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Manufacturing Incense in Japan

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Making Scents of Smell: Manufacturing Incense in Japan

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a hitherto unremarked aspect of cultural production – smell. It first outlines the historical background of Japanese scent culture, before moving on to describe in detail the processes by which incense is produced in Japan, and the various challenges facing a manufacturer with regard to consistency of raw materials, kneading blended materials, and drying formed incense sticks. It then concentrates on a group of incense manufacturers located on the western coast of Awaji Island in the Inland Sea of Japan, and suggests that it is access to, and successful management of, olfactory knowledge that enables a sub-contracted supplier to become independent by producing his own incense brands. The paper concludes by drawing a series of parallels between the symbolic and social uses of incense in contemporary Japanese society, and thus underscores the connection between olfaction and transition noted for many other societies.

Keyword

Incense

Production Processes

Sub-Contracting Relations

Scent Culture

Japan

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Making Scents of Smell

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One form of cultural production that does not attract much attention among those conducting research on, and writing about, creative industries is that connected with smell. Scholars have much to say about the other senses of sight (fashion, film and visual media), sound (music), even taste (*haute cuisine*), but smell – along with touch – tends to get overlooked.[1] The reasons for this, perhaps, are because smell is evanescent, lacks a coherent and standardised vocabulary with which to describe different odours, and is thus difficult to grasp as a concrete subject of study. This essay examines one particular form of olfactory cultural production – that of incense – and locates it in the cultural and economic contexts in which it is manufactured, marketed, and consumed.

As in many other countries, the Japanese use smell in all kinds of different ways: to measure time, to communicate with the dead, to distinguish among subtle differences in cuisine, and so on and so forth. That the sense of smell has played a not unimportant part in the development of Japanese culture may be seen in the fact that the Chinese character for 'self' depicts a nose (paralleled in communication when a Japanese person points to her nose when asking whether you are referring to 'herself').[2] Scents also make their appearance in the earliest chronicles (where there is mention in the *Nihon Shoki* of a log of fragrant wood being washed up on the shores of Awaji Island in the Inland Sea in 595), in 10th century Heian court society practices, in the development of *kōdō* (or the 'way of fragrance'), and in the contemporary use of scented air conditioning systems in department stores and office buildings. In crude classificatory terms, we may say that smell – apart from being biological – has material, cultural, aesthetic, spiritual and economic aspects. Although it is the last that I wish to focus on in this essay, some mention at least should be made of the first four.

The appreciation of smell throughout Japanese history has given rise to various material manifestations – both in the objects created to help such appreciation (various kinds of incense burners, bamboo receptacles and tools, as well as other fragrance-related accessories), and in designs applied to materials (such as the 52 *Genjikō* symbols used to decorate tea utensils, furniture and interior design, architecture, Nō theatre costumes, kimono, cakes, and so

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[1] But see Classen (2005) and Drobnick (2006) for general introductions to these two senses.

[2] Classen (2005: 153) notes that the Ongee of the Andaman Islands also put a finger to the tip of their noses when wishing to refer to themselves as 'me'.

on). The fact that incense materials have been expensive luxury goods imported from abroad has inflected both the craftsmanship and design of what have for the most part been high-end, high-quality commodities.

Such material manifestations are, of course, also cultural. Sandalwood from parts of Indonesia and Mysore in India has been used to make Buddhist sculptures and fans. A minute sliver of aromatic wood taken from an ancient piece of aloes, known as the *Ranjatai* and kept in the Shōsōin, is burned every New Year and during the accession ceremony of every new Japanese emperor. Buddhist monks time their prayers by means of different incenses,[3] and in the same vein, Glaser (2002: 30) notes that Japanese *geisha* used to charge their clients according to the number of incense cones burned during their stay, so that in Japan – as in other parts of east Asia – incense has been used to measure time (Bedini 1994). Traditionally, incense sticks have been burned daily in households that have ancestral shrines. Japanese also like to burn incense or fragrant woods in their homes before guests arrive (giving rise to the concept of 'lingering fragrance' [*nokoriga*]) and nowadays young people also light incense sticks, cones or coils towards the end of parties, once prepared food has been eaten. In some parts of Japan, fishmongers burn incense to ward off the smell of their (not so) fresh produce. In addition, all kinds of masking products are sold in supermarkets to get rid of smells perceived to be culturally inappropriate in some way – from lavatory cleaners to shoe and underarm deodorants. In short, the Japanese – like people all over the world – both odorise and deodorise themselves and their environment.[4]

The fact that smell is a cultural pursuit means that it also takes on spiritual and aesthetic qualities. During the Heian Period (794-1182), it was thought that the kind of incense a nobleman or woman created reflected, even enhanced (Gatten 1977: 39), his or her character in some way, so that olfaction was also a moral construction of reality (cf. Synnott 1991: 438)[5] – a belief shared by many contemporary incense blenders in Japan. In general, Japanese believe that fragrance calms the spirit (which makes sense, given that it is also used to communicate with and soothe the ancestral spirits).

What I have here termed the 'aesthetic' qualities of smell are primarily connected with the practice of *kōdō* (or 'way of fragrance'). In ancient times, people enjoyed smelling small pieces of fragrant wood, rather than 'incense' as

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[3] Every morning at nine o'clock an incense 'clock' is lit just inside the entrance to the Tōji temple in Kyoto; it burns throughout the day until approximately four in the afternoon – half an hour before the temple closes its doors to visitors – when the clock is replenished for the following morning.

[4] The fact that Japanese have traditionally described Caucasian foreigners as 'smelling of butter' (*batakusai*) can be seen as a metaphor for the social decay that they feared as a result of the arrival of Western culture (cf. Classen 1992: 135). By contrast, their perception of their own body smell as neutral can be construed as signifying 'both cleanliness and purity, and also a basic centrality and constancy' (ibid. p. 158).

[5] The link between a person's olfactory identity and moral state is found in many parts of the world, and gives rise to the idea that particular smells, whether real or alleged, indicate both moral purity and moral laxity (Largey and Watson 1972: 1021-24).

such (although kneaded incense was also made during the Heian period). This was called *monkō*, or 'listening to fragrance'.[6] Although the Japanese are not the only people in the world who 'listen to', rather than merely 'smell', a fragrance, their development of a formalised aesthetic practice in *kōdō* is probably a little special, and is certainly made much of by those writing about Japan's 'scent culture' (e.g. Katz 1996, Cobbi 2005; see also Gatten 1977: 47-8). *Kōdō* – whose components consist of 'incense blending' (*kōawase*), incense 'sniffing' (*monkō* [*bunkō*], or *kikikō*), and the incense sniffing 'party' (*kōkai, kōe* or *kikikō*) – emerged during the Muromachi Period (1336-1573) as part of Higashiyama culture and thus in tandem with the tea ceremony (*sadō*) and flower arrangement (*kadō*) (cf. Bedini 1994: 36-37). It was formalised as a 'way' during the Edo Period (1603-1868) and is now, like both the tea ceremony and flower arrangement, practised in large part by women (under the instruction of men). In certain important ways, in *kōdō*, smell bridges aesthetics and morality, as it does in other societies (Brubandt 1998: 64).

This essay's focus on the manufacture of incense is in reaction to the attention hitherto paid by scholars of Japanese culture to *kōdō*. In this context, it should be made clear that, while undoubtedly of interest, the 'way of fragrance' does *not* teach practitioners to learn and memorise all kinds of different fragrances, so that they can distinguish between, for example, cinnamon and cloves, olibanum and benzoin, sandalwood and aloes wood, and so on, in the manner necessary for an incense blender. Rather, participants train themselves to differentiate between different types of the *same* aromatic wood (aloes or *jinkō*) and a limited (up to 66) number of blended compounds. This essay, on the other hand, is concerned with more general issues surrounding the materials used in incense manufacture.

Because nobody, to my knowledge, has yet described the methods by which incense is made, this essay sets out to do so and looks at the various challenges facing an incense manufacturer in his processing of materials. At the same time, it depicts the social organization of the industry, as found on the west coast of Awaji Island, located in the straits that separate the Inland Sea of Japan from Osaka Bay and the main island of Honshū from another, Shikoku. The focus here is on sub-contracting relations and the clustering of incense manufacturers in a particular locality (cf. Clark 1979; Gerlach 1992). The question that arises here is: why do these manufacturers continue to work in the same location when there is no compelling reason for them to do so?

Finally, from this study of inter-firm relations emerges a second question relating to fragrance itself. Anthropological literature suggests that in almost all societies there is a connection between olfaction and transition (Gell 1977: 28), and that this connection can be explained at logical, psychological and sociological levels (Howes 1987). Can an analogy be drawn between primitive

[6] The idea that one can 'listen' to a scent probably derives from a Buddhist sutra, which states that the words of Buddha are as fragrant as incense. In Japan, the idea of 'spreading the aroma' (*nioigake*) of Buddha's teachings is found in the three original scriptures of the Tenrikyō sect (Sato 2005: 66-7).

societies, in which smell motivates category change, and the contemporary incense industry in Japan, which is characterised by manufacturing specialization and divided consumer markets? On the surface, such an analogy may seem far-fetched, but it is, I think, worth pursuing in my final comments to this essay.

Some General Remarks on the Use of Incense in Japan

The burning of incense in Japan is coextensive with the development of Japanese civilization. It is probable that the practice arrived in the country along with Buddhism in the mid-sixth century, during the reign of Emperor Kinmei (540-571 AD), and that – like Buddhism itself – the materials burned came from India and China and were thus extremely expensive. Incense was a luxury good, classified according to region of origin – Manaban (Malacca), Rakoku (Thailand), Kyara and Manaka (India), Sumotara (Sumatra) and Sasora (Sassori) (cf. Bedini 1994: 35).

Although manufacturers have in recent decades begun to use synthetic oils in their products, incense ingredients have consisted traditionally of two main categories: plant and animal products. The latter consisted mainly of musk deer and seashells; the former of woods and bark (aloes, sandalwood, camphor [*ryūnō*], cinnamon [*keihi*] and cloves [*chōji*]); resins (amber [*kunroku*], olibanum or frankincense [*nyūkō*], benzoin [*ansokkō*], storax [*sogokō*], and galbanum [*fushikō*]); and dried leaves, roots and flowers (like lily [*ukonkō*] and 'sweet' pine [*kanshō*]). Other materials that both in the past and now have formed the basis for incense include star anise (*dai-uikyō*), 'fragrant wood' (*mokkō*), *reiyōkō*, turmeric (*ukon*), and myrrh (*motsuyaku*) (cf. Gatten 1977: 36).[7]

Generally speaking, three types of kneaded incenses were made for three different purposes during the Heian Period: for ritual offerings (*kyūkō*); for fumigating clothes (*ekō*); and for burning in rooms (*soradakimono*). Court families handed down carefully guarded incense recipes from one generation to another, and could be recognised in public by the scents applied to their clothes through fumigation or scented bags. Indeed, their scent was almost as important as the clothes they wore (Morris 1969: 203), so that incense revealed not only one's taste, but one's personality (Gatten 1977: 39). It also disguised untoward body smells in an era when washing was not that frequent.

The threefold uses of ritual, masking and play to which incense was put in pre-modern Japan are to some extent carried across into contemporary Japanese society, and traditional incense manufacturers like Shoyeido[8] in Kyoto see themselves as supplying three rather separate markets. One consists of

[7] Stoddart (1992: 182-195) outlines the ingredients used in incense in Europe and the Middle East and notes the importance of what amount to but a handful of plant species and their products in the religious and social life of man.

[8] I use the Romanization adopted by this Kyoto-based company in its English language communications, rather than the standard Hepburn system which would read *Shōeidō*.

Buddhist temples which use a lot of incense in relation to their religious practices and which have developed their own recipes, as well as recipes in collaboration with traditional incense manufacturers in Kyoto.[9] A second, rather smaller, esoteric and specialised, market comprises those involved in the Japanese tea ceremony and practitioners of *kōdō*. And the third consists of a mass leisure market where people use incense as part of their everyday lifestyles. It is on this incense-as-leisure market that I will focus during the rest of this essay.

Incense Production

The Japanese incense market comes to slightly more than €20 million a year[10] and has been more or less steady over a long period, although it is now registering a slight fall-off. About 40 per cent of all households in Japan use incense every day for one purpose or another, primarily connected with Buddhist ancestral rites. Of the 120 or so incense manufacturers in Japan, the top four have a 60 per cent market share, with the turnover of the second largest company being less than one quarter, and the third and fourth approximately one seventh, of that of Nippon Kodo (*Nippon Kōdō*), the largest manufacturer with a 40 per cent share of the market.[11] About 70 per cent of Japan's incense is said to be manufactured by about 20 factories and workshops in Ei-ura and Ichinomiya on the northwest coast of Awaji Island, located strategically in the Inland Sea at the mouth of Osaka Bay.

Before examining the organization of incense manufacturing in more detail, it is important to understand how incense is produced and what are the challenges and issues facing manufacturers. Incense is made from a blend of powdered aromatic woods, fragrant oils, charcoal, water and *tabu*[12] tree bark, which is used as a fixative. Three factors are significant in its manufacture and contribute to the various fragrances that different incenses may have. One is the strength or weakness of a particular smell. This affects how it is appraised. A second concerns the quantity of materials used, since a minute fraction of one material may give off an extremely strong fragrance, while a large quantity of another may give off only a faint smell. The third factor is heat. There is a considerable difference between raw and heated materials, since their molecular particles fragment when burned. This means that it is difficult – if not

[9] Zen Buddhist temples tend to use aromatic woods, rather than prepared incenses.

[10] ¥30 billion (US); ¥3 billion (UK).

[11] Data supplied by Nippon Kodo, December 2005. Bedini (1994: 34) notes that "the family that served as purveyors of incense exclusively to the imperial family from the sixteenth century survives to the present as the firm on Nippon Kōdō, with branches in many cities throughout the world".

[12] A *tabu* tree is related to the camphor tree, and is found from central Kyushu southwards in Japan, as well as in Taiwan and other countries in Southeast Asia, from where it is now imported.

impossible – to judge a material's smell until it is burned. Moreover, because that smell changes during the course of burning, incense blenders have to develop an extremely detailed knowledge of the materials that they use.

Incense is made in a more or less standardised manner that, to some extent, resembles processes found in such other crafts as pottery. First, raw materials have to be purchased; then they have to be blended, kneaded, formed, dried, packaged and transported to markets that consist of contracting incense manufacturers (in the case of sub-contracted work), wholesale distributors, and retail outlets, including department stores and supermarkets, as well as specialty stores and Buddhist temples. (See *figure 1*)

Raw materials (*zairyō*) are either purchased directly from wholesalers in different parts of Southeast Asia or, in the case of smaller firms, from importers in Japan.[13] The first problem facing any independent incense manufacturer is the quality of raw materials – in particular, aromatic woods, barks, resins and plants. Precisely because Japanese incense has made use of natural materials, there is an inevitable issue of consistency,[14] for ingredients such as sandalwood, anise, clove, cinnamon, camphor and so on vary not just from one country to another, but from year to year, and thus from one supplier to another. Firms try to overcome such variations and maintain product consistency by purchasing in bulk and mixing together different years' supplies over – say – a three-year period. Bulk purchase, however, has become extremely difficult in recent years because of Indian Government restrictions on the sale of sandalwood, and international legal requirements regarding the sale of aloes and musk – which together have driven wholesale prices up astronomically and now threaten the stability of retail product sales.

The variation in natural raw materials next affects blending (*chōgō*), in that the actual quality of benzoin, camphor, or *tabu* fixing wood being used, for example, determines whether an incense will contain a little more, a little less, or the same amount as originally written down in a recipe. One such quality difference may be regional: Vietnamese aloes wood, for example, is generally quite 'sweet' (*amaime*), while that from Indonesia is more 'spicy' (*karaime*). Other differences are less predictable. The end result is that incense blenders cannot operate like Western-style perfumers using synthetic oils, even though many of them now buy such oils from suppliers and incorporate them in their products. No recipe can ever be set in stone.

Blending ingredients to make new incenses is a specialist job that is seen to be extremely important, ahead of that of the kneader. An incense blender has to imagine and work out how an incense will burn – what fragrances will be emitted when a stick is first lit, for example, and how a room will smell once the stick has finished burning, since different ingredients burn at different rates. After all, it is in the blending of materials that a product's final fragrance is

[13] Many of these importers supply the pharmaceutical, as well as incense, industries since a number of aromatic substances have medicinal properties used in Chinese health remedies.

[14] This is an issue that characterises the food and drinks industry in general and that has led to the adoption of synthetic fragrances and flavours (cf. Dorland and Rogers 1977: 109).

formed. The challenge here is to ensure that the original smell that arises during the mixing of an incense's ingredients will be the same as the smell given off by that incense when burned. In this respect, incense is seen to be very different from perfumes and eau de toilettes, which come across directly and for this reason demand great precision when their ingredients are blended.

Blenders tend to categorise incenses according to two criteria: those that use sandalwood as their base, and those that use aloes − with a tendency for the former to be preferred in spring and summer, and the latter in autumn and winter. In a traditional standard incense, between twenty and 30 different ingredients are added to these bases.

Kneading (*neri-awase*) involves a thorough mixing of an incense's aromatic ingredients with water and a fixative agent (*tabu* bark). Just how much *tabu* bark powder and water are used determines how long an incense stick will burn (the stickier the texture, the longer it lasts). Most firms add colour to their incenses; one or two do not (on the grounds that it is *smell* that customers are buying and that natural materials should not be gaudily coloured).

The uncertainty of consistency in raw materials that affects the work of the blender resurfaces in that of the kneader whose primary concern is with both the consistency of the fixative agent and of the water used to knead together the incense materials. There are three important qualities that a kneader needs to take account of: the adhesiveness or viscosity (*nebari*, *nenchakudo*); hardness (*katasa*); and softness (*yawarakasa*) of materials. Aromatic woods tend to react a little differently by season, and also vary by age, origin, and time of cutting. Thus, precisely because it is imported from different places at different times, *tabu* bark tends not to have the same glutinous consistency required to help the aromatic materials stick together. A manufacturer therefore needs to have at least three different strengths of *tabu* at hand in the kneading process, to ensure consistency.

The kneader's task is made the more difficult by the fact that pipe-supplied water tends to vary in quality, albeit very slightly, from day to day. Even such minute variations can affect the hardness, colour and final shape of an incense. This is not all. A third point of instability surrounds the workers who knead incense materials and form incense sticks, and the machinery they use for these purposes. Different workers have different ways of working. As a result, one batch of kneaded material becomes more or less hard than another batch made by a different kneader, so that adjustments to how much water is included in a recipe have to be made accordingly.

In the forming process (*seikei*), the shape (stick, spiral or cone)[15] and size (and therefore the burning time) of an incense are fixed. The standard diameter of an incense stick between five and seven millimetres, and its length 14 cm, although 7-8 cm sticks are made for home use and up to 30 or 40 cm sticks

[15] I will henceforth refer to the manufacture of incense sticks, since this forms the vast majority of current production.

(which are correspondingly thicker) to be burned in temples.[16] Kneaded materials (looking very much like clay that has been through a pug machine) are fed into a forming machine that presses the incense into long pieces of 'spaghetti'. These are then cut and trimmed and placed in two rows on corrugated board trays ready for drying. By one estimate, 80 kg of kneaded incense materials (the standard weight for most kneading machines) produces 1,200 trays, on each of which lie approximately 660 sticks. This process can be repeated up to five times in a day's work, so that a factory with a single forming machine produces 400 kg of incense a day.

Drying (*kansō*) used to be the bugbear of incense production, since the air has to be of the right temperature and humidity to prevent the sticks from warping. Thus, direct sunlight was avoided as the trays of incense, stacked as many as 50 high on trolleys, were turned every so often (as in drying pots) to facilitate equal drying for at least one week (and up to three weeks or more during the humid rainy season).[17] Nowadays drying takes place in specially ventilated rooms where fans control the temperature (approximately 22° centigrade) and enable sticks to reach the required seven per cent humidity within 24 hours. Nevertheless, to achieve perfect results, the trays of sticks need to be rotated at regular intervals so that they are now close to, now further from, the ventilating fans in the drying room.

The incense sticks are then taken to the packing room where teams of women workers sort, weigh, wrap and box them (collectively termed as *kessoku*). Incense is sold by weight – from 25 grams upwards (e.g. 35, 60, 80 up to 500 grams). Much of this is sold loose in boxes, although some is wrapped in small cylindrical bundles before being boxed. Packaging is used both to protect fragile incense sticks from breaking and to provide some sort of linguistic and colour-coded guide to the scent of a box's contents – in other words, to help brand a product. Finished incenses are then shipped by truck to their destinations.

Manufacturing Clusters?

As a generalization, we can say that incense manufacturers defy generalization. At one end of the continuum they employ several dozen, even hundreds, of people and have adopted fully automated production methods that make use of extremely high-tech equipment (some of which is patented). At the other, we find family firms employing perhaps one man to help operate basic machinery and a couple of women to sort, wrap and pack the incense once it is ready to leave the factory. Two or three companies located in Kyoto and Sakai have been

[16] Different Buddhist sects prefer different lengths, according to the different times taken in reciting their sutras and prayers.

[17] In the old days, sticks were laid to dry on wooden trays. In the 1980s, a manufacturer in Osaka realised that corrugated board would facilitate the drying process because it allowed air to pass immediately under the incense sticks. This innovation was quickly adopted by other manufacturers and is used by most firms today.

in business for more than three centuries; others in Ichinomiya or Ei-ura for just a few years; most for several decades. Some are wholly independent and introduce their own products on the market; others are subcontracting firms that manufacture a single product only from blended materials supplied by a parent company which thus controls the formation of a fragrance and the sale of the finished incense product; yet others act as suppliers, while also producing their own incense brands.

To those who know how the Japanese company functions, the fact that some incense manufacturers farm out some aspects of their production should come as no surprise. As Rodney Clark (1979: 63) has noted: 'activities ranging from gathering raw materials, refining them, turning them into parts, assembling components, marketing the product and carrying it to the customer, may in Japan all be undertaken by separate companies, specialized in a particular task.' In the manufacture of incense, kneading of materials may be one such task; forming another; packaging yet another. Some companies may be sub-contracted to carry out the first and second tasks, but not the third (which a large firm might see as an opportunity for quality control). Alternatively, they may do the second and third, but not the first, stages of production. Very occasionally, they will do all three. The only task that seems to be kept from suppliers is the blending of materials, since it is this specialised knowledge that allows a firm to become independent.

So, as is customary in Japanese economic organization, the manufacture of incense is marked by 'industrial gradation' (Clark 1979: 64-73). Nippon Kodo, Shoyeido and Gyokushodo (all located outside Awaji) are clearly − in their different ways − companies 'of the first water' (*ichiryū*). Baikundō, Daihatsu and Kunjudō, which are located in Ichinomiya and market their own incense brands, are 'of the second water' (*niryū*). Smaller firms like Nihon Senkō and Kōgyokudō, which are primarily or exclusively supplying incense under contract to larger firms, are 'of the third water' (*sanryū*). Such vertical differentiation is akin to the *A List/B List* property of creative industries noted by Caves (2000: 7-8), but extends beyond skills *per se* to market share, sales and revenue, number of employees, educational background of senior management, and so on – thereby encompassing both symbolic and economic capital.

Apart from encouraging workforce homogeneity, less emphasis on financial management, and considerable interdependence (Clark 1979: 63-64), sub-contracting arrangements tend to encourage firms to cluster geographically in particular areas. Currently, about 70 per cent of Japan's incense production goes on in Ichinomiya and Ei-ura, which together constitute a small township on the west coast of Awaji Island, in the Inland Sea near the city of Kobe. Remnants of an older concentration of manufacturers can be found in Sakai, the old port of Osaka, where between 60 and 70 firms were making incense and together supplied 70 per cent of the Japanese population's needs until the Pacific War. This manufacturing cluster arose in pre-modern times because of Sakai's strategic position as a port for aromatic woods that form the raw materials for both Chinese medicine and incense. Moreover, by being grouped

together in this way, the incense makers' cooperative in Sakai was also able to control the flow of products throughout Japan during pre-modern times.

Although the beginnings of how Awaji Island became an incense manufacturing cluster can be explained, why it should continue to be so is less clear. It was from Sakai that Awaji fishermen originally learned how to make incense in or around 1850, as a means towards earning a living during the winter months when rough seas prevented their fishing boats from leaving harbour. In these early years, Awaji incense makers did not produce their own products, but made basic cedar needle incenses which they would ship loose to incense firms in Sakai on the other side of Osaka Bay (Ichinomiya Kyōiku I'inkai 1989: 19). In other words, it would seem that from the start sub-contracting relations existed between Awaji and Sakai incense manufacturers. In this case, however, the cluster emerged initially not because of islanders' access to raw materials as such, but because they were shipping wholesalers who took advantage of the fact that they were transporting *tabu* tree bark – the fixing agent used in incense manufacture – from Kyushu to Sakai, to first learn about, and then start up their own, incense production. In this they were helped by the 'defection' of a handful of Sakai incense workers who moved to Awaji for higher wages, but they were also able to use their own fishing boats to look for, find and ship home the raw materials required. This enabled at least fifteen manufacturers to establish themselves in and around Ei-ura between 1870 and 1900 (Ichinomiya Kyōiku I'inkai 1989: 18-20).

There were, however, seemingly marked differences among them during these early decades of development. By the late 1870s one manufacturer was buying up the produce of others, labelling it as a single product, and shipping it on his own boat down to Kyushu at the western end of the Inland Sea. In other words, local producers were allowing one of their number to brand and sell their produce as his own. Favourable economic conditions induced by the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars around the turn of the 19th century then allowed other manufacturers to introduce their own product labels as the mechanisation of machinery hitherto powered by foot enabled them to embark on limited mass production (Ichinomiya Kyōiku I'inkai 1989: 19-20).

During the latter part of the Taishō Period (1912-1926), two rather different marketing strategies emerged. Some manufacturers started to use fragrance in their incenses for the first time as they aimed at an up-market clientele. Others saw an opportunity to use the new technology to make mosquito repellent incense coils for mass consumption. It was for the latter that Ei-ura incense duly became well known throughout Japan.

These different strategies would seem to reflect a form of vertical production, since fragrant incenses were – and still are – deemed 'superior' to mosquito coils (because of the specialised knowledge required to blend olfactory materials). However, such superiority was clearly limited. In the following years leading up to the Pacific War, manufacturers began to supply Osaka and Kobe retailers with branded goods whose labels had been provided by the retailers, so that many of them failed to maintain their identity and

establish independence in the search for market openings (Ichinomiya Kyōiku I'inkai 1971: 21-23).[18]

Awaji really came into its own as a manufacturing centre during the years following the end of the Pacific War, mainly because the city of Sakai had been flattened by Allied bombing and a number of Sakai firms re-established themselves on the island. There were two main reasons for this move away from Osaka's port city: space and ease of transportation. In the first place, land on Awaji was considerably cheaper than in Sakai and it was possible to purchase comparatively large areas for a reasonable price and set up a factory thereon, with sufficient room for drying and storing produce. Moreover, people lived in fairly large farmhouses, which enabled the practice of *naishoku* piecework for packaging incense. Secondly, it was comparatively easy for manufacturers to transport their incense materials around the island.

This latter point was crucial to the development of Ei-ura and neighbouring Ichinomiya. The fact that transportation was quick meant that manufacturers could sub-contract parts of the manufacturing process to smaller concerns without fear of delays. Moreover, they could also, if they wished, outsource finished incense to be wrapped and packaged at home by women seeking to make pocket money to supplement their household income. There were no hold-ups in production. They were also located within easy striking distance of the major port cities of Kobe and Osaka, as well as of the island of Kyushu at the far end of the Inland Sea.

But what advantages have there been to continued clustering? There is a Hyōgo Prefectural Incense Cooperative (*Hyōgoken Senkō Kyōdō Kumiai*) comprising 16 firms in Awaji, but the latter have not cooperated in any of the main tasks of incense manufacture: purchase of raw materials; kneading of materials; forming; drying; packaging; distribution or sales. Awaji manufacturers obtain their aromatic woods, resins, oils and so on from a wide variety of sources – all of them in Japan and mostly in and around Osaka (unlike some larger firms which go to Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Vietnam and India to purchase materials). There is also no coordinated buying, and firms buy primarily for immediate use, rather than for stock.[19] As we have seen, they separate out manufacturing processes. Each firm also distributes its products along different wholesale and retail routes to different parts of Japan. There has been no coordinated selling.[20] As one manufacturer remarked: 'If vertical relations between manufacturers and their suppliers are marked by

[18] Exempt from Government rationing of materials during the war itself (since the incense produced was primarily for use in household ancestral rites), manufacturers were able to continue production although they met with some difficulty in distribution towards the end of the war.

[19] There is the occasional exception. One larger manufacturer in Awaji proudly showed me his stock of sandalwood, but for quantity it could not begin to compare with the materials stored by firms like Shoyeido and Nihon Kōdō.

[20] A recent move – described as a 'one off' – has seen members of the incense cooperative try to market 'Awaji Island incense' in France, as part of a 'Japan Brand' initiative by the former Ministry of Trade and Industry to encourage the marketing of Japanese local products abroad.

cooperation; those between different firms here in Awaji are marked by competition.' In other words, there is greater cooperation between firms in Awaji and Sakai than there is on Awaji Island itself.

One interesting point to emerge in considering why manufacturers continue to outsource to smaller concerns around them on the island concerns land holdings. Most of those living in Ei-ura have always split up their own production processes because they have rarely had access to sufficient land to manufacture everything in one place. As one man kindly walked me through the narrow zig-zag of streets making up the fishing village of Ei-ura, he showed me first his raw materials store room and kneading machine next door, then two other adjacent buildings five minutes away where he formed and dried his incense, and finally the front part of his home round the corner, which also acted as his office, and where he, his wife and two other women sorted and packed finished incense into boxes that were then ready for delivery. This distribution of separated tasks around the village was characteristic of even the largest firm operating there, so that almost all firms seemed to store and knead materials in one location, form and dry them in another, and sometimes pack them in yet a third. Viewed in this light, one might say that sub-contracting is merely a social mirror of practices enforced by traditional landholding patterns. If you are obliged anyway to split up your production processes because there is no room for everything to be housed together, why not also farm out those processes that you yourself, for one reason or another, do not particularly wish to do?

Marketing Incense

As hinted above, the sole route by which an incense manufacturer can become independent of sub-contracting arrangements and/or wholesaler relations is by putting a series of new products on the market. This enables him to produce his own, rather than rely on orders to make some other firm's, incenses and to sell directly to retail outlets rather than to wholesalers or large scale (*ōte*) manufacturers. To become independent, the head of a firm needs to have 'guts', as well as 'pride',[21] in addition to thinking strategically, knowing the incense market, and being skilled enough in his craft to be able to make new fragrances that work.

Knowledge of the market is, of course, crucial and it is the strategic ability to spot an opportunity that has enabled some Awaji firms to become more or less independent and thereby shift from being 'of the third water' to joining the ranks of those 'of the second water'. As intimated earlier, during Japan's pre-modern period, incense was marketed primarily to two groups: Buddhist temples, and tea masters and *kōdō* aficionados. The leisure market as such did not exist. Manufacturers in Awaji initially produced standard pine needle-smelling incenses for burning in connection with Buddhist rituals. However, they soon learned that there were two seasons during which people burned a lot of incense − during the *obon* ancestors festival and at the New Year − and that other periods during the year could be extremely slack in terms of demand. This led to manufacturers' doing two things. First, they evened out their production over the year in order to meet excessive demand during the mid-summer and year-end festivals; second, they began to explore the possibilities of making non-Buddhist-related incenses with a variety of fragrant oils.

During the two decades leading up to and following the Pacific War, leisure-related fragrant incenses amounted to no more than 40 per cent of total production. From the beginning of the 1970s, however, there was a marked increase in demand for scented products, so that by 1982 Awaji manufacturers were producing eight times more fragrant incense than they had done in 1965 (and not *that* much less Buddhist-related incense). In less than twenty years, the ratio of Buddhist- to leisure-related products had shifted from 62:38 to 7:97 (Ichinomiya Kyōiku I'inkai 1989: 26-27). It was in response to this marked change in consumer demand that some firms on Awaji were able to successfully introduce new products and move out of the sub-contracting relations to which they had hitherto been tied.

How was this done? It seems that most manufacturers on Awaji, even those that are primarily or exclusively suppliers, have *some* incense recipes to hand − either their own, or handed down through generations. This provides those willing to take a risk and experiment with new fragrances with some basic principles on which to work, although, because of changing tastes in the market over the years (especially the recent trend away from strong-smelling incenses), many of these old recipes do not make successful products.

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[21] My Japanese informants used these English words.

In order to come up with a new product, an incense manufacturer needs to take into consideration the following factors: price, concept and image. The importance attached to each varies according to which end of the continuum a firm occupies. An incense manufacturer's decision to start with a product concept or with price depends very much on the size and stability of his firm, together with the quality of goods he markets. Smaller companies manufacturing lower-end products, like those on Awaji, tend to use price as their initial guideline; larger firms producing high-end incenses tend to start with a product concept.

The reason for this is fairly clear. The proportion of expensive aromatic materials used with the *tabu* fixative determines the price of a particular incense product. This means that, when a manufacturer decides to pitch a new product at a price that is between two well-selling ranges, he knows whether he can use a lot, or just a little, of a particularly expensive material like aloes or sandalwood, and what he must do to make up for any shortfall. Price thus comes to determine, to some extent at least, not just which materials, but how much of them, can be used in a new product. The incense blender then proceeds to work within these financial and material constraints. It is the reliance on price, as opposed to concept and image, which can be said to separate firms 'of the second water' from those of the first.

As noted above, in order to introduce new products, manufacturers have to know their markets. The largest of these – constituting about 80 per cent of total production in Japan – is the leisure market, which has continued to grow during the past three and a half decades. One challenge in the development of this leisure market has been to overcome younger Japanese people's built-in aversion to incense used in Buddhist rites. One way to do this has been to use the word *o-senkō* (fragrant incense) to describe leisure-related 'modern' incenses, rather than the old word *o-kō*, which has connotations of strong-smelling plain incense burned in temples and at ancestral shrines. Another has been to develop incense holders that allow an incense stick to burn at an angle, rather than vertically as in the case of *o-kō*. A third has been to develop new fragrant products that better fit into contemporary Japanese people's lifestyles. This means introducing new synthetic materials that smell rather differently from traditional ingredients like aloes and sandalwood (although these tend to be included still in the incense base), and to come up with smokeless incenses that can be better used in modern, more air-tight and less spacious living conditions. As part of this move to new products, manufacturers have also introduced different stick lengths and widths, and make sure to colour them in ways that often reflect their olfactory content (mauve for lavender, pink for rose, and so on).

To be able to come up with products that will sell and thereby enable an incense manufacturer to become independent of sub-contracting relations, he has to take account of all the variables (outlined earlier in this essay) that come into play during the production process. Most importantly, he needs to understand which materials go best with which, and in what order to blend them. Some − like cloves and benzoin, for example − have to be separated

entirely, with one being added at the beginning and the other at the end of the blending process. Finally, he needs to be able to take into account the relative strength of each oil, resin, wood or plant and work out how much of one material should be mixed with how much of another, in such a way that the finished recipe provides a balanced and pleasing smell. The man (and it almost invariably is a man, in my experience, who is in ultimate charge of incense production) who can do all this, and who can then package, brand and market his products successfully is a man who will be able to take his sub-contracting small firm up the gradation of the incense industry to become a company 'of the first water'.

Concluding Transformations

How are we to make 'scents' of this fieldwork material? The description I have provided about the manufacturing of incense has been down to earth and practical. Yet those scholars before me who have written about the roles of smell in different societies have commented on its ambiguity (Rasmussen 1999), magical (as well as seductive) properties (Gell 1977, Le Guérer 1992: 3-16), transformative symbolism (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994), on how it mediates social action (Synnott 1991), and on how it acts as a general guide to issues of identity, difference (Classen 1992), morality, power and cosmology (Brubandt 1998, Pandya 1993: esp. 44-69). On the surface, at least, such interpretations of the role of smell in society seem out of place in this discussion of incense in Japan, but maybe it is now time to take a stab at 'sniffing things out' (Rasmussen 1999: 70) of the material presented. A few flights of olfactory fancy are in order as I try to reconcile processes of production with those of consumption. Let us try, at least, to be 'creative' when talking about a 'creative' industry.

During the course of this essay, I have noted a number of things pertaining to the manufacturing and marketing of incenses in Japan. One of these has been the existence of sub-contracting relationships in production. Another has been the shift from a Buddhist-related to private leisure incense market during the course of the past few decades. In passing, I also noted that traditional land tenure patterns in somewhere like Ei-ura tended to favour sub-contracting relationships, since it was virtually impossible for an incense manufacturer to carry out *all* processes of production in a single location. It is now time to try to link these disparate observations into a more coherent whole.

Traditionally, incense was used in Buddhist rites − in temples, at funerals, and before household ancestral shrines. The ultimate purpose of these rituals has been to transform the spirit of the dead into an ancestral spirit or god (Smith 1974: 12, 72).[22] At the same time, incense is itself transformed through

[22] In Suye Mura, in the 1930s, participants in a funeral held bunches of burning incense to overcome the 'distinct odour' of the corpse (Embree 1939: 216). Hendry (1995: 144) reports that burning incense is passed around at a funeral so that those present can 'add a pinch to the fire

burning[23] − from hardened substance to aroma and thence to ash. There is thus a parallel between the act (transformation of material incense into immaterial fragrance) and its intention (transformation of the material dead into an immaterial god).

But an ancestral spirit, traditionally, has been a mark of the household as the primary organizational form in Japanese society, so that burning *o-kō* incense has been a *household* − rather than individual or family − act (although personal emotions naturally come into play when praying to particular dead).[24] Nowadays, however, comparatively few households in urban Japan have either their own ancestral shrines or ancestors to pray to. Thus, when contemporary younger Japanese start burning fragrant incenses for themselves and friends, instead of for their ancestors, they are revealing, albeit indirectly, a new transformation: that of the traditional Japanese household to a modern Japanese *family* in which personal preferences tend to prevail over collective interests. At the same time, the burning of incense creates a 'we-group' feeling, as participants share a common experience that is beyond adequate linguistic description (cf. Sperber 1975: 115-6).[25]

Another way of expressing this transformation is to say that contemporary Japanese are shifting from a relation in which they are controlled by household norms to one in which − to some extent at least − they control their interaction with their families. This transformation from the honouring the dead to honouring the living is clearly signalled in young people's shift from *o-kō* Buddhist to *o-senkō* leisure incense usage.

The transition is also indirectly evident in land holding patterns. Traditionally, the dispersal of plots of household land in Ei-ura meant that production processes were carried out in different and separate places. Nowadays, large firms are able to purchase large plots of land outside the old fishing village and so concentrate all their manufacturing processes in one place. In this way, they are also able to control the extent to which they do, or do not, make use of and interact with suppliers.

At the same time, it is knowledge of the production of fragrance or smell that enables an incense manufacturer to transform his firm from being a mere supplier into one that can make and market his own incense brands. In other

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as a token of farewell.' The Ongee of the Andaman Islands believe that spirits can only be reborn by absorbing the smells of the living (Pandya 1993).

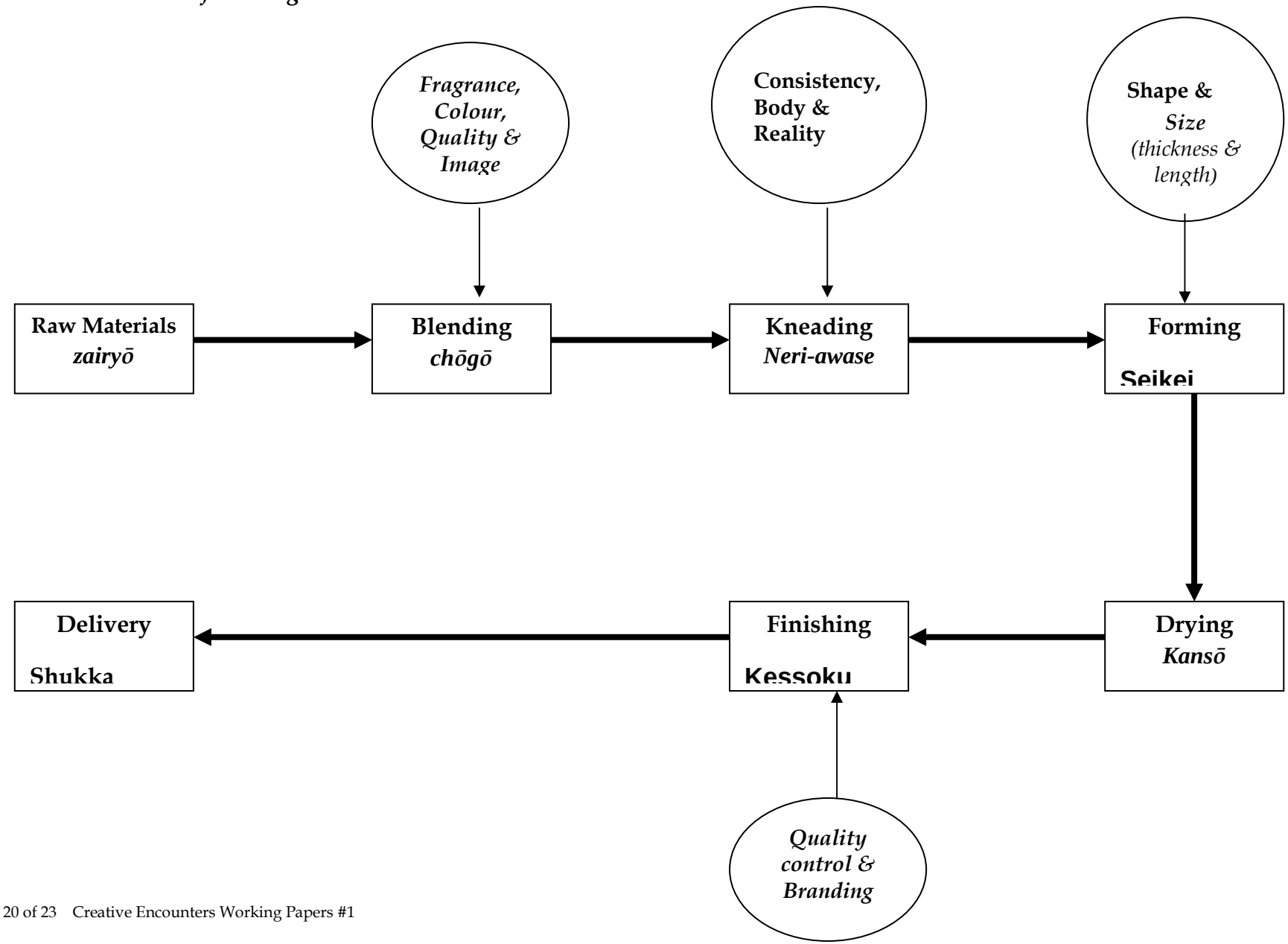
[23] This 'burning through' or 'burning completely' is, of course, the origin of the word *perfume*.

[24] It seems that nowadays quite a lot of people burn personalised incenses at Buddhist altars – such as a coffee incense for a departed family member who was very fond of coffee during his or her lifetime.

[25] Although, in Western societies, perfumes are used to enhance *sexual* identification, this is not so of incense usage where the management of an olfactory impression is more a matter of lifestyle and thus of *social* identification (cf. Largey and Watson 1972: 1030-31).

words, the transformations enacted through the relationship between incense use, smell and *symbolic* change are repeated at the level of incense production, fragrance and *social* change. Thus does the manufacture and use of fragrance in Japan epitomise the near universal connection between olfaction and transition outlined by David Howes (1987).

Figure 1: Incense Manufacturing Process Flow Chart



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