

BAKHOOR

Stepping Into Another World:

My first encounter with bakhoor did not come from my own heritage, but from stepping into one of my Arab friends homes. I remember walking through her doors just as her mother placed a small piece of dark brown piece of wood into a decorative incense burner. Warm, sweet and smoky fragrance moved through the air, wrapping around us like a soft fabric. The house felt alive and welcoming in a way I had never experienced before. I did not know the name of the scent at the time, but I understood that it carried meaning. From that day, that small piece of wood became a symbol of how cultural practices can reach across different backgrounds and invite someone into a quiet and intimate sense of belonging.



The Art & Science of Fragrance:



Bakhoor consists of small pieces of dark brown agarwood soaked in different fragrance blends. Some are mixed with jasmine or sandalwood to create softer, sweeter scent, while others use amber or citrus for sharper, more textured notes. The chips are pressed and shaped into small square blocks, and when placed on heat they release steady plumes of smoke carrying the scent through the room (Ramadan Scents..., 2021).

A Tradition Carried Through Time:

Historically, bakhoor has been a long-standing tradition in many Middle Eastern and Chinese societies for thousands of years (Global Demand for Bakhoor on the Rise, 2017). Its main ingredient, oud, has been used across Eastern and Middle Eastern regions for spiritual and everyday purposes (Wells, 2013). Over time, bakhoor became part of hospitality, purification, and celebration practices. In many Saudi homes, women walk through each room with the burner, so the smoke spreads gently through the house and lift into their clothing (Al Mukhtar, 2011). In families who have moved away from their homelands, burning bakhoor can create comfort in unfamiliar places by carrying memories of home and keeping cultural routines alive.



Ethnicity Woven in Scent:



My experience with bakhoor helped me understand ethnicity as something lived through the senses. Watching my friend's mother light the mabkhara (incense burner), I saw how scent became a vessel for ethnic heritage. Bakhoor carries stories, migration histories, and everyday rituals across generations. For many Middle Eastern and North African families, it expresses an ethnic world shaped by hospitality, memory, and long-standing traditions tied to the Arabian Peninsula (Ramadan Scents..., 2021). Even far from its place of origin, bakhoor creates an atmosphere rooted in cultural lineage. I realized ethnicity is shaped not only by language or food, but also by small practices like burning bakhoor that help people feel connected to their heritage. During weddings and celebrations, the smoke is waved over the bride and groom as a blessing or fills homes with joy during Eid and Ramadan gatherings (Ramadan Scents..., 2021). In some Arab cultures, unpleasant odours are believed to attract harmful spirits, making the scent of bakhoor part of protecting the home and expressing ethnic identity (Classen, Howes, & Synnott, 1994).

Identity in Everyday Rituals:

Bakhoor revealed how identity is woven through everyday rituals. As the smoke curled through the living room, I saw how my friend connected with her family's past and how identity forms through repeated acts of care and memory. Burning bakhoor was not a performance. It was part of who they were, a quiet expression of belonging practiced without words. Seeing bakhoor used so naturally made me reflect on my own cultural rituals and how identity is shaped by the practices that make a house feel like home. Even though bakhoor is not from my heritage, witnessing its use helped me understand identity as something sensory and emotional. Bakhoor is also connected to religious sites. In Saudi Arabia around sixty traditional mabkharas perfume the Holy Kaaba daily, creating serenity and a sacred atmosphere.



Challenging Perceptions Through Smell:



While bakhoor holds deep meaning within Middle Eastern communities, outsiders sometimes misinterpret its scents and rituals as strange or exotic. The Middle East has long been labeled "the orient," a term linked to exoticism that shaped how people viewed its cultures (Said, 1977). These misunderstandings show broader patterns in which non-Western traditions are marginalized or exoticized. Experiencing bakhoor personally challenged these assumptions. Instead of seeing it as foreign, I recognized it as a universal act of preparing a space with warmth and care.

References:

Al-Mukhtar, R. (2011, Sep 14). Oud: The Scent of Arabian Luxury. McClatchy - Tribune Business News <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/oud-scent-arabian-luxury/docview/889332522/se-2>

Classen, C., Howes, D., & Synnott, A. (1994). *Aroma: the cultural history of smell*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203428887>

Global Demand for Bakhoor on the Rise -- Asia Plantation Capital Perfectly Positioned to Meet it. (2017, Jul 18). PR Newswire Europe Including UK Disclose <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/global-demand-bakhoor-on-rise-asia-plantation/docview/1919630049/se-2>

Ramadan scents: Bakhoor among region's most-loved gifts. (2021, May 04). TCA Regional News <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/ramadan-scents-bakhoor-among-regions-most-loved/docview/2521708152/se-2>

Said, E. W. (1977). ORIENTALISM. *The Georgia Review*, 31(1), 162–206. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41397448>

Wells, R. (2013, 01). Oud: the mystical liquid gold. *Middle East*, , 50-51. <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/oud-mystical-liquid-gold/docview/1281845109/se-2>