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26 The Prophet Muhammad’s Sandalprint: Muslim Retro-cool and the Product-placed Sermon in Contemporary Turkey

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In the years 2016–17, the popular Turkish Muslim preacher Ahmet Mahmut Ünlü, known as Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca, offered for sale a pair of sandals at the price of 130 Turkish Liras, or about \$35 at the time. A hefty sum to pay for his lower-middle class followers, this unusual footwear, he claimed, was a faithful copy of the Prophet Muhammad’s sandals (*na‘l*) or slippers (*terlik*).¹ Not merely blessed items, these sandals were promoted as especially blessed and protective. For example, in a sermon and publicity materials posted online, he tells his followers that the slippers can induce visions of the Prophet, stop homes from burning and ships from sinking, and, more generally, protect its owners and wearers from enemies, Satan, magic, the evil eye, and covetousness. Made from 100 percent genuine leather and nestled in a lovely gift box, he continues, the purchase is well worth the 130 Turkish Liras, of which a small portion, “God willing” (*inşallah*), will be donated to the religious social services (*hizmet*) under his purview. He then concludes his speech by encouraging his listeners—whom he calls blessed “wayfarers” (*yol gidenler*)—to hurry up and take advantage of the special campaign by phoning in an order for this most propitious, dream-inducing footwear (Figure 26.1).²

Among his pious followers, Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca was praised for multiplying Muhammad’s blessings (*bereket*) in the domain of everyday life via his exhortatory performance and its concomitant material object. The “sacred” (*kutsal*) sandal thus helped extend the prophetic presence through the practices of object acquisition, spiritual rapprochement, and physical embodiment. However, among his detractors—a miscellany of individuals ranging from secularists to anti-capitalist Muslims—he was sharply criticized as nothing but a money-grubbing charlatan. Within such counter-spheres, Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca was derided as a disgraceful “dealer in religion” (*din tüccarı*) focused on increasing his personal wealth, which permitted him, most infamously, to vacation in the Swiss Alps and jet-ski in Malta (*HaberSom*. 2017).

Although it would be easy to dismiss Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca and his prophetic product as a passing debacle—a momentary media-driven brouhaha with polarized audiences clamoring on either side of the ideological divide—this sandal episode proves instructive in several ways. First, the incident follows the “formula and myth and symbol” (Browne and Browne 2005: 11) pattern of popular culture; here, the formula is the sermon, the myth is the securing of protection and healing, and the symbol is Muhammad’s sandal, materially reified and sold as a mass-produced object. In this specific case, however, it is difficult to distinguish between practice and product—that is, between listening to a sermon and purchasing its related artifact. The former comprises a relatively traditional acoustic delivery of an Islamic religious lesson or message recorded and disseminated thanks to the audio-visual and digital tools used in contemporary



Figure 26.1 Sandals. Photo: Christiane Gruber.

televangelism. Besides the use of television and internet platforms, especially YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, what stands out most here is the emergence of a new type of popular religious practice that embraces the type of creative entrepreneurship typical of global capitalist economies. As a result, Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca's homiletic-consumerist endeavor might be best called a "product-driven sermon," in which formula and symbol prove co-constitutive as well as co-consumptive.

As scholars have shown, novel religious popular cultures, including those emerging in majority Muslim lands, are often simultaneously celebrated and castigated.³ It is for these reasons that popular culture is not only defined as "for" or "by" the people and entangled in a market economy but also considered a site of struggle on a larger Gramscian "compromise equilibrium."⁴ Indeed, the varied reactions to Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca's sandal sermon highlight that this new

Islamic practice of product-preaching hit a nerve among Turkish audiences: whilst some individuals were thrilled that this celebrity *hoca* made available sandals re-enchanted with prophetic aura, others deplored his trafficking in the hopes of Muslim believers seeking succor in times of difficulty. For others still, Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca's mediatic enterprise prompted anxieties about the withering away of recognizable structures of Muslim religious authority in our global informational age. Blurring such boundaries, the Prophet's sandalprint highlights the possibilities and problems that emerge from the intersections between high textualism, popular religious practices, visual and material culture, the commodification of a perceived tradition, and Islamic televangelism in contemporary Turkey.

MUSLIM RETRO-COOL: THE SANDAL'S ICONOTEXTUAL INSPIRATIONS

Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca's commercial campaign centered around the prophetic sandal, an item of significance to Sunni Muslim devotional life and popular belief throughout the centuries. In his speech, the Turkish imam holds up a leather sandal for his listeners as he enumerates its many benefits, characteristics, and mysteries (*faydalar, havas, ve esrar*). The item's putative virtues draw upon a rich reservoir of Islamic texts detailing the blessed qualities of Muhammad's sandal. Among such texts, he relies most heavily on al-Maqqari's (d. 1041/1632) *Fath al-muta'al fi madh al-ni'al* (The Most High in Praising the Prophet's Sandals), an Arabic-language treatise dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad's sandal, its constituent material parts, and its talismanic properties.⁵ This long and detailed text synthesizes a number of sandal-related Hadiths and written sources; it thus forms the core of the imam's theme chosen for homiletic delivery and manufactured artefact. Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca's reliance on al-Maqqari reveals that his sermon and sandal cannot be considered simply "low-brow" in appeal or "popular" in character. To the contrary, his practice reveals the high textualism—that is, the serious scholarly research—undergirding his interlinked labors in hortative performance and product development.

Al-Maqqari's popular text was produced as manuscripts and printed books illustrated with sandal diagrams during the late Ottoman period. For instance, one handwritten copy of the *Fath al-muta'al fi madh al-ni'al* includes beautifully illuminated diagrams of the Prophet's sandal interspersed throughout the text. The depictions are filled with a rich array of floral and geometric motifs, and at times they are shown stretching horizontally across two facing folios (Figure 26.2).

In addition, al-Maqqari includes a section (*fasl*) detailing the various benefits (*manafi'*) of the sandal's visual representations, which often appear in modern printed editions of the text as well. It is to such texts and images that Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca must have made recourse while crafting his oral sermon, sandal treatise,⁶ and line of prophetic footwear.

Returning to al-Maqqari's treatise, the term the author uses for the accompanying sandal diagrams is *mithal* (plural, *amthal*), which is derived from the Arabic trilateral root *ma-tha-la*, meaning "to resemble." More than just a re-rendering, a *mithal* is conceptualized as a symbolic likeness or similitude—that is, as a visual or material analogon for the "real thing." The calque or faithful replica itself has been deemed especially important for the Prophet Muhammad's sandal since Muslim pilgrims who could not visit the relic housed in Damascus requested exact or traced paper replicas of the original item ever since the twelfth century (Meri 2010: 108). In this way, the

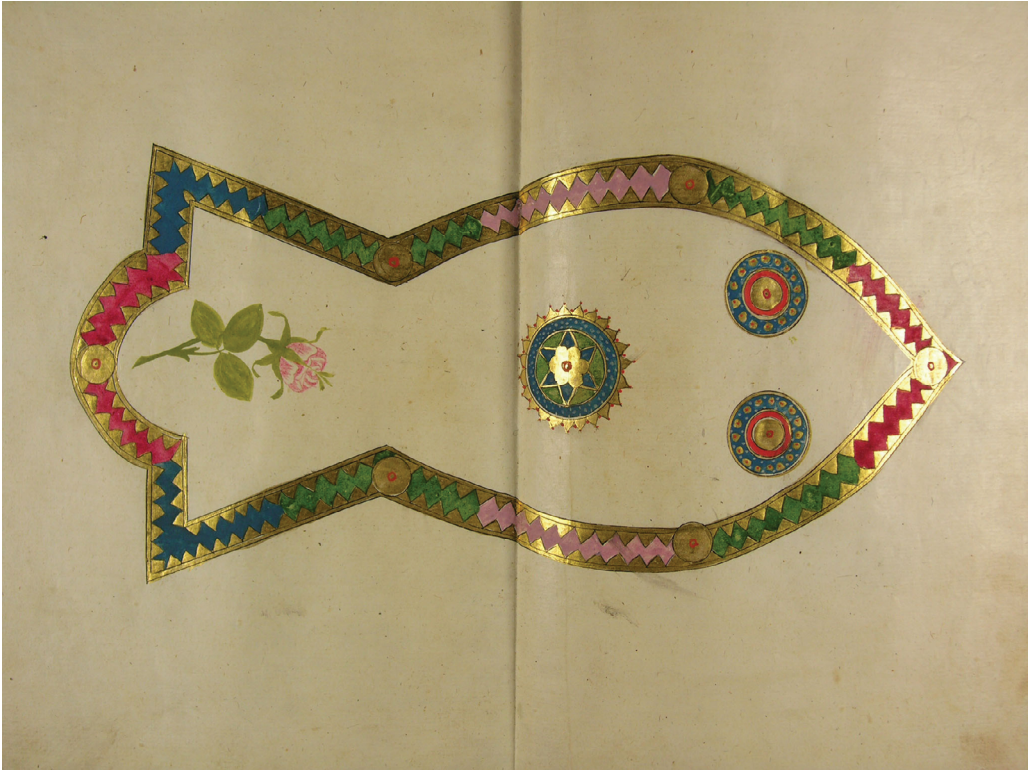


Figure 26.2 Kayseri Rashid Efendi 534 Madh al-Nial. Photo: Christiane Gruber.

sandal's prophetic aura has multiplied via pictorial proxies that have spread across vast swathes of land throughout the centuries. Such visible, sensible analoga in turn have expanded Islamic sacred territory into new and ever-expanding horizons—including, as of late, gainful commercial ones.⁷

As Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca's prophetic product shows, such "contact relics" of the Prophet's footwear have been considered particularly effective against a range of malefic forces. What distinguishes the imam's most recent contributions to the genre, however, is the sandal's similitude through its reiteration as a three-dimensional object rather than as a two-dimensional pictorial depiction. Enfleshed in leather and constructed in the round, the imam's sandal serves as an object signifier—a material *mithal* of sorts—for the Prophet as he becomes metaphorically manifested in footwear and allegorically activated in his followers' footsteps. Such practices of embodiment and locomotion hint at Muslim devotees' spiritual desire to sustain Muhammad's ongoing, energetic presence in their everyday lives (Bredekamp 2014: 60).

The manifestation of the prophetic sandal, as both *image* and *object*, outside the arts of the book can be traced back to Ottoman times as well. The sacred trusts (*kutsal emanetler*) and royal vestments (*padişah elbiseleri*) departments in Topkapı Palace in Istanbul house the most important exemplars, including several putatively genuine leather sandals of the Prophet Muhammad (Aydın 2004: 125–7). The Ottoman royal collections also include depictions of his sandal prints inked on talismanic shirts as well as embroidered on hats (Tezcan 2006: 135).

The leather sandal and sandal-related objects in Topkapı Palace are locally available to Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca and his followers, a number of whom perform devotional visitation (*ziyaret*) to the Prophet's relics on religious holidays, especially during the holy month of Ramadan. Such sacred objects thus form part of the religious practices and liturgical calendars of Muslims living in Istanbul and beyond. The sacred trusts in the royal collections also are widely known thanks to their 2004 publication in two beautifully illustrated English- and Turkish-language tomes (Aydın 2004: 125–7). These and other books' ornamental gift boxes, in fact, appear to have inspired Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca's aesthetic choice for his leather sandals' luxurious, chest-like packaging. That the imam most likely sought inspiration for his sandal product from these illustrated tomes reveals an array of influences that includes not only Ottoman-Islamic iconotextual sources but also contemporary scholarly research and publication.

Taking this tradition-with-a-twist to the next level, Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca is frequently seen sporting headgear embroidered with the Prophet's sandal print while attending events and funerals as well as when teaching and preaching the Qur'an.⁸ Photographic images showing the imam wearing this symbol of Sunni Muslim learning are then transformed into digital graphics that help develop a particular aesthetic brand for his official Facebook page, in which he self-identifies as a "Public Figure."⁹ The imam's look—as cultivated in the flesh and recorded in visuals uploaded to his Facebook page—is emulated by his followers, who number over 2.4 million individuals as of July 2020. The fact that this large devotional demographic may be tapped into as a profitable consumer base needs no belaboring here. The more critical issue at stake is as follows: Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca must not be considered merely a "micro-intellectual" or *lumpen-khatib*, to borrow Dale Eickelman and John Anderson's portemanteau term (Eickelman and Anderson 2003: 12). He is neither uneducated nor unclever, and his power and influence in the realm of Muslim religious and consumer cultures cannot be discarded as simply crude and plebeian, as "popular" and nothing more.

Instead, the particular characteristics that have made the imam and his sandal products "popular" must be explored beyond the Marxist lens of the fetish and the proletariat—that is, the way that communities organize themselves—to engage with the more pressing questions posed by Islamic praxis as it enters into, and functions as, a marketplace. Such issues have been addressed by previous scholars, including Patrick Haenni in his *L'Islam du marché*, which explores consumer-based forms of Islam as another kind of "conservative revolution" (Haenni 2005). In his 2005 study, Haenni highlights the new economic orientation of Islamic forms of religiosity in which creative entrepreneurs "conceptualize Islam as a product to be sold to consumers."¹⁰ These practices temper Salafī tendencies via the creation of new products that are in-style, tapped into popular culture, and target individual subjectivities rather than national politics. This "*da'wa* light"¹¹ also transforms the imams themselves into media products, as is the case for Christian and Muslim growth-oriented celebrity televangelists whose charisma and stardom boost product placement.¹²

The type of Islam crafted by Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca therefore should not be cast aside as banalized religion up for sale to the mid- to lower "rungs" of Turkish society. More importantly, to many fans the imam's sandal sermon and products represent a signifier of Sunni Muslim-ness via their engagement with and creative updating of Ottoman-Islamic textual and artistic traditions. The sandal's newest materialization as a commercial product in Turkey is also embedded in a global market that caters to a demand for apparel that is visibly and proudly Muslim. Indeed,



Figure 26.3 Travel mug.

other sandal products sold online are similarly fashionable, and they include lapel pins, ties, bags, keychains, spiral notebooks, t-shirts, iPad covers, soap dispensers, and travel mugs (Figure 26.3), to name just a few.¹³

Bringing a long historical stemma of the genre up to date, these many sandal objects point to an ever-growing (and potentially lucrative) niche market for Muslim retro-cool products.¹⁴

ACTION, REACTION, RETRACTION

Not all members of the Turkish public consider Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca's sermons and products singularly "cool" or even remotely desirable. His ventures were met with scathing critique as well. Adverse reactions were further exacerbated when critics discovered previous sermons for other items he was offering for sale: namely, "blessed" water run-off from a strand of the Prophet Muhammad's hair as well as a fire-proof burial shroud (*yanmaz kefen*) that ostensibly would protect a deceased body from burning in the blaze of hell. His promising salvation in heaven through a simple white cotton sheet went a step too far for many Turks, who were quick to lambast the imam via Twitter and other social platforms. As a result of this collective onslaught,

Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca saw himself forced to pull his fire-proof shroud off the market, while his leather prophetic sandals—which he argued would enable wearers to successfully cross the bridge over hell at end times—have almost entirely disappeared from stores of devotional goods today.

The fire-proof shroud debacle was woven in layers of misinformation, made all the more knotty due to the raft of angry responses posted in the Twittersphere. At first, Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca denied having created such a product. The imam was recorded in various media reports as having said that: “I did not say a thing about a fire-proof shroud. God looks at your deeds, and if you are corrupt, no one will save you” (*Yeni Akit* 2019).¹⁵ However, in the same breath he also spoke about some shrouds that were made to-order and distributed as gifts. Based on the textual sources that he consulted, the imam states that the shrouds were made of gazelle skin, onto which the names of God were inked in saffron. These items were then collected by other individuals and resold for the steep price of 300 Turkish Liras (*Yeni Akit* 2019). In such contradictory statements, Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca labored to absolve himself from any responsibility in the matter, although a leaked video of his shroud-sermon proved to the contrary. His prevarication was thus laid bare for all to see and comment upon.

Reactions were fast and furious. For example, on Twitter some individuals scornfully declared that “there is a lot of money in the business of religion” (*din işinde çok para var*) and that those who purchase such items rightly deserve to be swindled out of their savings. Still others lambasted the self-appointed cleric as a lowly “dealer in religion” (*din tüccarı*) poised to deceive his followers and monetize their hopes in life and fears of death.¹⁶ The comments section of Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca’s sandal sermon posted on YouTube were filled with predictably combative and crass remarks: some users blasted the imam as a proponent of the “religion of Satan” and perverted (*sapık*) panderer of nonsense (*saçma sapan*), while another opts for sexualized satire by stating that a vibrator would prove more useful than the slippers.¹⁷ For their part, while plenty of the imam’s followers expressed praise for the product per the “protocols of polite *du‘a*,”¹⁸ at least one member of the imam’s fan (*sevenler*) Facebook site posted a question about the sandal, asking: “I’d like to ask something. Is wearing the noble sandal a sin (*günah*)? Please provide an answer. Thank you.” Although his query was left unanswered, it is clear that some of Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca’s adherents and admirers felt moral unease about the prophetic product.

The reasons for such anxieties are no doubt manifold. First can be counted the problematic ethics of commodifying and commercializing a religious tradition into a financially remunerative activity that may include predatory machinations, such as false publicity and sales campaigns. Promising protection and cure for those who hurry up, the imam’s pricey sandal can appear as if profiting off the aspirant poor, a criticism that also has been leveled at conservative Protestant charismatic ministries working in the United States since the 1950s (Coleman 2005: 499–501). Blending capitalist ventures with trust in faith-based healing, Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca’s own version of “prosperity theology,” however, results in rising financial riches for himself and *not* others. In such a case, the worry of his critics—whether they identify as Muslim or not—concerns primarily the defrauding of the common man and woman via religious trickery.

Besides such hocus-pocus promises, the second source of apprehension concerns the withering away of clearly recognizable spaces and structures of authority. Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca’s sermons transcend the mosque and madrasa as primary sites of religious enlightenment and learning to come fully alive on the Internet, thus reaching millions of followers. According to Gary Bunt,

these new types of cyber-Islamic environments (CIEs) partake in a larger proselytizing economy in which networked and connected Muslims—or “*iMuslims*”—encode their identities (Bunt 2009: esp. 2–6). These new digital loci involve a range of transformational processes that cause, among others, a perceived collapse of religious hierarchy that places the most influential clerics (or what Haenni calls the “*purs et durs d’al-Azhar*” [Haenni 2005: 45]) on equal footing as the most wanton opportunists and swindlers. The articulation of high or elite knowledge within the medley of *hoi poloi* voices causes unease among those who have vested interest in class distinction.¹⁹ Within such a hierarchical structure, the “popular” is thus often conceptualized as occupying the lowest stratum society; relatedly, it is considered a debasing and contaminating agent that, just like the mass and digital media, steadily dilutes the auratic qualities of religious authority.²⁰

This perceived erosion of authority proves a pendant to the third source of disquietude: namely, the massification of precious, rare, or unique items such as the Prophet Muhammad’s relics. This “down-market turn” causes a creolization of the religious and commercial spheres, in which nothing appears sacred, taboo, or off-limits anymore.²¹ In today’s mediatic landscape of meaning-making, religious belief is not merely criticized and shunned as a “stubborn archaism or return of the repressed” (Stolow 2005: 122).²² Rather, as suggested by the negative reactions to Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca’s sermon and sandal, the highest expression of religious belief—imagined as pure, unadulterated, and soaring heavenward—is mourned in the decline of the *déclassé*. To note here then: alongside the adjectives “kitsch” and “tawdry,”²³ the term “*déclassé*” is used synonymously with “popular,” maintaining in its very etymology the vertical class and economic structures that belie a host of other anxieties precipitated by today’s wild and restless cyber-world where almost anything goes.

“POPULAR” PROBLEMS: THE PRODUCT-PLACED SERMON

Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca’s sermon seems to have facilitated the placement of a product, cloaking it with an “add-on” patina of religious authority and aura of the sacred, both of which in turn increased the object’s perceived financial worth. Much like the prophetic product he pandered via the megaphone of the Muslim televangelist, the imam’s homiletic performance was condemned as driven by financial gain—an overly simplistic criticism that overlooks the imam’s deep knowledge of, and scholarly commitment to, Islamic and Ottoman Prophet-centered devotional traditions.

In the end, both sermon and sandal were loved and reviled, devoured and dismissed. Such divergent reactions highlight how the realm of the “popular” remains an ideological battleground with various publics and counterpublics staking claims to what they deem a dominant cultural and religious order.²⁴ Within today’s Turkey, Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca and his followers are actively crafting an arena of Muslim belief and practice in which mass produced sandals are deemed not only permissible but praiseworthy. For them, seeking a sacred encounter via the mediation of a material object or saintly personage—a practice known as “intercession” or a “means of drawing close” (Arabic, *tawassul*; and Turkish, *tevessül*)—proves a moot issue. To the contrary, it is a popular one. In more conservative Sunni spheres, however, seeking intercession is frowned upon as a blameworthy innovation (*bid’a*) extrinsic to the Islamic tradition. Adding their voices to the

mix, criticisms of the sandals also are launched by those of a secular bent, who opine that the imam, via the production and consumption of prophetic proxies, debases an otherwise elite sphere of knowledge while concurrently defrauding the hopeful of their hard-earned cash. Invectives against the imam's prophetic sandals thus run the gamut from religious heterodoxy to popular impoverishment to financial exploitation, highlighting the more pejorative definitions of the "popular" as it operates in a larger nexus of contestation.

Yet the realm of the "popular" carries plenty of positive prospects as well. For one, as Webb Keane notes, "religions may not always demand beliefs, but they will always involve material forms. It is in that materiality that they are part of evidence and provoke responses, that they have public lives and enter into ongoing chains of causes and consequences."²⁵ In today's global commercial landscape, Islam, too, is reified as both contested praxis and product, packaged as if a consumer good staffed by a cadre of material forms. Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca's endeavors, as a case in point, materialize a widespread belief in the protective and auratic powers of objects, above all Muhammad's blessed sandal. Skirting the problems of intercession and innovation, the parameters of the "popular" prove eminently malleable, its contours shifting with the ebbs and flows of demand. As for the sandal itself: this is surely not the end of the story. Plenty of other Muslim retro-cool sandal products thrive on the market today and others promise to emerge in the future as various creative entrepreneurs turn to catering to pious Muslims' wish to visually and materially express their desire to follow in the Prophet's footsteps.

