meaning perfume (*ṭīb*)”; al-Mubārakūrī, *Tuhfat al-aḥwādī*, VIII, p. 60–61; Lange, “Ibn al-Athīr”, p. 87.

48 Yāsīn & Bārū, “al-Hady”, p. 137.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 138–140.

50 The supremacy of musk is also affirmed by al-Suyūṭī in his *Maqāma miskiyya*, Van Gelder, “al-Suyūṭī”, p. 198–202, where we also find, among other things, a statement that is as curious as it is evocative: “If perfume had an eye, musk would be the pupil”.

an exemplar (*maṭal*) for excellent smells in general (al-Buḥārī, Muslim). The blood of the martyrs on the Day of Judgement will smell of musk (al-Buḥārī, Muslim), as will the perspiration of the blessed (al-Buḥārī, Muslim), and the soul of the Muslim woman when she breathes her last (Muslim). Infused with musk are the soil of the Garden (al-Buḥārī) and the bed of the heavenly river called Kawṭar (al-Buḥārī; see Qur 108:1). As for its health-giving properties, the authors invoke the celebrated botanist, apothecary, and physician from Málaga Ibn al-Bayṭār (d. 646/1248), citing his *al-Ġāmiʿ li-mufradāt al-adwiya wa-l-aḡdiyya* or ‘Compendium on Simple Medicaments and Foods’. Musk, among its other virtues, is good for the eyes, and combats aging, palpitations and weakness of the heart.⁵¹ The Prophet instructed women to perfume themselves with musk: as ʿĀʾiṣa reports, a young woman asked him how she should wash herself at the end of her period and he replied: “Take a little musk and wash yourself with that” (from Ibn Ḥaḡar). The two authors of *al-Hady al-nabawī fi l-ṭīb* claim that the antibacterial efficacy of musk has been confirmed by contemporary medical research.

Second in the list comes *ḍarīra* – a perfume, or a mixture of perfumes, originating in India⁵² – accompanied by the testimony of ʿĀʾiṣa: “I perfumed the Messenger of God [...] with *ḍarīra* powder during the Farewell Pilgrimage before he entered the state of consecration (*iḥrām*) and after”.⁵³

Next among the perfumes mentioned in the Tradition, Yāsīn and Bārū list sweet-smelling plants or *rayḥān*, along with a saying on the authority of the Companion Abū Mūsā al-Aṣʿarī (d. c. 50/670):

The believer who reads the Qurʾān is like the citron (*uṭruḡḡ*), which is good to eat and perfumes the air; the believer who does not read the Qurʾān is like the date (*tamra*), which is good to eat but has no perfume; the hypocrite (*munāfiq*)⁵⁴ who reads the Qurʾān is like the perfumed plant (*rayḥāna*), which smells good but is bitter to eat; the hypocrite who does not read the Qurʾān is like the colocynth, which is bitter to eat and smells of nothing.⁵⁵

51 For a direct response, see Ibn al-Bayṭār, *Al-mufradāt*, IV, p. 444–446.

52 Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v. On *ḍarīra* and compound perfumes, Qosī, *Kitāb al-Ṭīb*, p. 18.

53 Yāsīn & Bārū, “al-Hady”, p. 138; cf. Lange, “Ibn al-Athīr”, p. 83–84. The saying is recorded by al-Buḥārī.

54 In other versions of the story: *al-fāḡīr*, “a fornicator”,

55 Yāsīn & Bārū, “al-Hady”, p. 139; the saying is by al-Buḥārī and Muslim.

Ambergris (*ʿanbar*)⁵⁶ follows in the list, this too used by the Prophet. ʿĀʾiṣa, when asked “Did the Prophet use perfume?” answered: “Yes, the masculine perfumes (*dikārat al-ṭīb*), musk and ambergris”.⁵⁷

Next comes camphor (*kāfir*), used in funeral rites. Umm ʿAṭiyya al-Anṣāriyya (d. 70/689) recalls: “The Messenger of God came to see us when his daughter died, and said: Wash her three times, or five times, or more if you see fit, with water and lotus leaves, and the last time with camphor – or perhaps he said ‘with a little camphor’ – and when you have finished, call for me. And when we had finished, we called for him”.⁵⁸ The authors of *al-Hady al-nabawī fi l-ṭīb* also mention the *hunūt* procedure – *darīra* or musk or ambergris or camphor or Indian cane or sandalwood, bruised⁵⁹ – and remind us of the Medina Companion Ṭābit ibn. Qays (d. 12/632) who rubbed camphor into his thighs in imitation of the Prophet.

Next comes cleansing with pebbles using aloe vera (*al-istiḡmār bi-l-uluwwa*); and finally, the habit of mixing perfume with alcohol (cf. *al-ṭīb al-mamzūḡ bi-l-kuhl*), a usage whose lawfulness is a matter of dispute among jurists.⁶⁰

Other contemporary Muslim scholars, drawing on a range of medieval historical and geographical works, beyond the Prophetic Tradition, deal extensively with the *ʿūd* in its various forms, the use of sandalwood oil (*ṣandal*), of *sunbul*, another fragrant plant known as *rayḥān sūrī*,⁶¹ cloves (*qaranful*),⁶² and agarwood.⁶³

6 Perfume and the Law

Muslim jurists, as we know, traditionally divide human actions into five types, from the obligatory to the forbidden by way of the recommended, the indifferent and the reprehensible. The example set by Muhammad, both in his personal choices and his recommended practice, renders the use of perfume meritorious, which is to say, *mustaḥabb* or ‘recommended’; but not compulsory

56 From the sperm whale, although some believe saffron is meant. Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v.; Cf. Ḡannābī, *al-ʾIṭr*, p. 26–28.

57 *Ibid.* p. 139; cf. Van Gelder, “Al-Suyūṭī”, p. 202. The saying is recorded by al-Buḥārī. On masculine and feminine perfumes, see below.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 139; passed on by al-Buḥārī and Muslim. On camphor, Qosī, *Kitāb al-Ṭīb*, p. 17.

59 Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v.; Qosī, *Kitāb al-Ṭīb*, p. 16.

60 Yāsīn & Bārū, “al-Hady”, p. 140.

61 Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v.

62 E.g. Ḡannābī, *al-ʾIṭr*, p. 29–30.

63 Qosī, *Kitāb al-Ṭīb*, p. 16.

(*wāḡib*), and the reason for this is obvious: as perfume is expensive, it cannot be made obligatory for those without the means to procure it, in line with one of the fundamental principles of Islamic law that God does not ask us to carry more weight than we are able to bear (the rule known as “*taklīf mā lā yutāqu*”; see, for example Qur 2:286 and 6:152). On the place of perfume in the ethical/juridical sphere, we can entrust ourselves again to the succinct and to-the-point summary of Yāsīn and Bārū.⁶⁴

Perfume is recommended – the authors say – whenever people are gathered together, as on Fridays or during the two main Islamic holidays – *ʿīd al-fīṭr*, which follows the month of Ramadan, and *ʿīd al-aḍḥā*, on the tenth of the lunar month of Dū l-Ḥiġġa. As the Prophet said: “Whoever goes to Friday prayer should wash themselves, and if there is perfume, perfume themselves (*fa-l-yamassa min-hu*)[...]”.⁶⁵ He also said: “He who takes a full bath on Friday and purifies himself to the best of his abilities, and then anoints or sprinkles himself with perfume (*iddahana aw massa min al-ṭīb*), and then sets out on foot (*rāḥa*), and does not thrust himself between two worshippers [to reach the front rank]⁶⁶ (*wa-lam yufarriq bayna itnayn*), and prays the prescribed prayers, and when the imam speaks, keeps quiet and listens (*anṣata*), that man will be forgiven all the sins he commits until the following Friday”.⁶⁷

It is also recommended that both parties perfume themselves before sex: “The Messenger of God used to perfume himself before coming into his wives, ʿĀʾiṣa recalls. It is recommended too before *iḥrām*, the state of consecration required during pilgrimage; and also, at the end of *iḥrām* – though whether in the latter case it is merely allowed or *ḥalāl* has been a matter of disagreement.⁶⁸ As we have already seen, perfume is also prescribed in the washing of corpses and after the menstrual period.⁶⁹

On the other hand, it is strongly prohibited (*ḥarām*, *yunḥā* ‘*an-hu*) during the state of *iḥrām*;⁷⁰ and to women on the death of their husbands until four months and ten days have passed, as we learn from another story recounted by Umm ʿAṭiyya al-Anṣāriyya concerning the period of waiting or *ʿidda*:

64 Yāsīn & Bārū, “al-Hady”, p. 140–142.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 141. Passed on by Ibn Māġa on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās.

66 This is the explanation proposed by Ibn Ḥaġar, *Fatḥ al-bārī*, v, p. 439 in his commentary on al-Buḥārī.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 140–141. Recorded by al-Buḥārī, following Salmān al-Fārisī.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 141–142.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

70 See also Lange, “Ibn al-Athīr”, p. 559; Bursi, “Scents of Space”, *passim*, and Bursi, “Ibn Abī Zayd”, p. 505–509.

We were forbidden to mourn more than three days for a dead person, except for a husband, in which case the period of mourning is four months and ten days. We should not wear any coloured clothes, only simple attire; we should not apply kohl to our eyes, or use perfume, except [...] when we washed ourselves after finishing our period [...].⁷¹

Perfume is also forbidden to women leaving the house on their own: our authors report several accounts transmitted in the major works of Tradition, some of which even compare a woman who perfumes herself to go to the mosque to a fornicator (*zāniya*).⁷²

A final prohibition concerns gender confusion in the use of perfume: a man should not use women's perfumes, nor a woman men's.⁷³ Yāsīn and Bārū devote an extended paragraph to the issue, kicking off with a Prophetic saying which distinguishes men's perfumes – which are “rich in fragrance but poor in colour” – from women's perfumes – which are “rich in colour and poor in fragrance”. Appropriate perfumes for men might then be musk, ambergris and *ūd*, while saffron is a suitable perfume for women. According to another story, the Prophet commanded that every pubescent boy (*muḥtalim*) should perfume himself after the Friday full bath, “even if this means using a woman's perfume (*wa-law min ṭīb al-mar'a*)”.⁷⁴ In this last regard, the two Malaysian authors worry that if women's perfumes have poor smell, how can men scent themselves with them? And besides, was it not reprehensible (*makrūh*) for a man to use women's perfume? Having raised this thorny conundrum, the authors set themselves to discussing it.⁷⁵

7 Advising Today's Sisters

To demonstrate the continuing relevance of the Prophetic example in the field of perfume, and to illustrate at the same time the range of opinions in the contemporary cultural landscape, it seems important here to introduce a female viewpoint. Šumaysa Ḥalawī, an Algerian author with a strong online presence – often, though not exclusively, discussing women's concerns and/or marital relations⁷⁶ – has recently published a brief text on perfumes, organised

71 Recorded by Muslim. *Ibid.*, p. 143–144.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 143–144.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 144. See also Hirsch, “Cosmetics”, *passim*.

74 Da Abū Sa'īd al-Ḥudrī, recorded by Muslim, p. 145.

75 Yāsīn & Bārū, “al-Hady”, p. 145–146.

76 On her publications between 2012 and 2022, <https://www.alukah.net/authors/view/home/5841/>.

in five sections and entitled *Lamasāt al-siḥr fī mā qīla ‘an al-rawā’ih wa-l-‘itr*, ‘Touches of magic in what is said about scents and perfumes’. Šumaysa Ḥalawī considers, in order: 1. The definition of perfume or *‘itr* and the Arab peoples’ relationship with perfume before and after the arrival of Islam; 2. The example set by the Prophet and the rules on female perfumery according to religious law or *sharī‘a*; 3. The obligation for women to purify themselves with musk at the end of their menstrual period and the role of perfume in successful marriages; 4. Perfume in its medical aspects; 5. A few tips on the optimal use of perfumes and of incense (*buḥūr*).

Her work is broadly similar to other contemporary treatments: she refers back to the Tradition of the Prophet and focuses on the relationship between perfume and health and beauty, providing a few clarifications based on contemporary medical knowledge. What sets her text apart is its wholly feminine perspective, its practical approach, and its sociological input. The author, who has a PhD from the University of Algiers, is not afraid to set her knowledge of texts – ancient and pre-modern, lexicographical, historical, and legal – against her experience of femininity and straightforward common sense, which in other cultural contexts might have sounded like a falling off in tone.

Notable are the sections on the uses of perfume in matrimony (“*Anti, zawġu-ki wa-l-‘itr*”),⁷⁷ and the final one, which contains tips and teaching addressed to her sisters in the faith (“*Naṣā’ih wa-fawā’id*”).⁷⁸ A few examples:

My dear sister, the Creator has bestowed upon you a hidden beauty (*ġamāl maknūn*) and an irresistible capacity to attract (*ġādibīyya lā tuqāwamu*). As he has revealed in the Qur’ān, “The love of desirable things is made alluring for men – wives, children, treasures of gold and silver [...]” (Qur 3:14). In this way, He has made man inclined toward you and your company and made him desire marriage, which is the path of self-restraint and discipline (*‘iffa, tanẓīm*) in relations between the sexes, and an impenetrable bastion against the assaults of perversion and temptation (*inḥirāfāt, fitan*). Since your perfume is one of the strongest factors that create intimacy and love (*ulfa, maḥabba*) between you and your husband, it is as well that you know that choosing a perfume is an art in itself, a *savoir faire* (*fann, dawq*); it is like choosing your clothes, your jewellery and accessories. And it’s best if you involve your husband in choosing your perfume and then continue using the perfume you think your husband likes, because husbands, my dear, also have their preferences when it comes to perfume and know how to tell a good smell.

⁷⁷ Part 3, <https://saaaid.org/daeyat/shmish/8.htm>.

⁷⁸ Part 5, <https://saaaid.org/daeyat/shmish/10.htm>.

Pay attention to perfume and recognise its importance in your life: it will help your husband limit his gaze [see Qur 25:30–1] and distract his thoughts from other things, especially given the temptations we see in magazines or on satellite channels, and the abundance of indecency and evil in the world. All around you, my sister, seductions (*mafātin*) of every kind proliferate.

The best idea is to go for a whole range of products and accessories that have the same fragrance: bottled perfume, soap, bath foam, shower gel, and so on. If you can't find them, you can use unscented products and add a few drops of your favourite perfume to them.

You can also spray your comb with your perfume – but only a little bit – to refresh the strands of your hair [...]. When putting on perfume, start with a small amount and wait until its effect is clearly noticeable, because the amount you have applied may already be enough. If not, you can always add some more. It is better to do this than to find yourself drowning in the scent, because then you will not know how to get rid of it. Remember: if you overdo it, the perfume becomes a cloud that will irk those around you.

Do not apply perfume, my dear sister, immediately after your shower, because your skin then is depreciated by water, soap and heat. It is better to give your skin time to regain its poise, which also helps to retain the perfume for longer [...]. Perfume doesn't cling well to the pale skin of blondes, so they will need to apply perfume more often.

8 Back to Dubai

As we come to the end of this illustrative tour, it may be worth taking a closer look at the *Bayt al-ʿuṭūr*, one of the dozens of 'Houses' – all managed by the governmental Culture & Arts Authority of Dubai – that between them make up the city's recently restored al-Shindagha historic district. The House of Perfumes – a significant example of the government's desire to foster national identity through a revaluation of heritage, and to highlight the significance of tradition in contemporary daily life – is dedicated to "the art of making, wearing, and using perfume in Emirati culture, handed down verbally, through practice, and in poetry", as the bilingual Arabic-English notice at the entrance of the museum proclaims. And it is in fact a poem, composed by the former 'lady of the manor', Šayḥa bint Saʿīd ibn Maktūm, that greets the visitor:

Greetings from the depth of my heart, Fused with ambergris and saffron,
I send to the one I wish to greet / A person who is sweeter than sugar, And
the nectar in which sugar melts, And more fragrant than aloeswood (*ʿūd*)

That perfumes my day / Like an Eid day when it approaches, And we present bunches of narcissus, Arabian jasmine and crocus.⁷⁹

The historic journey through Emirati perfumery is accompanied by multimedia material illustrating the characteristics and origin of the essences and their extraction processes. Large vitrines display the equipment and other objects traditionally used in the production and preservation of perfumes, and by each, one or more metal censers (*mabḥara*) offer the visitors' noses examples of the various essences. Elegant installations depicting large glass ampoules are dotted about the space. After a disclaimer warning those who are allergic or overly sensitive to strong odours to proceed with caution, the exhibition opens with the *ūd*, '*gaharu*' in the local vernacular, the most important ingredient in traditional Emirati perfumes, and the most highly prized: to produce one 'tolah' (*tawla*) – a unit of measurement for aromatic oils corresponding to roughly four fluid ounces⁸⁰ – you need only a little less than 12 kilos of agarwood or aloeswood. The censers, positioned next to a large branch of *Aquilaria* from the collection of the former owner, offer examples of *ūd*, both natural – from India and Indonesia – and today's artificially produced variety. The show continues with saffron or *za'farān*, the so-called 'red gold' (*al-ḍaḥab al-aḥmar*), also in its turn flanked with a synthetic version. Illustrated are the spice's origins – Isfahan and Khorasan, – its characteristics, its use in cooking and dyeing, and its preciousness: 1,600 crocus flowers are needed to produce a single *tawla* of oil.

Considerable space is dedicated to musk, describing its origin – the pineal glands of musk deer or African civets – and its preciousness: in its lifetime, a single animal possesses only two 'pods', each of which can render from 10 to 30 grams of musk powder. Next comes *fill/full* or Arabian jasmine; *maḥlab*, an oil often mixed with saffron and rose oil; *mašmūm*, a variety of basil; then *yās* or myrtle – very strong-smelling. The exhibition notes then the many ingredients once sourced by trade but now grown in the UAE and readily available *in loco*; among these the very rare oil extracted from the Taif rose whose production process is shown on an accompanying video.⁸¹

An interesting section of the museum is devoted to social rituals and family perfume heritage, and in particular the role played by women who used

79 A (not entirely literal) translation from Arabic by Dr. Šihāb Ġānim. On aromatics in Arabic Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Poetry, King, "The Importance".

80 The tolah, of Indian origin, is an ancient measurement unit of essential oils: it is also used to refer to containers holding that amount.

81 40.000 petals are needed to obtain one tolah.

to concoct perfumes at home using knowledge unique to their families. This section demonstrates, among other things, the practice of dyeing and perfuming the groom's clothes with *wars* or turmeric; the use of *libān* or frankincense to fumigate the inside of the jars in which drinkable water was kept; the use of musk to remove bad odours and repel insects, also the practice of stuffing cotton mattresses with small quantities of it; the use of *yās* to strengthen and perfume women's hair in the traditional braided style called '*ağifa*'; the habit of applying saffron paste behind the ears, on the temples and on the cheeks of a girl during *tawmīna*, a ceremony that marks the completion of reading the Qur'ān; the key role of perfume in hospitality rituals, rooted in past times when travellers were invited into a home to seek shelter from the elements, and now an expression of generosity and mutual respect. The exhibition also displays several photos from the mid-20th century to document the versatility of perfume in everyday life, also for spiritual purposes.

The museum itinerary, which opens, as we have seen, with a poem by Šayḥa bint Sa'īd, ends with a section dedicated to perfume in Emirati poetry, featuring – through a sensory soundscape animation – poems by Šaḥbūṭ ibn Sulṭān Āl Nahyān (d. 1989), the brother of Sheikh Zayed the founding father of the UAE – describing saffron and amber on the cheeks and dress of his loved one; by al-Māyidī (c. seventeenth century), considered the literary forefather of the country⁸² – on the scent of *zibād* or civet musk on his loved one's clothes, which the breeze (*hubūb al-riyāḥ*) wafts to him; by 'Ūša bint Ḥalifa al-Suwaydī (d. 2018) – celebrated in the country as *fatāt al-'arab*, "the Girl of the Arabs",⁸³ – on the comfort she gets from the familiar aroma of 'ūd, *fill*, musk and rose oil; and finally, by Muḥammad ibn Rāšid al-Maṭrūšī (d. 1950) again on *zibād*, evident on his loved one's cheeks as she passes by.

Conclusions

An exploration of scent in the Qur'ān reveals that, although the sense of smell is only briefly mentioned, it carries profound symbolic and spiritual

82 See Kurpershoek, *Introduction* to al-Māyidī, *Love, Death, Fame* (monolingual edition), p. 11–38.

83 Her voluminous *Dīwān*, comprising 855 pages, was brought to press by the Women's Museum shortly before her passing. See Dr. Rafī'a 'Ubayd Ġubāš (ed.), *Dīwān fatāt al-'arab*. Partially translated into English by Nadia Khawandanah, *The Girl of the Arabs*, Dubayy, Iṣḍārāt mathāf al-mar'a, 2024.

significance, particularly in narratives such as that of Joseph and the descriptions of Paradise. Within the Prophetic Tradition, the extraordinary fragrance attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad is presented as a mark of divine favour and spiritual elevation, positioning scent as a potent medium of recognition, grace, and sanctity that transcends the physical to engage with the spiritual realm. Contemporary scholarship affirms the enduring significance of perfume, emphasising its spiritual, psychological, and medicinal benefits as exemplified by the Prophet and articulated by classical scholars. Perfume is thus understood not merely as a symbol of beauty and cleanliness but as a source of holistic well-being, bridging traditional Islamic teachings with modern scientific perspectives. Additionally, perfume's importance in marital intimacy is acknowledged. The *Bayt al-ʿuṭūr* museum in Dubai exemplifies this cultural continuity, celebrating the heritage of perfumery and preserving it as a living tradition that enriches community identity, history, poetry, and hospitality within contemporary Emirati society.

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