

# A gift for baby Jesus

So, what is this myrrh that the Magi presented to the newborn?

By Francis Gachathi

The Bible's best-known mention of myrrh involves the three Magi offering the rare and costly gifts to the newborn Jesus. "Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." (Matthew 2:11). Myrrh is the reddish brown aromatic gum resin that exudes from incisions in the bark of *Commiphora myrrha*, a tree locally known by the Somali as didin (the tree) and malmal or molmol (the gum). The Borana call it khumbi.

*Commiphora myrrha* is a small deciduous tree, up to 5 metres tall with silvery or greyish bark peeling in papery flakes. Its branches end in a sharp spine. The bark contains a secretion, which is freely discharged when the tree is wounded or from natural fissures. The secretion flows as a pale yellow liquid, but hardens to reddish-brown, semi-transparent aromatic oily lumps of various sizes with an acrid and bitter taste.

This gum resin exudate is the renowned myrrh, an article of commerce, traded since ancient times. Remember Joseph's jealous brothers who sold him into slavery: "And looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh on their way to carry it down to Egypt." (Genesis 37:25).

Myrrh has been valued since Pharaonic times when the ancient Egyptians, who thought it essential for the proper preparation of mummies, sent expeditions to the land of Punt (Somalia) to obtain it for embalming and fumigations. It has been used throughout history for personal adornment and religious rituals. It was the primary ingredient in the holy anointing oil that God commanded Moses to make (Exodus 30:23-33).

*Commiphora myrrha* grows in drylands, characterised by hot and dry climate and low rainfall. It is found in Somalia, South West Arabia, Yemen, Djibouti, eastern Ethiopia and North Eastern Kenya. In Kenya, it occurs in Mandera and Wajir in *Acacia commiphora* bush land, on shallow sandy soil overlying limestone, 200-800 metres altitude with about 250-300 mm annual rainfall. Myrrh is a product of considerable economic importance to the local pastoralist communities.



Tapped myrrh tree in Mandera. (Photo by KEFRI)



Myrrh collected in Mandera. (Photo by KEFRI)

## Collection and trade of myrrh

Myrrh is collected after the trees are tapped. Organised groups of men called malmale (malmal collectors) do this. During the season (January-February and July-September), they move into the woodlands and live in camps where each person is allocated an area. A specially designed axe is used for tapping and collecting myrrh. A single malmale can collect up to 5 kg per day

during the peak season. Since they are in the camp throughout the tapping season, collection is a continuous process and a person can collect up to 150 kg in a month. It is collected in a tin or plastic container and stored at a collection centre in gunny bags with polythene lining to minimise loss of the volatile oil.

From the field, myrrh is transported by camels or donkeys and sold to shopkeepers in local trading centres. The local traders sell the same at a profit to gum traders who could be agents of yet other gum traders who at last re-pack the gum in fresh bags ready for export. Prices of myrrh in Wajir range between Ksh 80 – 120 per kg.

## Uses of myrrh

Locally, myrrh is mixed with charcoal to make a very durable ink used in Madrasa (Quranic schools), and burned to repel snakes and offensive insects. In human and livestock medicine, it is used to treat various ailments including wounds and boils, digestive problems, coughs, colds, eye diseases and a wide range of ulcers.

A very common local traditional use of myrrh is placing on the fontanel, the membrane space in an infant's head, to quicken hardening. Its commercial uses are mainly incense and perfumes, essential oils, cosmetics, flavours, antiseptics, astringents and other medicines. It is a common ingredient in toothpaste and mouthwash.

Like other gum-resins, myrrh falls into the category of non-wood forest products (NWFPs). These renewable resources could be exploited sustainably for household income and still conserve biological diversity and ecosystem functions while increasing overall productivity of the land. It can generate wealth and uplift the living standards of the local communities by contributing to their welfare, livelihood and development. It has potential to diversify livelihood options in drylands. One advantage of the gums and resins resources is their ability to produce marketable products in the dry season when forage is scarce, thereby offering a meaningful economic activity.

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