
Dinah Jung. *An Ethnography of Fragrance: the Perfumery Arts of 'Adan / Lahj*. Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts. Ed. board S. Günther, W. Kadi. Vol. 84. Leiden — Boston: Brill, 2011. 284 pp.

After such works as *The Renaissance of Islam* by Adam Metz¹ and *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* by Montgomery Watt² were published, the notion of absolute superiority of the everyday life culture of the Islamic world over their European analogues in the Middle Ages, and of the borrowing of a number of key cultural achievements by Europe became commonplace. At the same time we do not have that many researches at our disposal that would speak of historical destinies of the most important aspects of the everyday culture of the Muslim world under conditions of European civilization hegemony. The research by Dr. Dinah Jung, currently working at the University of Heidelberg (Institute of East Asian Art History, SFB Ritualdynamik) over the topic “Perfumery traditions of Asia — cultural flows and exchange”³, recently published by the Brill publishing house, belongs to this type of works. She was one of the organizers of the International Scientific Meeting “Perfumery and Ritual — The Use of Incense, Flowers, Distillates and Aromatic Objects in Asia” (University of Heidelberg, November 28—30, 2010), is involved in the research of international markets and the perfumery business and has rich field in anthropological fieldwork (West Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia). The presented work is the result of the field work in South Yemen (2002—2004). Its main purpose is the description of the perfumery arts of ‘Adan / Lahj in their cultural context and the explanation of its historical significance, development and typical peculiarities. “Oriental” perfumery tradition, which has a rich history and is represented by various cultures at the vast territories between Africa and Asia, usually was considered to be just a historical stepping stone in the evolution of the modern western perfumery art. The need for its detailed study was never consid-

ered and / or recognized. Nevertheless, researchers address the meaning of smells in the socio-cultural life more and more over the course of the last decades. According to the opinion of Claude Lévi-Strauss, “smells simultaneously belong to the natural and social worlds”⁴, therefore signs related to smells play a particular role in structuring the image of the world. Smells make up an important part of “its own” picture of the world; they have special significance in the intercultural communication and are perceived as an inalienable part of the semiotic field of a foreign culture. The study of olfactory senses, the disclosure of the fragrances’ symbolic meanings, the explanation of connections between smells and memory, intuition and imagination enable one to learn a great deal about the society as a whole. The anthropology of smell and olfaction examines four directions, which overlap in many cases: the instability of smell perception, olfactory skills, the use of smell and its representations⁵, and the study of these very aspects in the context of the Yemeni perfumery tradition underlies the work of the researcher. The difficulty of determining the olfactory phenomenon in its relation to perfumery, however, calls for the establishment of the terminological foundation for scientific discourse. Examining perfumery as a cultural craft, the goal of which is to create olfactory phenomena — “fragrances” (pp. 50—51), the author reviews the meaning of the key perfumery terms. For instance, in accordance with her vocabulary “aromatic” means “a material of potential olfactory qualities”, “perfume” — “any material which is valued specifically for the capacity of creating a fragrance with it”. And a neutral term “odour” means “the olfactory phenomenon which exists simply because of a material’s natural olfactory quality” (pp. 209—210). The anthropological approach offered by the author suggests equal attention for the common foundations, similarities and differences of cultures, and theoretical discussion of the perfumery arts as such. All of that is reflected in the structure, style and content of the reviewed book.

The main merits of this book have first of all to do with the fact that the author introduces the outcome of

¹ A. Metz, *Die Renaissance des Islams* (Heidelberg, 1922).

² W. M. Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* (Edinburgh, 1972).

³ See also: D. Jung, “The Value of Agarwood. Reflections upon its Use and Pistory in South Yemen” (Heidelberg, 2011), *Der Heidelberger Dokumentenserver — the Open Access Platform of Heidelberg University*: <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de>.

⁴ Cited from Russian edition: C. Lévi-Strauss, *Put' masok* (La Voie des masques) (Moscow, 2000), p. 163.

⁵ J. Candau, “The Olfactory Experience: Constants and Cultural Variables”, *Water Science & Technology* XLIX/9 (2004), p. 12.

her field work into the scientific cycle. It was important for her to establish contacts with people of different ages and social background, who belonged to different ethnic and religious entities. Getting acquainted with clients and professionals at the ‘Adan perfume market, she strove to find out more about perfumery materials and their characteristics. Participating in the everyday life of the local population in many of its faculties, she gained knowledge of production methods and perfume genres. Having infiltrated the “women's world” of Yemen, she purposefully collected ethnographic data, first of all in the process of personal fellowship with women. She consistently subjected her theoretic assumptions to verification, involving her informants into the research process.

Fragrances are an inalienable part of the everyday life and worldview of the Orient. The perfumery traditions outside of the West have not been thoroughly analyzed yet in the western science. In the first chapter of the book — “Perfumery” — the attention of the author is directed toward peculiarities of the western attitude for the perfumery arts of the “Oriental” cultures, which was formed in the 19th century; toward difficulties related to the examination of such sensitive phenomenon, as olfaction; toward the awakening and strengthening of the anthropologists' interest for olfactory items in the second half of the 20th century; and finally toward a rather philosophical problem of the acknowledgement of the perfumery art as an aesthetic value. The author emphasizes the important role of such notion as “fragrance images”. It was introduced for the purpose of designating the result of the olfactory perception, necessarily accompanied by the interpretation act of the olfactory phenomenon. The data collected as the result of the field work were grouped in a particular way in the form of recollections and stories, which reveal both the essential features of the perfumery tradition of ‘Adan / Laḥj, as well as underlying methodology and interpretative theorizing. These stories do not only present the historical data about the development of the perfumery art of ‘Adan / Laḥj, but also a whole number of themes directly related to this plot.

The second and third chapters — “Bilqīs” and “Royal Histories” — cover the time frame from early history up to the 19th century. Fragrances accompany ‘Adanīs / Laḥjīs in their everyday life from the moment they are born and until the very day they die; their main functions are purification and protection. The author pays special attention to the geographic and climactic conditions, the main factors defining the prosperity of the given region. On the one hand the fertile soils of Laḥj were conducive to the cultivation of aromatic plants, on the other hand the port city of ‘Adan gave an opportunity for direct connection to the world outside, and specifically to Europe, India, the Far East. From the time immemorial local people had rich varieties of perfume materials at their disposal, both local and imported, such as musk (*misk*) from the Himalaya region and agarwood (*‘ūd*) from Southeast Asia. The use of ambergris (*‘anbar*) and shell higes (*zifr*), which help to fix other fragrances, is very special for the local perfumery arts. The curious factors of the cultural identity related to perfumery are the historical phenomenon of the

Frankincense Road and the image of the mythical Yemeni ancestress, Queen Bilqīs.

Multiple occupations and immigration make it possible to characterize ‘Adan as “a melting pot of diverse cultures” (p. 59), each of which made its contribution to the development of the ‘Adanī / Laḥjī perfumery arts. The royal courts have always been conducive to the development of the trade relations and perfumery business, and patronized sciences and arts. The cultivation of various sorts of exotic redolent plants in Laḥj is related to the activities of the ‘Abdalī dynasty (r. 1728—1967) of the Sultanate of Laḥj. The concluding part of the third chapter is devoted to the person of al-Qumandān (d. 1943), the brother of the *sultān* ‘Abd al-Karīm (r. 1915—1947). He made a significant contribution not only to the development of the local agriculture, but also to the local poetic tradition, reflecting the world of Laḥj in his works, its greenery and aromatics.

The fourth and fifth chapters — “Her Achievements” and “Precious Secrecies” — are devoted to the history of the 20th century, “when “art of perfumery” in its stricter sense starts, enriching, contrasting, and emphasizing fragrance qualities through the artistic amalgamation of two or more perfumes” (p. 95). In spite of the specific kind of life of women in Southern Arabia, their accomplishments have in many ways defined the uniqueness of the local perfumery arts. Originally the production of perfumes was favourite pastime of very well educated women from noble families “in high regard for reasons of purity and cultural refinement” (p. 96). The social stratification of local women in their complementarity motivated the flowering of the perfumery art of ‘Adan / Laḥj at its new coil of its developments. Gradually more and more women got involved in the work related to perfumery. The products of more talented perfumers gained fame, but they were never referred to by their names in accordance with the traditions of ‘Adanīs / Laḥjīs. People usually spoke of their family affiliation, or their house. Perfumery was collectively practiced by women from several houses and the knowledge was passed down from mothers to daughters. The author notes the significance of special social connections, which are established between clients and “their” perfumery houses.

The make-up and manufacturing method of the production becomes a personal trade secret of the perfumer in the process of commercialization. In the fifth chapter the author narrates the story of two Muslim families of Indian origin, al-‘Aṭṭar and ‘Abd al-Nabī, which were forced to leave their motherland on account of the negative consequences related to the British intervention. They then became the main perfumery entrepreneurs in ‘Adan over the course of the following decades. They settled at Bohorā Sūq (market of the Bohorā), historically related to the Ismā‘īlī Bohorā sect. Thanks to the efforts of those two families Bohorā Sūq was the main centre of perfumery craft over the whole territory of Arabian Peninsula until the 1960s.

The infiltration of western industrial products into the perfumery market of ‘Adan was conducive to the invention of the first perfume oils based on synthetic perfume liquids as well as the invention of visual representation of

perfumery artifacts. European perfume waters stirred up significant changes in Southern Arabia: they were incredibly popular, they were used on and for every occasion and added to local perfumery compositions. The author quotes some examples of the phenomenon of aesthetic adaptation and integration of foreign perfume waters into the local perfumery culture.

The 50s and 60s of the 20th century are characterized as “golden times” in the recollections of the local population. Western brand names were represented at the local market in incredible numbers; they symbolized prestige and complemented the range of local goods. Polyphonic fragrances, composed by means of blending several olfactory notes, emerge during those times. After 1967 the political situation in the country changed cardinally, where many wealthy ‘Adanī families were forced to leave the country. The perfumery culture of ‘Adan / Lahj spread all over the Arabian Peninsula, and the centre of the perfumery business was relocated to Dubai.

The perfumery business in ‘Adan / Lahj began developing more and more among women, many of whom were forced to provide only for themselves, but also for their family members. Unusual properties of modern industrial products of the 70s inspired female perfumers to create new perfume genres. It also promoted the broadening of the perfumery community and active interaction of female masters and professional merchants at the perfumery market. In this case the author gives examples of various ancient and more modern perfume genres (*nadd*, *zarīra*, *ṭīb*, *maṭbūkh*, *bukhūr*, *majmū‘*, *akhḍarayn*) and describes the production process as well as the peculiarities of interaction between perfumers and their customers.

In the sixth and seventh chapters — “Productional attributes” and “Kitchen Art” — the author analyzes the criteria of the perfumery artefacts. Before one can assess the olfactory properties of one perfume or another, the potential customer pays attention to what it looks like visually and what its name is. The western perfumery industry gave birth to the fashion not only for beautiful poetic names of perfumes, the inspiration source for which oftentimes is the Arabic language itself, but also for their outlook. The poetic nature of the names is perceived as part of the quality of the perfume, whereas the colour and form of the packaging define the aesthetic expectations. Buyers' desire to purchase the perfume of a particular brand and with particular olfactory properties gave rise to the gigantic market of more or less ingenious forgeries, which oftentimes are bought rather consciously. Although professionals do have certain ideas about the expected results, each arrangement is unique on account of its individual combination of its components and production peculiarities.

Material properties of perfumes, revealed as the result of various examination methods acquire their significance only in fusion with ideational aspects (p. 163).

The author points out the obvious relation between culinary and perfumery arts of the Muslim Arabic world and gives examples of similar methods of preparing some local perfume genres and culinary specialties.

The eighth chapter — “Courteous Presentations” — perfumes are examined in their performative context. The sum total of very different aspects of everyday life of the ‘Adan / Lahj community creates the foundation for the emergence of perfumery. Ethical norms of Islam encourage the use of perfumes in accordance with the ideals of internal and external purity. Perfumery has always been highly valued, saved for religious holidays and various festive occasions, in order to display their hospitality and courtesy before their guests. Thereupon the author shares her observations concerning the use of incense, which were used to smoke premises and objects during religious practices, at wedding ceremonies and in the course of entertaining guests during holidays.

The ninth chapter “Pop & Smell” presents the fundamental changes, which took place in the perfumery culture within the last decades. It speaks of how the local perfumery culture managed to adapt to the new tasks of the globalism epoch. Currently ‘Adan is the market outlet for foreign companies, many of which based in the countries of the Persian Gulf by the emigrants from South Yemen. Local perfumers are forced to alter their aesthetic ideals because of inaccessibility and high prices of natural components. Cheap synthetic substitutes negatively affect the olfactory character of perfume, but may also cause substantial harm to one's health. Once a high art that required much knowledge and many years of experience now acquired bulk product traits not always of accessible quality, whereas the professionalism of perfumers is now evaluated from the standpoint of commercial success. Growing demand for perfumes and their extreme use conceived the idea that they must be produced quickly and be available at cheap costs.

In the concluding tenth chapter “A Fragrant Mirror of Culture” the author sums her research up. Aromatic substances used in the local perfumery arts are closely linked to the history of Islam in this region as well as intercontinental contacts of ‘Adan / Lahj of many centuries. Perfumery production makes it possible to assess the development of South Arabian culture from the pre-Islamic times and up to today, its interaction with other cultures and religious traditions. The author also notes the peculiarities of the historical perception of the matter of perfumery in the Islamic society, which has lived among and by means of fragrances, but has never brought them to the level of the object of theoretical speculation.

“Smell is the indicator of many processes taking place ‘within’ a human being, and yet it carries a cultural meaning”⁶. Many original texts have been preserved: about redolent gardens, about the art of production and the order of applying reconstituted oils, perfumery arrangements and refreshing rinsing, about the aromatization of the body, hair, clothing and rooms with medical goals in mind as well as with aesthetical. It is clear that the corresponding Muslim tradition, having absorbed important elements

⁶ A. I. Kostiaev, *Aromaty i zapakhi v istorii kul'tury: znaki i simvoly* (Fragrances and Smells in the History of Culture: Signs and Symbols) (Moscow, 2009), p. 7.

of the cultures of the Mediterranean, the Far and Middle East, Central Asia, India and China, is significantly more developed than its European analogues.

The author shows that the peculiarities of the modern perfumery art has not been registered in some sort of educational literature, since the knowledge has been preserved within families and has been passed on from the teacher to his apprentice. There are neither general textbooks on perfumery in Arabic language, nor are there specialized educational institutions in the Arabic world. At the same time it must be noted that several important works related to the Muslim perfumery tradition (such as al-Kindī in the 9th century, al-Bīrūnī in the 10th and 11th centuries, al-Nuwayrī and al-Dimashqī in the 13th and 14th centuries) reached our days. They were being created all over the Muslim world⁷ and their detailed analysis must become one of the major aspects of specialized study of smells in the culture of the Muslims East. There is no doubt that the studies of this type will help discover the most interesting elements of civilizational peculiarities of peoples, constituting the Muslim world, and help discover the sources of the major paradigm elements of their everyday culture.

There is a special attitude toward the Yemeni culture in the Russian Orientology of the 20th century, which is

largely related to the work of the Soviet-Yemen Complex Expedition (SOYCE). Since 1982 archaeologists and specialists in Arabic culture, ethnographers and anthropologists, epigraphists and geo-morphologists, paleobotanists and linguists, specialists in the history of architecture and philologists, employees of the largest academic, museum and university centres of the USSR

carried out the grandiose work in the complex study within the framework of the expedition — since the ancient times and up until now — the study of South Yemen and, first of all, of the most important historical and cultural regions of the Arabic East — Ḥaḍramawt⁸.

From the very beginning the expedition was conceived as one of the largest humanitarian missions of the Academy of Sciences, and there is a good number of scientists and scholars working in the largest scientific and museum centres of Russia today, whose lives and scientific career has been linked to *Arabia Felix*. The book by Dinah Jung will undoubtedly be in great demand among many specialists in various fields and living in many countries. There is no doubt about this book by Dinah Jung finding its grateful readers in Russia.

A. Kudriavtceva

⁷ See for example chapter 5 of ‘Alī Akbar Ḥusayn, *Smell in the Islamic Garden: A Study of Deccani Urdu Literary Sources* (Oxford, 2000).

⁸ For more details see http://www.kunstkamera.ru/en/temporary_exhibitions/virtual/the_land_of_incense/index_en.