

Book Reviews

Asia

An ethnography of fragrance: The perfumery arts of 'Adan/Lahj

By DINAH JUNG

Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011. Pp. 284. Maps, Plates, Notes, Bibliography, Appendices, Index.

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This interesting and theoretically engaged ethnography is valuable and relevant in several respects. First, in poststructural and postmodern anthropological and ethnographic analysis there has been a critical awareness of culture-bound limitations of social science paradigms based on the privileging of the visual in knowledge construction, meaning interpretation, and social practice. This bias derives from Enlightenment and positivist traditions in the Western sciences and humanities, and until recently has influenced both choice of research topic and method of analysis. In the wake of ethnographic critique over the past twenty-five years (James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing culture*, 1986; James Clifford, *The predicament of culture*, 1988; Susan Rasmussen, 'Making better scents in anthropology', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 1999; Paul Stoller, *The taste of ethnographic things*, 1989, *Sensuous scholarship*, 1997), many scholars now recognise that additional sense modalities, for example olfaction, are highly elaborated in many cultures where sense modalities are given diverse meanings and uses in various contexts, and change in meaning over time. In Europe, scent formed part of the medicine cabinet, but later became part of cosmetics, and acquired more frivolous associations, despite its partial resurgence in aromatherapy (Constance Classen 1997, 'Foundations for an anthropology of the senses', *International Social Science Journal*, 'Engendering perception', *Body and Society*, 1997; Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma*, 1994; Alain Corbin, *The foul and the fragrant*, 1986). In many parts of the world today, scent or aroma is a culturally-elaborated medium of communication and mode of aesthetic creativity.

Dinah Jung's fascinating study of the cultural, aesthetic, social, and ritual meanings and uses of perfumery in South Arabia and southern Yemen, specifically in 'Adan/Lahj, shows how the elaboration of 'natural'

scents into cultural perfumes, incense, and other aromatic forms enjoys much prestige, and carries complex meanings transcending art and pleasure (though these, too, are important). This ethnography contributes to efforts in cultural studies, Middle Eastern studies, and socio-cultural anthropology to better understand diverse aesthetic and philosophical worlds, specifically, attitudes toward scent in diverse cultural settings and changes in these attitudes over time. Jung discusses current meanings and uses of scent and the art of perfumery, and also traces transformations in this practice (as affected by changes in gendered constructs, the political economy, new environmental concerns, and popular tastes) under the successive impacts of British colonialism, postcolonial relationships in Yemen, and globalisation.

Jung's research is also timely, given the general tendency to emphasise politics, violence, and conflict in Middle Eastern studies in recent years; there is a need for more truly cultural studies of Arab-speaking and Muslim societies, in particular, their artistic and symbolic traditions. This study provides rich insights into the manufacture, uses, roles, and meanings of local perfumery (including what in English would be classified as both 'incense' and oil-based 'liquids' — though these labels do not do justice to the intricacy and vast array of local aromatic categories) in historical and contemporary perspective, and more: this author also relates perfumery culture and aesthetics to religion and ritual, gender, social stratification, politics, and globalisation, and traces perfumery transformations (in its manufacture, uses, changing forms, materials, and tastes) over different eras and in response to wider events.

Other anthropological works that mention perfumery — for example, my ethnography of Tuareg medicine women in northern Niger (*Those who touch*, 2006), with a chapter on healers' medicinal use of scent, and Janice Boddy's ethnography of female spirit possession in northern Sudan (*Wombs and alien spirits*, 1987), with a section on the relationship between incense, cologne, gender, and spirits — yield instructive comparative insights. Both these societies are somewhat similar to 'Adan/Lahj in that they are nominally Muslim, and Islam and Islamic science do indeed play a key role in the prominence of perfumery in ritual and social contexts. One must be clean and sweet-smelling before Allah/God, before entering a mosque, and while praying. Yet additional factors may also contribute to perfumery's prominence, as shown in South Arabia: namely, the presence, traditionally, of a socioeconomic elite or 'aristocracy' of ruling families whose women were until recently free from domestic and subsistence labour and were secluded inside the home, thereby enabling the development of the fine art of perfumery and also the means to profit economically

from it; ecological and commercial conditions that made available plant and animal substances for perfume manufacture; and intergenerational relationships featuring respect for the role of older women as conservators of esoteric cultural knowledge.

This book's ten chapters include a critical discussion of 'the burden of Orientalism' in outsiders' hegemonic representations of Western and Yemeni/Arabian perfumery in the opening sections, as shaped by envy, colonisation, and exploitation (pp. 2–3); a historical background on the region; and on women's worlds, in particular, women's prominence in the perfumery arts, though not much about men's worlds or their own views or uses of scent.

This latter dimension could be further developed, since gender involves both women and men, even in societies where they tend to socialise separately in public; for men also use scent, though not in identical ways to women. The author astutely analyses symbolic parallels between perfumery and cooking (pp. 170–75), and refers to Qur'anic and other holy book sources pertaining to scent. There is also a discussion of current health problems posed by the use of synthetic chemical compounds in 'modern' perfumes. Although there are notes on transliteration and translation, the book could have included a more critical discussion on the problems of translation, not solely of terminology and botanical species, but also local olfactory-related comments and imagery. In the appendices, there are comparisons of different perfumery arts and a historical chronology.

I highly recommend this book to scholars interested in aesthetics and the arts, religion and ritual, ethnographic representation, Middle Eastern studies, and gender studies. The book is also appropriate for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students in courses with a focus on expressive culture.

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China as a sea power 1127–1369: A preliminary survey of the maritime expansion and naval exploits of the Chinese people during the Southern Song and Yuan periods

By LO JUNG-PANG. Ed. and commentary by BRUCE A. ELLEMAN

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Anyone who has studied China's maritime history owes a lot to the late professor of Chinese history at UC Davis Lo Jung-Pang (1912–81) and it is