

Kese and *Tellak*: Cultural Framings of Body Treatments in the ‘Turkish Bath’

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Using water for body treatments has an especially long tradition in many cultures and, is deeply intertwined with Roman *and* Ottoman culture. However, it is clear that today it is not possible to attribute bathing – not even a specific type of bathing, such as the *hammam* steam bath – to one particular culture (ignoring the obvious problems associated with trying to delineate clearly between such blurred constructs as a specific culture or as a discrete entity). Thus, the ‘Turkish bath’ is a widely used term introduced to Europe in the eighteenth century or applied to various different manifestations. The term reflects the European perception of Turkish bathing culture, primarily connected with bathing within a *hammam* complex or – as the Turkish term goes – a *hammami*. Bathing in the *hammam*-style is rather a Roman cultural practice, an element adapted and integrated in Ottoman culture and readapted thereafter into modern Western culture. It is often believed that these practices are rooted in the cultural history of the present state of Turkey (although ancient ‘Turkish bath’ architecture famously exists in Greece or Albania, too¹). Furthermore, the geographical or architectural nexus between mosques and *hammams* and, also, the temporal order of Islamic culture (in which visiting a *hammam* before various ritual occasions is required) have often suggested seeing the Turkish bath as a religious custom.

Interpreting *Hammam* Culture

In recent centuries, we find a lot of mostly artistic representations of the Turkish bath or the *hammam*. The artistic discourse can be divided into at least two groups of representations: prose and poetry on the *hammam* as a place ‘between heaven and hell’,² a place of water and fire, pleasure and pain, as described in travel reports such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s view of the *Hammam* in her travel letters 1716–1718, first published 1763.³ The *hammam* also played a role in Victorian literature, inspiring a spate of Turkish baths to be built in the nineteenth century in Great Britain and Ireland.⁴ Other forms of artistic representation include visual depictions. The topic of both bathing and the *hammam* steam bath has been depicted in paintings throughout art history and later in film. A more recent example is the

1997 film *Hammam*, directed by Ferzan Özpetek, and interpreted as an example of 'transnational orientalism'.⁵ Artistic representations offer very different interpretations of the Turkish bath, as do the scholarly interpretations of the art works. Whilst female authors have often stressed the aspect of a female gathering within the *hammam* as an event that is not paralleled in Western culture, male authors have tended to interpret interactions within the male and female section of the *hammams* in an erotic or homoerotic sense. The management and use of old or newly constructed hammam complexes also reveals specific interpretations of the Turkish bath. In Afghanistan, the re-opening of *hammams* in 2001 after they were closed down in 1996 provided the only place women were allowed to go without male escorts.⁶ Thus, the *hammam* became a place of freedom. However, in Turkey, as in Morocco,⁷ the traditional neighbourhood *hammam* seems to have been re-invented or re-discovered as 'women's quarters', where women negotiate and produce a social space of their own.⁸ Finally, the historical *hammams* in Turkey have been re-discovered for use by non-local groups. Refurbishing and operating them as tourist attractions became a lucrative aspect of the tourist industry. This practice, however, has often been criticised.

Bearing in mind that there are many interpretations of the Turkish bath, how can we define a *hammam*? What are the most common or probably objective traits of *Hammam* bathing? On the most basic level it is an indoor activity that relies on water and steam from heated water. Whereas most often a *hammam* interaction between those visiting the *hammam* at the same time is crucial, first and foremost the *hammam* is a specifically constructed material complex with devices for running water (taps and sinks), heated marble seating and laying areas, areas for scrubbing and massage, changing rooms, lounges, and, of course technical equipment, 'behind-the-scenes' furnaces and mechanisms for heating water and air that are not accessible to visitors. Initially, such complexes were often built within neighbourhoods in order to serve the residents around with washing facilities. Yet, even after washing facilities in the privacy of one's own home became more common, the *hammam* complex in its original dimensions remained a popular, shared facility and is an experience not easily replaced. So, the *hammam* remained a private place within a public environment; it is private insofar as it is a privately owned and privately operated business. Nevertheless, the business includes a substantial degree of openness to the public. In general, such businesses are geared towards attracting as many customers as possible, even though potential customers might be excluded, most commonly by the temporal separation of the sexes. While sex separation already establishes a rule of order that reflects social norms outside the *hammam* complex, there are some further rules commonly applied inside the *hammam*. For one, visiting the *hammam* is intrinsically related to performing certain activities in a particular order. Additionally, there are some traditional aspects, such as for example the *kese* (a goat skin glove for intensified peeling), *pestemal* (woven towel for partially covering the body during the treatment) and olive soap. Using the *hammam* involves personal interactions between the client/customer and the person treating them, the *tellak*. Interactions between the customers themselves are also important.

The socialising process, thus, might not only play an important role for the visitors of the *hammam*, but is also the main focus of the above-mentioned artistic or scholarly interpretations of the *hammam* situation. It has been suggested that the significance of the *hammam* is a form of *rite de passage* (most likely in a religious sense).³ But also from a more worldly perspective, the spatio-temporal structure of the *hammam* visit has something of a *rite de passage*. The more the *hammam* ceremony is transferred and adopted into other cultural frames of reference, the less obvious is its interpretation. In this paper, I would like to provide a reading of three *hammam* interpretations as presented in theoretically selected videos. I take these videos as a visual database for my own interpretation. By analysing the various representations and encoded interpretations of the *hammams*, I would like to draw a conclusion regarding the cultural frames in which these videos are embedded. My approach is that of a cultural sociologist, particularly interested in new media cultures. Therefore, I do not claim to provide any kind of interpretation of the ‘real’ (Turkish) *hammam*.

Interpreting the Interpretation of *Hammams* in Istanbul

The first empirical evidence is drawn from a documentary on long established, ‘historical’, *hammams* in Istanbul, which was released alongside Ferzan Öztepek’s movie *Hammam*. In contrast to the fictional story, the documentary aims to offer insight into the existing, non-fictional *hammam*. This is a European-centred perspective on the ‘unknown’ *hammam*. The depiction is figure-oriented, often relying on narration from the owner or female and male employees directly to the camera. Sometimes the camera tracks professional individuals inside or outside the *hammam* in order to demonstrate the various aspects of their professional tasks, or to record conversations among professionals talking to each other or treating clients. While the aesthetics of tracking individuals is focused on sharing authentic impressions with the recipients of the documentary, the real-life focus definitively becomes blurred when it comes to treating customers, e.g. by covering and lathering with soap or massaging, and at the same time describing the treatment by speaking to the camera and implicitly to the equally ‘unknown’ audience. In general, the logic of this demonstration of authentic *hammam* life is organised as a translation of meaning: the camera makes the *hammam* professionals translate the practices, rules and the cultural significance to an absent audience. However, the documentary video transfers not only speech; it is conceivable that the transferred speech is not even the primary interest of recipients. Besides the auditory signs, it encodes a richness of visual signs that are subject to the recipients’ interpretations, too. The *hammam* appears as an enclave on the one hand, and related, however, to the outside world on the other hand. From the visual perspective, it is made clear that the architectural confinement of the *hammam* complex provides for specific performances. Although complete body treatment such as deep cleansing (no religious ‘purification’ is mentioned, however), beauty treatments (for females) and relaxation through special massage techniques (for males) are depicted as the sought-after treatment that motivates the *hammam* visit,

the documentary explicitly and implicitly shows that the interactions involved in the process of deep cleansing plays an important role, too. While they are waiting for customers, the male and female *tellaks* do spend some time chatting and drinking tea. It is made clear that waiting for customers is not at all a favourable situation for them; since they are paid according the number of customers served, the unavoidable waiting periods seem filled with little formalised activities. Yet, while serving customers the *tellaks* appear very much concentrated on the body treatment they perform but they also focus on the individual customer in in order to provide him or her with an adequate, tailored treatment. What is striking is that the *tellak* and the customer seem to have established a long-term relationship. On the one hand, especially in the female section, visiting the *hammam* means catching up with the *tellak*, with fellow visitors and, also, with family members and friends who meet there. On the other hand, meeting there means further producing social ties or family history, e.g., traditionally by discussing possible matches or preparing wedding ceremonies. In the male section, it is emphasised that the skills and the experiences of the *tellak* are performed in a much more vigorous way than the treatment of the women, providing for the satisfaction of customers, and is characteristically acknowledged by excellent tips. Women tend to prefer beauty treatments (e.g. hair dying and waxing) compared with more therapeutic treatments (e.g. massage and chiropractic) in the male section, this also applies to different types of client-customer oriented relationships. Whilst the beauty treatment is somehow a backstage activity and a shared 'secret' between the service personnel and the clients, the therapeutic treatment is somehow involved in a hierarchical interaction with two twisted sequences: first, the client must depend on the benefit of the harsh body treatment performed by the *tellak*, but eventually the situation is followed by another sequence where the *tellak* receives the tip with a grateful, almost humble, gesture. Bonding over shared secrets and hierarchical interactions, however, should not be conceived as typical for either the female or male section. For example, negotiations over marriage arrangements clearly also involve a status component. Informal arrangements of business relationships might also include elements of shared 'secrets', which will not be discussed in a more public or more formal situation elsewhere. To sum up, the presentation of the *hammam* stresses the interaction order which is informal in a sense that much seems to be left to the situational context stemming from the actual presence of service personnel and clients. This does not mean that anything can happen at any time, but that the confinement and the distinctive rules that separate the inside and outside of the *hammam* complex provide the interactional frame for phenomena that emerge. They might still be considered a *rite de passage*, but rather a short-term passage in the course of someone's daily activities.

Interpreting the Interpretations of Hammams in Salzburg

The depiction of the Istanbul *hammam* contrasts sharply with the depiction of the *hammam* recently constructed within European leisure resorts and spas. Compared with saunas or swimming and recreation, it is still quite seldom that a *hammam*

complex is run in Europe and it is even more seldom that a *hammam* complex is run by Europeans. However, the most recent leisure and spa resorts rely heavily on the construction of different kinds of deliberately shaped theme-based playgrounds for children and adults. Operating the *hammam* facility within a leisure and spa resort and offering more specialised themed areas has become very popular in the last ten years or so. Running a *hammam* involves a substantial initial investment and permanent, expensive maintenance – maybe to an even higher degree than the original *hammam* business. While the neighbourhood *hammam* in Istanbul will not attract customers by mediated advertisements, the ‘new’ European *hammams* have to attract customers from a larger area and, therefore, need to present the facility through professionally crafted commercials and new media – first of all, the internet. Although the above-mentioned objective criteria of a *hammam* are met even in a way that very much emphasises traditional European imaginations of the seemingly oriental interior design, requisites and flair, the commercialised interpretation of these hammams suggest a very different meaning of a hammam compared with the former video.

Evidence for the following interpretation is drawn from commercial videos of *hammams* in the Salzburg (Austria) area in Central Europe. These *hammams* have become part of leisure and spa resorts aimed at tourists and locally-based customers. The *hammam* facilities are depicted as high-end, luxurious places with ornamental marble interior and designer plumbing equipment. It is striking that whilst the interior is represented in slow motion, and professional lightning seems to play a huge role, no individuals are present in this visual impression of the *hammam*. In addition, the visual text is accompanied by music typically defined as relaxing or for meditation. If there is also a voiceover, the typically female voice speaks with a slow, low and soothing voice. The voiceover affirms how individuals will feel during a visit to the *hammam* as they get their treatment, rather than explaining the facility to an imagined person to whom the facility is unfamiliar. Yet there are parts of the video that show interactions between professionals and clients. These interactional scenes are aesthetically distinguished from the scenes presenting an overview of the *hammam*. The camera only provides figure shots and shows very little of the space surrounding the figures. This gives the idea of a hide-away situation within a specialised, narrow space of the *hammam* from which other customers are excluded. Also, the professional and the customer do not have face-to-face contact. They are typically depicted in a kind of anonymous serving position with the client lying prone on a lounge and the professional standing alongside and treating her (such presentations rarely show males) with *kese* and lather. The treatment looks much gentler compared than that shown in the documentary. Instead of intensively cleaning and peeling the skin, the use of materials is rather symbolic, so that it looks like mere touching the client at a distance. There is no visible or audible talking between the professional worker and the client. While the interaction is already depicted as a situation between only two persons and within a space separated from other people, the two persons do not share intimacy or a temporary bond, but perform a still more extensive separation. Intimacy is rather created between the treated customer and the

recipients, the potential customers, as the camera provides close-ups on the client's face showing expressions of intense indulgence. Therefore, it is made clear that the meaning of the *hammam* ceremony, which centres on its client-professional oriented sensual treatment, is an individualised performance, and not a social event. As mentioned by the voiceover, it does include corporeal effects and a personalised service. However, the camera depicts a person totally left to herself and focused on her sensations. While this situation appears to be highly desirable by the client, it seems that, paradoxically, it can only be produced with the help of others, the skilled use of devices and the distinctive atmosphere of the imaginative 'oriental world'. Another separation can be identified within the presentation of the *hammam* since it contains a visual/audio stream and, separated from them but in addition, literal information on the treatment. The literal information is very formalised. It typically lists services such as massage with an array of various scented oils and soaps, a detailed description of the peeling procedure, or of the snacks and drinks being served or offered after the *hammam* ceremony. Information includes the area in which the service is performed, how long it takes, how many service personnel are required, what their certified skills are and, at the end, the price for the entire service package. There will also be detailed information on the time the service is offered and on scheduling requirements. At first glance, the service seems even more personalised, as usually the customer can choose from a list of different components, or from a list of different ingredients used during the *hammam* treatment service. At the same time, selecting components of the treatment and pre-scheduling precisely coordinated material and personnel resources based on a written contract demonstrates rationalised, standardised and commodified aspects of the *hammam* organisation in accordance with other industries developed in Western culture.

Interpreting an Interpretation of a Tourist *Hamam* in Turkey

Another interpretation of a Turkish bath deals in an oblique way with clichés of oriental and European perspectives on the 'opposite' culture. Evidence for this interpretation is drawn from a video advertising a tourist resort in Belek (Turkey) and addressing a German-speaking audience via the internet. Again, the video stands in stark contrast to both the *hammam* documentary video and those on the Austrian-based tourist and leisure resorts. While these videos – in very different ways – are based on a stream of scenes demonstrating the typical procedure of the respective *hammam* treatment, the last video shows figures of visitors/customers and service personnel involved in a story. The story is as follows: a man arrives at the newly constructed, huge, oriental-style, luxurious complex with an equally luxurious chauffeur-driven car. After entering the resort he is guided to his suite and he carefully checks the interior design. He apparently recognises and pays a lot of attention to the decorum of the room. For example, the bed is embellished with rose leaves and fluffy towels arranged in the shape of a heart. He then spends some time in a lounge and enjoys a drink. The lounge, too, has some very special features, for example a transparent floor under the coffee table. This allows the protagonist to watch

a woman elegantly swimming in the basin below the lounge area. The film then cuts to a parallel scene in which a woman arrives in an even bigger car, a stretch-limo, which she leaves in front of the resort. The camera shows that after leaving the car and entering the reception hall she is very impressed by the environment, giving the idea to the viewer that it is her first visit to this or to any luxurious resort. The story continues with various sequences showing either the man or the woman engaged in activities. The activities of the man include, first of all, selecting jewellery, which is apparently offered in shopping areas within the resort. Activities for the female include wide-ranging ‘pamper’ treatments by staff members with assorted snacks, drinks, bathing, massaging and the traditional peeling ceremony. During the treatment she receives the jewellery gifts in instalments and is visibly pleased. The jewellery is presumably sent by the man and arrives in a particular order: from brooch, progressing ultimately to a ring. During the treatment session she has the temporary company of other females. The group is entertained with food, dancing and a musical play in a *hammam*-like, marble-clad sitting and lying area. When her mental and bodily preparation is completed, she gets dressed and is guided blindfolded by two employees to a grand patio that includes a water pool. After crossing beside the pool, she sits down at a table where the man is already awaiting her and she uncovers her eyes. While she seems again overwhelmed by the environment of the situation, it does not look as if they are strangers to each other, rather a reunited couple in love. They have dinner at a table by the water. Eating, chatting and laughing a lot, they are meanwhile surrounded by darkness and, also, many service personnel and candles. The evening culminates with an even greater light show, fireworks, and a dancing party with the couple mingling in a crowd of people all dressed conspicuously in white.

What is striking in this video is the combination of old and new features of the story. The story tells the classical fairy-tale of the beautiful girl who is distantly courted by a rich and handsome man and, after some delay, the knot can be finally tied in a splendid big pre-wedding ceremony. Indeed, this story has a classical ‘oriental’ twist. Bride and groom prepare separately and in the company of same-sex persons for the wedding occasion. Also, the preparation – especially of the bride – relies on a shared and beautifying *hammam* ceremony prior to her meeting the groom. The pre-wedding evening provides some private time for the couple, where they wine and dine in the middle of the water-filled pool. The party thereafter is, however, a marvellous event with so many people as to demonstrate the status and the social position of the couple and their families. However, the story also reminds one of the most recent videos advertising the *hammam* and spa (tourist) experience. First of all, the love story takes place at a commodified place, customers are able to temporarily rent it, with all its facilities and services. It does not happen accidentally or within an everyday life environment but, instead, the day seems carefully prepared and choreographed. Apparently, this love story can only take place within a professionally organised, luxurious environment and not within a more private home. Performing and experiencing the romance, however, does actually not require anything more than scheduling (and, of course, financing) and attending. In these provided scenes, service personnel with the support of the architectural amenities and

the interior design will carry the story on – while the protagonists relax, enjoy and sense. They are not – as the typical romances might suggest – the ones who actively create the love story. The love story rather revolves around them. They are the protagonists but, also, spectators of their own story. Thus, the *hammam* visit embedded into this story will hardly mark a *rite de passage* in someone's everyday-life, but rather a kind of movie-inspired, celebrity role-playing *out of* everyday life.

References and Notes

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