

A Wisp of Smoke

Scent and Character in *The Tale of Genji*

by AILEEN GATTEN

ONE warm and cloudy day in late October some years ago, I attended a demonstration of *kōdō*,¹ the incense ceremony, at Tennōji in southern Osaka. Our gathering was held in a secluded garden at the edge of the temple grounds. Nearly all the participants wore formal Japanese dress; the ceremony took place in the restrained setting of a tea room. Yet the atmosphere was relaxed, almost playful, for we had been invited to take part in a highly aesthetic amusement: the matching of several kinds of incense.

Although an incense ceremony varies in accordance with the virtuosity of its participants, the goal is the same: to discriminate between three or more varieties of aloeswood incense, and to recognize and identify those which one has sampled previously. In order to accomplish this goal, one must possess a good nose, preferably improved by lessons in the sampling of incense, and an ability to concentrate on the nature of a scent. Even in its simplest forms, the incense ceremony is a combination of intellectual discipline, rare sensations, and easy sociability.

A stimulating pastime, I thought as I left the temple. Elegant, serene, exclusive—but is that all there is to it? I had come to the incense ceremony in an attempt to make more tangible my knowledge of the role of incense in the Heian period, and most particularly in the eleventh-century *The Tale of Genji*. Instead I found that the modern ceremony has lost the practicality which, together with its important aesthetic qualities, had defined the Heian view of incense. Where the incense ceremony of today is an art so refined that it makes little inroad into the daily life even of those who study it, incense in the Heian period was an indispensable part of an aristocrat's life.

Incense at that time was not limited to Buddhist ceremonies and the perfuming of clothing and rooms. Nor was it a craft left to merchants. The compounding of incense was an art requiring as much training and skill as any other polite accomplishment: and, like his music, poetry, or calligraphy, the incense produced by a

A version of this article was presented before | Asian Studies, Toronto, 20 March 1976.
the annual meeting of the Association for | ¹ 香道

Heian aristocrat often benefitted from closely guarded techniques passed down by illustrious ancestors.

One reason why incense was held in such high esteem arose from the customs of upper-class Heian society. People rarely *saw* each other. Even members of the same sex, if not on close terms, met with a curtain between them. To make matters worse, in the case of romantic conversations, the man might not hear the voice of the woman whom he was courting until the romance reached its later stages. Until then he had to be content with the voice of a lady's maid repeating her mistress' message. Thus, one of the few means of forming an opinion of one's companion was the scent emanating from his or her quarters.

UNTIL the fourteenth century, 'incense' in Japan referred to the blending of fragrant wood and other plant and animal products, nearly all of which were obtained from the Middle East, India, Indonesia, Indochina, and the Philippines, and imported through China, Korea, and later the Ryūkyū Islands. The port of entry for these exotic materials was Dazaifu in northwest Kyushu. From there the incense ingredients were forwarded by the assistant viceroy to the imperial palace and the great houses of the capital. The difficulty and expense of transporting ingredients from such distances insured that they would be always scarce and extremely expensive: hence, the compounding of incense was, from the start, a pastime only of the wealthy. Its leaders were the imperial family, the Fujiwara clan, and certain priests of the great temples of Nara and Kyoto.²

The ingredients for incense fall into two major categories: plant and animal. The plant products are by far the larger, and may be subdivided into fragrant wood (including aloes,³ sandalwood,⁴ and camphor⁵); fragrant resins (amber,⁶ frankincense,⁷ benzoin,⁸ storax,⁹ and galbanum¹⁰); and dried leaves, roots and flowers, especially those of the pine¹¹ and lily.¹² Animal products consisted mainly of deer musk¹³ and seashells.¹⁴

These ingredients, together with various kinds of incense already blended, made their way to Japan in the mid-sixth century, when Buddhism and the accessories necessary for its ritual were introduced from the kingdom of Paekche in southwest Korea. Although incense was originally used in Japan for Buddhist ceremonies, it was quickly secularized by the Nara court. The Shōsōin repository in Nara preserves silver censers, clothes perfumers, and sachets from this period.

The art of blending incense reached its peak in the early Heian period. The first recorded incense competition—a gathering to compare the quality of several

² Yamada Kentarō 山田憲太郎, *Tōa Kōryō Shi* 東亞香料史, Tōyōdō, 1942, pp. 319-24.

³ *Jinkō* 沈香 or *senkō* 淺香, depending on its density.

⁴ *Byakudan* 白檀

⁵ *Ryūnō* 竜腦

⁶ *Kunroku* 薰陸

⁷ *Nyūikō* 乳香

⁸ *Ansokkō* 安息香

⁹ *Sogōkō* 蘇合香

¹⁰ *Fūshikō* 馱子香

¹¹ *Kanshō* 甘松

¹² *Ukkonkō* 爵金香

¹³ *Jakō* 麝香

¹⁴ *Kaikō* 甲香

kinds of incense compounded by the contestants—took place in the early ninth century, under the auspices of Prince Kaya,¹⁵ the seventh son of Emperor Kammu (r. 781–806). The prince, a patron and talented blender of incense, codified the Six Scents¹⁶ with Fujiwara Fuyutsugu,¹⁷ the Minister of the Left, in the reign of Emperor Nimmyō (r. 833–50), a period generally regarded as the golden age of incense. During this time the aristocracy stopped using imported Chinese blends, and turned to the manufacture of incense which better reflected Japanese tastes.

The Six Scents, as defined by the twelfth-century *Kunshū Ruishō*, 'Selections from the Incense Anthologies,' of Jakuren,¹⁸ are as follows: Plum Blossom,¹⁹ Lotus Leaf,²⁰ Chamberlain,²¹ Chrysanthemum,²² Fallen Leaves,²³ and Black.²⁴ Each scent corresponds to a season, suggested by the name of the scent. Thus Plum Blossom is linked with spring, Lotus Leaf with summer, Chamberlain with the autumn wind, and Black with deepest winter. No season is given for the Chrysanthemum and Fallen Leaves incense, although their names indicate that they represent the transition from autumn to winter.

All Six Scents are compounded of the same six ingredients: aloes, cloves, seashells, amber, sandalwood, and musk. The quantity of each and the order of combination vary with the scent. Each scent is further defined by the addition of a characteristic seventh element: if spikenard were added to the six ingredients, for example, one would have Lotus Leaf; but if frankincense were added instead, one would have created a Black incense.

The *Kunshū Ruishō* reveals the closely guarded recipes of eminent incense-blenders of the ninth century. A glance at a few famous methods of making incense may prove interesting.

Lotus Leaf. By Lord Kintada.²⁵

Spikenard: one *bu*²⁶

Aloes: seven *ryō*, two *bu*

Seashells: two *ryō*, two *bu*

Sandalwood: two *shu*

¹⁵ 賀陽宮

¹⁶ *Rokuishu* 六種

¹⁷ 藤原冬嗣

¹⁸ The poet-priest Jakuren 寂蓮 (Fujiwara Sadanaga 藤原定長, d. 1202), best known as compiler of and contributor to the imperial poetry anthology *Shinkokinshū* 新古今集, 1201. He is thought to have assembled *Kunshū Ruishō* 薰集類抄 between 1159 and 1166. Volume I consists of secret incense recipes by famous connoisseurs of the past; Volume II discusses the appropriate seasons for the blending of certain kinds of incense, the ingredients to be used, the way they should be blended, and other details. The title of the work suggests that *Kunshū Ruishō* is based on several earlier works no longer extant.

¹⁹ *Baika* 梅花

²⁰ *Kayō* 荷葉

²¹ *Jijū* 侍従

²² *Kikka* 菊花

²³ *Rakuyō* 落葉

²⁴ *Kurobō* 黒方

²⁵ Minamoto Kintada 源公忠, 889–948, a grandson of the Emperor Kōkō, was a court official and one of the Thirty-six Poetic Geniuses. He plays an indirect but prominent role in the incense competition in *The Tale of Genji*, discussed below. His recipe, as well as the one that follows, may be found in Yamada, pp. 292–3.

²⁶ 1 *ryō* 兩 = 4 *bu* 分 = 24 *shu* 銖. A *ryō* was equivalent to about 49 grams.

Mature lily petals or musk: two *bu*
 Cloves: two *ryō*, two *bu*
 Benzoin: one *bu* (optional)

Plum Blossom. By Prince Kaya.

Aloes: eight *ryō*, two *bu*
 Seashells: three *ryō*, two *bu*
 Spikenard: one *bu*
 Sandalwood: two *bu*, three *shu*
 Cloves: two *ryō*, two *bu*
 Musk: one *bu*
 Amber: one *bu*

A batch of the finished product varied from one to one and a half pounds. The order in which the ingredients were combined seems to have been of some importance. Shigeno no Sadanushi, a ninth-century courtier famous for his Plum Blossom and Black blends, advises us, 'First combine the aloes and cloves. Then add the seashells, sandalwood, and finally the musk.'²⁷

The ingredients were brayed in iron mortars about the size of a modern rice bowl. The mixture was then moistened with plum pulp, honey, or arrowroot sap, pounded with a pestle from five hundred to three thousand times, and rolled into balls about the size of marbles. The final steps are outlined in the T'ang treatise *Hsiang p'u*,²⁸ 'Taxonomy of Incense': 'When all the ingredients have been blended, store the incense in an inexpensive, well-used vessel. Seal it with wax-coated paper in a quiet dwelling. Bury the vessel in three to five inches of earth and leave it there for a month and some days. Remove and open immediately.'²⁹

Burying the incense, preferably near a tree or water, helped to blend and mature the scents. Once unsealed, however, the incense had to be burned as soon as possible. If left exposed to the air for any length of time, incense tended to dry out and lose much of its scent.

The rules governing the burning of incense were as stringent as those of combining and maturing ingredients. They are outlined in detail in *Go-Fushimi-in Shinkan Takimono no Hō*,³⁰ 'A Treatise on Incense in the Hand of the Retired Emperor Go-Fushimi':

First burn some hardwood to make charcoal, and stir it well. Charcoal should be buried in the ashes of the censer in order to warm them. Place additional hot charcoal on top of the ashes, and leave it there for some time. When

²⁷ Yamada, p. 294.

²⁸ 香譜

²⁹ Yamada, p. 311.

³⁰ 後伏見院宸翰薰物方, quoted in Yamada, pp. 297-8. This is probably not the work of Go-Fushimi, although a postscript in the

treatise states that it was compiled at his request. Both the author and date of composition are unknown; but since Go-Fushimi abdicated in 1301, the treatise probably dates from the early 14th century.

the charcoal on the ashes is quite cool, bury it in the ashes, top with another hot piece of charcoal, and let it warm the ashes for a while.

When you wish to burn incense, remove the uppermost charcoal and replace it with the incense. It is best to wait until the ashes are fairly cool. Let the incense smoke until its scent becomes apparent. Burn the incense slowly and evenly, and, after an interval, extinguish it

If extinguished after a short period, all smoke will vanish and the incense will last a long time. After the incense has been burned and extinguished, its scent will usually linger. If one burns incense properly this evening, for example . . . , one need not burn more until four or five days hence.

Incense, however, cannot be considered apart from its accessories, which not only identified the variety of incense but also offered further opportunity for the creator to display his or her taste. Incense made its formal appearance in vitreous or ceramic jars, four to a box. The box itself was usually made of lacquer and lavishly decorated. The censers, or *hitori*,³¹ in which the incense was burned had scalloped wooden bases lined with ceramic or copper, and were topped by a decorative copper grille.

INCENSE, then, played an important role in aristocratic society by revealing one's taste, indeed one's personality, as eloquently as did performance on the koto or the nuances of handwriting. In *The Tale of Genji*, that register of taste, the social utility of incense extends into the realm of literary technique: for here the author develops and defines her characters through the device of incense.

One example of how scent not only identifies but also enhances the personality of a character in the *Genji* occurs in Chapter 25, 'Hotaru' (translated by Edward Seidensticker as 'Fireflies').

Prince Hotaru, Genji's half-brother and the greatest aesthete of the novel, comes to Genji's mansion to court a lovely young woman named Tamakazura. Hotaru has never seen the lady; he has not heard her voice, or seen so much as a scrap of her handwriting. His opinion must be formed solely on the basis of Tamakazura's incense:

A seat was put out for [Hotaru] near the corner doors, where [Tamakazura] received him with only a curtain between them. Genji had given close attention to the incense, which was mysterious and seductive—rather more attention, indeed, than a guardian might have felt that his duty demanded. One had to admire the results, whatever the motive The dark nights of the new moon were over and there was a bland quarter-moon in the cloudy sky. Calm and dignified, the prince was very handsome indeed. Genji's own very special perfume mixed with the incense that drifted through the room as

³¹ 火取

people moved about. More interesting than he would have expected, thought the prince.³²

Not long after this episode, an extremely comical lady appears, who could be the antithesis of Tamakazura. She is the lady from Ōmi, a daughter of Tō no Chūjō, Genji's great rival. The lady from Ōmi not only composes ridiculous poems and speaks in a dialect which jars the ears of the Kyoto aristocrats; she also puts too much honey in her incense, which makes it sweet and cloying and drives away suitors of taste.

Scent is also important to the male characters of *The Tale of Genji*, and reaches a peak with the appearance of Kaoru (whom the world believes Genji's son) and Niou, Genji's grandson. Even the names of the two characters prepare us for the role of scent in determining their personalities: Kaoru is short for Kaoru Chūjō, 'the Fragrant Captain', and Niou for Niou Miya, 'His Perfumed Highness'.³³ The contrast between the naturally fragrant Kaoru and the artificially perfumed Niou is most evident in Chapter 42, '*Niou Miya*'. We are first introduced to Kaoru:

There was nothing in his face or manner, to be sure, that brought people up short, but there was a compelling gentleness that was unique and suggested limitless depths.

And there was the fragrance he gave off, quite unlike anything else in this world. Let him make the slightest motion and it had a mysterious power to trail off behind him like a 'hundred-pace incense.' One did not expect young aristocrats to affect the plain and certainly not the shabby. The elegance that is the result of a careful toilet was the proper thing. Kaoru, however, wished often enough that he might be free of this particular mark of distinction. He could not hide. Let him step behind something in hopes of going unobserved, and that scent would announce his presence. He used no perfume, nor did he scent his robes, but somehow a fragrance that had been sealed deep inside a Chinese chest would emerge the more ravishing for his presence. He would brush a spray of plum blossoms below the veranda and the spring rain dripping from it would become a perfume for others who passed. The masterless purple trousers would reject their own perfume for his.

Niou was his rival in everything and especially in the competition to be pleasantly scented. The blending of perfumes would become his work for days on end. In the spring he would gaze inquiringly up at the blossoming plum, and in the autumn he would neglect the maiden flower of which poets have made so much and the *hagi* beloved of the stag, and instead keep beside him, all withered and unsightly, the chrysanthemum 'heedless of age' and purple

³² *The Tale of Genji*, by Murasaki Shikibu, translated by Edward G. Seidensticker, p. 431. Copyright © 1976 by Edward G. Seidensticker.

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³³ 薰中将, 匂宮; *Genji*, p. 740.

trousers, also sadly faded, and the burnet that has so little to recommend it in the first place. Perfumes were central to his pursuit of good taste. There were those who accused him of a certain preciousness. Genji, they said, had managed to avoid seeming uneven.³⁴

Kaoru possesses a natural fragrance so pervasive and refined that it resembles the 'hundred-pace' incense³⁵ often used for scenting clothes. His fragrance enhances other perfumes of nature—scented wood, plum blossoms, and purple trousers;³⁶ and yet it is a source of embarrassment. Unable to conduct love affairs in the secrecy appropriate to the times, Kaoru is forced by his inescapable fragrance to become shy with women, aloof from society, and overly interested in religion.

Kaoru's fragrance is also the cause of Niou's extreme involvement in the blending of fine incense. The two young men carry on the amiable rivalry of their forebears Genji and Tō no Chūjō; yet where the latter competed for women in their youth and political power in maturity, the young Niou attempts to best his rival in somewhat more trivial realms; for whereas Kaoru gives a new perfume to plants already fragrant, Niou must rob these same plants of their scent in order to improve his own perfume. He neglects the lovely but scentless maiden flower and *hagi* celebrated by the poets, and instead devotes his attention to the drying of fragrant flowers in order to compound new and unusual blends of incense. None, however, seems to please the flamboyant Niou so much as does Kaoru's fragrance.

Incense is most developed as a topic in the thirty-second chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, 'Umegae'—'A Branch of Plum'. Here the author shows us unquestionably that incense, like the other arts practiced by the aristocracy of the time, is a reflection of personality.

At the beginning of the chapter, Genji is thirty-nine years old. His daughter by the Lady of Akashi is now eleven, and her initiation ceremony, her official entry into womanhood, is to be held at Genji's mansion. There is naturally a great to-do over the preparation of materials for her initiation and subsequent entry into court. Genji is ambitious to make his daughter the favorite of the young crown prince, and, when the crown prince becomes emperor, to have her become empress, thus gaining the influential position of potential grandfather to the next emperor. Everything the girl brings with her must therefore be of the finest quality, and among these necessities are, of course, a full set of incense. Thus Genji turns the preparations into a contest among proven talents to see which scents will be judged worthy to accompany his daughter to court.

It was now the end of the First Month. In his spare time Genji saw to blending the perfumes [his daughter] would take with her. Dissatisfied with

³⁴ *Genji*, pp. 739–40.

³⁵ *Hyakubu* 百歩

³⁶ *Fujibakama* 藤袴, *Eupatorium Fortunei*.
One of the 'seven autumn grasses', the purple

trousers bears clusters of small lavender blossoms which are specially fragrant when dried.

the new ones that had come from the assistant viceroy of Kyushu, he had old Chinese perfumes brought from the Nijō storehouses.

'It is with scents as with brocades: the old ones are more elegant and congenial.'

. . . .

He laid out all the perfumes and divided them among his ladies. Each of them was to prepare two blends, he said The ladies were hard at work at their perfumes, and the clatter of pestles was very noisy indeed.

Setting up his headquarters in the main hall, apart from Murasaki, Genji turned with great concentration to blending two perfumes the formulas for which—how can they have come into his hands?—had been handed down in secret from the day of the emperor Nimmyō. In a deeply curtained room in the east wing Murasaki was at work on blends of her own, after the secret Hachijō tradition. The competition was intense and the security very strict.

'Let the depths and shallows be sounded,' said Genji solemnly, 'before we reach our decisions.' His eagerness was so innocent and boyish that few would have taken him for the father of the initiate.

The ladies reduced their staffs to a minimum and let it be known that they were not limiting themselves to perfumes but were concerned with accessories too. They would be satisfied with nothing but the best and most original jars and boxes and censers.

They had exhausted all their devices and everything was ready. Genji would review the perfumes and seal the best of them in jars.

Prince Hotaru came calling on the tenth of the Second Month. A gentle rain was falling and the rose plum near the veranda was in full and fragrant bloom. The ceremonies were to be the next day. Very close since boyhood, the brothers were admiring the blossoms when a note came attached to a plum branch from which most of the blossoms had fallen. It was from Princess Asagao, said the messenger. Prince Hotaru was very curious, having heard rumors.

'I made certain highly personal requests of her,' said Genji, smiling and putting the letter away. 'I am sure that as always she has complied with earnest efficiency.'

The princess had sent perfumes kneaded into rather large balls in two jars, indigo and white, the former decorated with a pine branch and the latter a branch of plum. Though the cords and knots were conventional, one immediately detected the hand of a lady of taste. Inspecting the gifts and finding them admirable, the prince came upon a poem in faint ink which he softly read over to himself.

'Its blossoms fallen, the plum is of no further use.
Let its fragrance sink into the sleeves of another.'

. . . .

The time had come to review the perfumes.

'It should be on a rainy evening,' said Genji [to his brother]. 'And you shall judge them'

He had censers brought in. A most marvelous display was ranged before the prince, for the ladies were determined that their manufactures be presented to the very best advantage.

[The prince] went over them very carefully, finding this and that delicate flaw, for the finest perfumes are sometimes just a shade too insistent or too bland.

Genji sent for the two perfumes of his own compounding. It being in the old court tradition to bury perfumes beside the guardsmen's stream, he had buried them near the stream that flowed between the main hall and the west wing

'You have assigned me a most difficult task,' said the prince. 'I fear that my judgment may be a bit smoky.'

The same tradition had in several fashions made its way down to the several contestants. Each had added ingeniously original touches. The prince was faced with many interesting and delicate problems.

Despite Asagao's self-deprecatory poem, her 'dark'³⁷ winter incense was judged the best, somehow gentler and yet deeper than the others. The prince decided that among the autumn scents, the 'chamberlain's perfumes,' as they are called, Genji's had an intimacy which however did not insist upon itself. Of Murasaki's three, the plum or spring perfume was especially bright and original, with a tartness that was rather daring.

'Nothing goes better with a spring breeze than a plum blossom,' said the prince.

Observing the competition from her summer quarter, the lady of the orange blossoms was characteristically reticent, as inconspicuous as a wisp of smoke from a censer. She finally submitted a single perfume, a summer lotus-leaf blend with a pungency that was gentle but firm. In the winter quarter the Akashi lady had as little confidence that she could hold her own in such competition. She finally submitted a 'hundred pace' sachet from an adaptation of Minamoto Kintada's formula by the earlier Suzaku emperor, of very great delicacy and refinement.

The prince announced that each of the perfumes was obviously the result of careful thought and that each had much to recommend it.

'A harmless sort of conclusion,' said Genji.

The moon rose, there was wine, the talk was of old times. The mist-shrouded moon was weirdly beautiful, and the breeze following gently upon the rain brought a soft perfume of plum blossoms. The mixture of scents inside the hall was magical.³⁸

³⁷ Or 'black', *kurobō*.

³⁸ *Genji*, pp. 511-14.

Here, then, is the incense competition:

<u>Spring</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Autumn</u>	<u>Winter</u>	<u>Sachet</u>
(‘Plum Blossom’)	(‘Lotus Leaf’)	(‘Chamberlain’)	(‘Black’)	(‘Hundred-Pace’)
*Murasaki Asagao	Lady of the orange blossoms	Murasaki *Genji	Murasaki Genji *Asagao	Lady of Akashi
*winner				

As Genji remarks, Prince Hotaru’s judgment is of ‘a harmless sort’, designed to please everyone. No contestant wins in more than one category, and each has the honor of sending one kind of incense to court with Genji’s daughter.

It is not surprising that Murasaki triumphs in the ‘Plum Blossom’ competition. Throughout the *Genji* she is identified with the red plum blossom, and with spring itself. The four quarters of Genji’s Rokujō mansion are named after the seasons, and Murasaki occupies the spring quarter. Indeed, the incense contest probably takes place in her quarter.

The text mentions that Murasaki bases her blends of incense on the ‘secret Hachijō tradition’. This refers to the recipes of a ninth-century connoisseur of incense, Prince Motoyasu,³⁹ known as the Hachijō Prince because of his residence. Motoyasu was a son of Emperor Nimmyō, another devotee of incense, and is said to have inherited many of his father’s secret recipes.⁴⁰ The *Kunshū Ruishō* lists Prince Motoyasu as a specialist in the blending of Plum Blossom, Chamberlain, and Black incense⁴¹—exactly the three kinds submitted by Murasaki.

Prince Hotaru describes Murasaki’s winning incense as *hanayaka*—‘bright, cheerful’; *imamekashi*—‘stylish, just right for the occasion’; and *sukoshi hayashi*—‘a bit tart, sharp’. All these modifiers could describe not only Murasaki’s incense, but Murasaki herself. Her personality is decidedly tart. Of all Genji’s ladies, she is probably the cleverest, the one most capable of defeating Genji in verbal duels. At one point Genji rebukes her for being too clever, and wonders why Murasaki does not model her behavior on someone like his cousin Princess Asagao.

Asagao wins the most difficult competition, that for the best Black incense. This category has the largest number of entries, submitted by three of the most admirable characters in *The Tale of Genji*. Asagao’s Black incense, sealed in an indigo jar and identified by the symbol of winter, a pine branch, is awarded first place because of two qualities: it is *kokoro nikushi*—‘elegant, enviably so’; and *shizuka nari*—‘quiet, calm, tranquil’.

Not only are these modifiers appropriate to the winter season: they too are a

³⁹ 本康

⁴⁰ Tamagami Takuya 玉上豚弥, *Genji Monogatari Hyōshaku* 源氏物語評釈, Kadokawa

Shoten, 1968, vi, p. 311.

⁴¹ Yamada, p. 290.

fine description of Asagao herself. She has led a quiet and reclusive life, first as the daughter of an imperial prince, then as the high priestess of the Kamo Shrine in Kyoto. At the time of the incense contest she is living in elegant seclusion, quite aloof from society. Her quiet and refined life has given her the finest of taste.

Genji defeats Murasaki in the autumn incense category, because his Chamberlain's incense has 'intimacy'. In the original text the word used is *namamekashi*—a word suggesting warmth, gentleness, and fullness, as well as fine breeding and a certain sexiness. Readers of *The Tale of Genji* will agree that this adjective—and scent—capture the nature of Genji himself.

The narrator of 'A Branch of Plum' expresses surprise that Genji had acquired the secret formulae for two scents dating from the time of Emperor Nimmyō. Her surprise, we are told in the *Kakaishō*,⁴² is because the formulae were not to be revealed to men. Genji's two blends were no longer secret by the time of the *Kakaishō*, however. The methods for compounding his Black and Chamberlain's incense are given in detail, together with the elegant names of the scents:

It says in the *Gōkō Hihō*:⁴³ 'For "Raven" [Black], mix together four *ryō* of aloes, two *ryō* of cloves, one *bu* of sandalwood, one *ryō* of oil of cloves (add an extra two *bu* if desired), one *bu* of musk, and one *bu* of amber.

'For "Gleanings" [Chamberlain], combine four *ryō* of aloes, two *ryō* of cloves, one *ryō* of seashells, one *ryō* of spikenard, one scant *ryō* of mature lily petals (one method adds musk, another yellow lily petals), and one *bu* of orange leaf extract.

'Mix with honey and pound three thousand times with a pestle. Warm the seashells and add them to the mixture. Coat with honey. The mixture should be yellowish-black. It must not be too black.

'These two methods are not to be transmitted to men. This is the command of the Jōwa emperor [Emperor Nimmyō]. The methods were presented by the late Shigeno no Chokushi, lady in waiting, on the third day of the Second Month in the sixth year of Engi [906].'⁴⁴

The ladies were asked to submit two kinds of incense each, but only Asagao does so. Murasaki submits three, and the other two ladies present one each. Let us examine the reasons for this.

The lady of the orange blossoms lives in the summer quarter of Genji's mansion, and, ever since her introduction in the eleventh chapter, '*Hanachirusato*' ('The Orange Blossoms'), she has been associated with summer. Hence her summer incense. Prince Hotaru describes it as *shimeyaka*, 'quiet', a word used often in describing night, or gentle rain. This brings to mind the visit Genji pays the lady in Chapter II, which takes place on a summer night, during a break in the

⁴² 河海抄, probably the most influential of the many medieval commentaries on *Genji Monogatari*; it was compiled by Yotsutsuji Yoshinari 四辻善成, 1326–1402, about 1363.

⁴³ 合香秘方, 'Secret Incense Formulae'.

⁴⁴ Tamagami Takuya, ed., *Shimeishō, Kakaishō* 崇明抄, 河海抄, Kadokawa Shoten, 1968, pp. 410–1.

constant, quiet rain. Prince Hotaru also calls her incense *natsukashi*, a word which gives a feeling of friendliness, familiarity, and attraction.

The lady of the orange blossoms is not an outgoing woman, and will go to some trouble to avoid competing with the other ladies. Hence her one incense, in an otherwise uncontested category.

The Akashi lady is quite another case. The girl over whom all the fuss is being made is her only daughter; but because the Akashi lady was born outside the limits of the capital, of noble but somewhat eccentric parents, her daughter has been adopted by Murasaki, who comes of more proper lineage. The daughter has been living in Murasaki's quarters now for several years. The Akashi lady is a proud woman. She resents Murasaki for having taken charge of her daughter, even though it is for the girl's benefit. What is more, the Akashi lady has never forgiven Murasaki for holding the highest place in Genji's affections. This is why, although the Akashi lady is the occupant of the winter quarter of Genji's mansion, and would therefore be expected to submit a winter incense, she withdraws from the competition. Rather than be defeated by her rival, she instead submits a sachet.

The 'hundred-pace' incense submitted by the Akashi lady was based, we are told in the text, on a formula by Minamoto Kintada, adapted from a blend of the 'earlier Suzaku emperor'.

Minamoto Kintada, who supplies us above with a recipe for Lotus Leaf incense, is listed in the *Kunshū Ruishō* as one of the few experts in blending superb incense for every season.⁴⁵ His recipe for 'hundred-pace' incense, however, has not come down to us. The author's 'earlier Suzaku emperor' is thought to be Emperor Uda, who reigned in the last years of the ninth century. Since Kintada served an emperor known to history as Suzaku, it seems to have been necessary to distinguish the two rulers.

The Akashi lady, a relative of the imperial family, has this famous formula in her possession. Although she does not want to risk defeat by entering the winter-incense competition, her pride dictates that her entry derive from the glorious days of incense blending. Prince Hotaru rules her sachet *kokoro okite suguretari*, 'of an unsurpassed nature', a judgment which cannot help but please the lady.

The text of 'A Branch of Plum' mentions that Genji, Murasaki, and the Akashi lady use recipes handed down from emperors, princes and courtiers of the ninth century. As the author tells us, the same traditions were subsequently taken up by a variety of people and made into something new and distinctive.

THE tradition continues to this day, but has of course undergone some changes. In the fourteenth century, the informal pastime of incense competitions, like that of tea drinking, was formalized into a Way. Just as *sadō*, 'the way of tea' or the tea ceremony, came into existence, so did *kōdō*, 'the way of incense'.

In the Heian period, as we have just seen, sizeable amounts of fragrant in-

⁴⁵ Yamada, p. 290.

redients were combined to form balls of incense. These were placed directly on the hot ashes in a censer: the heat generated from the buried charcoal seems to have burned the incense rather quickly. And although incense competitions like that in *The Tale of Genji* seem to have been one way of exhibiting good taste, the primary reason for the manufacture of incense in the Heian period was eminently practical. Incense was used daily, in order to keep rooms and clothing attractively scented, and thereby to hint subtly at a personality which remained concealed behind shutters, blinds, and curtains.

The incense ceremony which evolved in the fourteenth century contrasts sharply with its Heian predecessor. Where the Heian aesthetic stressed the colorful and the diverse in its incense, the Muromachi sought beauty in the monochrome and in simplicity. The Six Scents and their six basic ingredients were replaced by a single scent, aloes. The incense balls of the Heian period gave way to a tiny fragment of aloes burning slowly on gold or silver leaf in a ceramic brazier the size of a teacup.

The greatest difference between incense use in the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, though, was the purpose it served. The fundamental goal of the Muromachi incense competition was to discern, through the sampling of several pieces of aloes, which was the superior wood. This goal, translated into aesthetic rather than practical terms, was to 'attain, through the scent, the realm of highest knowledgeable beauty.'⁴⁶ The creation of individual combinations of incense was supplanted by the appreciation and evaluation of rare kinds of aloes.

The *kōdō* of today is much like that of the fourteenth century. Certain technological improvements have taken place: the gold or silver leaf on which the aloes rested has been replaced by a silver grille which burns the incense slowly and evenly. But the small porcelain brazier passing from hand to hand at Tennōji probably does not differ much in size and shape from those used five centuries ago; nor do the warm ashes, carefully sculpted into a cone, which cushion the grille and the aloes.

The ceremony itself is not unlike the tea ceremony. One receives the brazier from the person on the left, bows, and picks it up, turning it three times with the elbows held out at right angles to the body. Forming a funnel with the hand over the brazier, one samples the incense three times, contemplating the scent while doing so. The brazier is then turned three times and passed on, with a bow, to the next person.

Adepts of the incense ceremony are able to discern the several types of aloes on the basis of the Five Bouquets⁴⁷ (sweet, bitter, spicy, sour, and salt) and the Six Countries⁴⁸ of origin (Kyara, Rakoku [Thailand], Manaban, Manaka, Sumatora [Sumatra] and Sasora). For example, an incense named Tōdaiji after the great Nara temple is recognized as aloes from Kyara (assumed to be either Java or the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

⁴⁷ *Gomi* 五味

⁴⁸ *Rokkoku* 六国

Malay Peninsula) with a bouquet, in diminishing order, of sweet, spicy, sour, and salt.

The beginner is set a far simpler task. All that is required is that one distinguish three different scents, and remember them. *Shōchikubai*⁴⁹ is the simplest of such games.

The three scents, *Shō* (Pine), *Chiku* (Bamboo), and *Bai* (Plum) are first presented in a *tameshi*, or trial run. Each scent is identified by the master of ceremonies before it is passed on to the participants. When everyone has had an opportunity to sample the three scents, the packets containing the incense are shuffled to mix up the order. The three scents are then passed around again, and one must identify them by their characteristic odor.

This is more difficult than it may seem. One cannot rely on the memory of familiar fragrances: the scent named Pine, for instance, does not smell especially like a pine forest, nor does the Plum resemble the fragrance of a plum blossom. The scents are entrancing but abstract; they are distinct when one samples them, and have passed from memory by the second round.

Each participant had been given paper and a small writing-box before the game began; at the end of the second round, we brushed our opinions of which incense was sampled first, second, and third. Approximately twenty people took part: all but one failed to identify the scents correctly, according to the secretary. The woman who succeeded in doing so had taken lessons in *kōdō*.

Shōchikubai was succeeded by a more difficult game. The first round was again a *tameshi*: the scents passed around were named for the Three Scenic Views—Matsushima, Ama no Hashidate, and Itsukushima. But the second round included an unknown scent, called *fune*, ‘the boat’, mixed in with the previous three. When our answers had been duly recorded, the secretary announced that no one had recognized all four scents in their correct order. We were ranked according to how many scents were correctly identified. A score of three ranked one as *asagiri*, ‘morning mist’; two as *yūgiri*, ‘evening mist’; and one as *kumogiri*, ‘fog’.

There were certain similarities to the Heian incense competition—the elegance, the leisurely quality, a feeling of well-being and relaxation. But the *kōdō* of today is much more of a game, at least in its simpler aspects; it lacks the critical spirit and practicality of the incense competition in *The Tale of Genji*. In either case, however, the way of incense makes demands on a sense rarely associated with art, except the arts of cooking and wine-tasting—the sense of smell.

⁴⁹ *Shōchikubai* 松竹梅

Resource: **A Wisp of Smoke. Scent and Character in The Tale of Genji**

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Monumenta Nipponica, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1977), pp. 35-48 (14 pages)