

A whiff of holy perfume

Frankincense is found in the drylands of north east tropical Africa

By Francis Gachathi

Frankincense and myrrh are mentioned repeatedly throughout the Holy Bible. When God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, He commanded that the holy anointing oil should contain prescribed quantities of myrrh (Exodus 30:23) while the sacred perfume or incense should contain pure frankincense (Exodus 30:34).

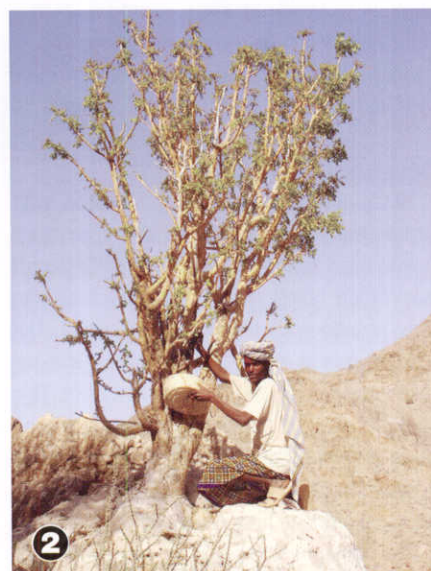
However, frankincense and myrrh are best known through the story of the Three Wise Men (Magi) delivering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem (Mathew 2:11). However, although many of us are able to recite this familiar biblical story, few are able to state what exactly frankincense or myrrh is. *Miti* issue 8 gave a brief account on myrrh. But what is frankincense?

Frankincense, also called olibanum, is the fragrant gum resin obtained by making incisions into the trunk of some trees of the genus *Boswellia* in the plant family *Burseraceae*. After the trunk is cut, aromatic sap oozes out of the tree and slowly hardens on the stem. The hardened mass is the famous frankincense that has been valued from ancient times in burnt offerings in the worship of God (Leviticus 24:7), as incense and as perfume and medicine (Song of Solomon 3:6; 4:14). This substance has been traded for over 4,000 years and today remains an important article of commerce on the international market.

There are about 17 *Boswellia* species in the drylands of northeast tropical Africa, each producing a slightly different type of frankincense. These trees are particularly found in Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Somaliland, and are well adapted to the very hot and dry conditions. The trees are generally medium-sized, with pale yellowish-brown bark with outer flaking papery layers and compound leaves, often clustered at the tips of branches.

The trees shed their leaves after the rains to limit evaporation and help them cope with the climate. Just like the related genus *Commiphora* growing in the same ecological conditions, *Boswellia* is able to perform photosynthetic activities through special layers in its bark, even in the absence of leaves. This is one of the reasons it has a papery bark that peels off. This way, the tree discards opaque layers that no longer allow light through.

The best frankincense, and probably the type delivered to baby Jesus, is derived from the tree



1. Cleaning and selecting of frankincense in a warehouse in Burao, Somaliland.

Inset: A lump of the precious commodity.

2. Collecting frankincense from *Boswellia frereana* at Hodhgoble, Somaliland.

(All photos by KEFRI)

Boswellia sacra, found in Somaliland, Yemen (Hadramaut) Oman (Dhofar) and southern Arabia. In Roman times, it was as valuable as gold.

Another high quality frankincense is obtained from *Boswellia frereana*, also found in Somaliland.

Both species occur along the coast of the Gulf of Aden, growing out of rocks, without soil, attached by a thick oval substance resembling mortar. They occur in stands known as hiji (frankincense gardens), which are jealously protected. High production areas are found in Erigavo District of Sanaag Region.

These two types of frankincense are, to the present day, still major export commodities from Somaliland and hundreds of tonnes are exported annually to the Middle East, Europe and Asian countries. It is most valued for use particularly in the Coptic, Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, in temples as well as mosques.

Local names for the tree *B. sacra* in Somaliland include lufod, mohor, mohor add, mohor madow and moxor while the frankincense is known as beeyo, a name sometimes also used for the tree. *Boswellia frereana* is called yagar or yagcar, while the frankincense is known as maidi or meydi.

Apart from its use as incense in religious ceremonies, frankincense is now widely used in the pharmaceutical, cosmetic, aromatherapy and perfumery industries. It is chewed as gum and burnt to repel mosquitoes and other insects.

The writer is a plant taxonomist at the Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI)

Email: gachathif@yahoo.com