

# Camphor and Metaphor

Dana Paxson

2023

## Openings

One single word can offer its reader or hearer a glimpse through a portal into an entire world. Usually this fleeting vision is an unexpected event, arriving like an uninvited guest in our senses and our minds when we were gliding easily through some text or speech with our anticipatory intuition prepared for something else altogether, something we have come to comprehend with ease and familiarity.

Not with a new sign, a new term, a new idea wrapped in a word we thought we knew. Abruptly we confront this oddly-costumed presence at our mind's door in some confusion, and only after considerable dithering, credential-checking, hemming and hawing, internal debate, and urgent research do we offer the new guest our hospitality. It is at that moment that this apparent guest reveals that we are not as much the givers of hospitality as we are its receivers. Our guest is in fact our host, welcoming us in a realm of meanings new to us.

The word 'camphor', which many of us associate with nothing more than the smell of mothball insecticides, is one such arrival in certain contexts, awakening in readers of those contexts an awareness or consciousness at an elevated tier of meaning. The history of the human embrace of camphor is long and rich. Drawing upon both history and the most-sacred Writings of our modern existence, we extend our glimpse from the physical realm into a much-greater realm of elevated human experience.

## Quotes on Physical Meanings

To give ourselves a starting point for this crossing of the bridge of meaning, here is a basic description of the chemical identified as camphor in our everyday world:

*Camphor is a waxy, flammable, white or transparent solid with a strong aroma. It is a terpenoid with the chemical formula  $C_{10}H_{16}O$ . It is found in the wood of the camphor laurel (*Cinnamomum camphora*), a large evergreen tree found in Asia (particularly in Sumatra and Borneo islands, Indonesia) and also of the unrelated kapur tree, a tall timber tree from the same region. It also occurs in some other related trees in the laurel family, notably *Ocotea usambarensis*. The oil in rosemary leaves (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), in the mint family, contains 10 to 20% camphor, while camphorweed (*Heterotheca*) only contains some 5%. Camphor can also be synthetically produced*

*from oil of turpentine. It is used for its scent, as an ingredient in cooking (mainly in India), as an embalming fluid, for medicinal purposes, and in religious ceremonies. A major source of camphor in Asia is camphor basil (the parent of African blue basil).<sup>1</sup>*

The literature on the material substance of camphor is extensive, fascinating, cautionary, contradictory, and rich in detail in everything from its natural and artificial sources to its applications in many cultures. References to it in religious scriptures, as mentioned above, attest to its significant place in human experience. Its uses are many: in embalming fluid, in explosives, in insect repellants, in food flavorings, in religious ceremonies, and in medicinal applications.<sup>2</sup>

Camphor from the camphor laurel tree and the kapur tree has been in use medically, in foods, and in religious ceremonies from antiquity, notably in the Vedic period in India between 1500 and 500 BCE.

Camphor occurs naturally at various levels in many herbs used in cooking, including basil (especially African basil), rosemary, marjoram, sage, bay leaves, tarragon, and coriander.<sup>3</sup> The camphor component amplifies both the sweetness and the pungency (or bitterness) of the foods or beverages in which it appears. Many Indian dishes, particularly desserts, incorporate it as a flavoring.

*In ancient and medieval Europe, camphor was used as an ingredient in sweets. It was used in a wide variety of both savory and sweet dishes in medieval Arabic language cookbooks, such as *al-Kitab al-Ṭabikh* compiled by *ibn Sayyâr al-Warrâq* in the 10th century,<sup>4</sup> and an anonymous Andalusian cookbook of the 13th century.<sup>5</sup> It also appears in sweet and savory dishes in a book written in the late 15th century for the sultans of Mandu, the *Ni'matnama*.<sup>6, 7</sup>*

Camphor finds numerous medical uses: as a mild analgesic, as a topical rubefacient (dilating skin capillaries and improving blood circulation to the area), as a counterirritant and itch reliever, and as an inhalant to improve respiratory function. It can be taken orally, but is highly toxic in large doses. It excites the central nervous system, at small

---

<sup>1</sup> From <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camphor>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Reliable references to camphor's natural sources are too numerous to list here. Any online search for camphor and any of the herbs listed will demonstrate the point.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Nasrallah, Nawal (2007). *Annals of the Caliphs' Kitchens: Ibn Sayyâr al-Warrâq's Tenth-century Baghdadi Cookbook. Islamic History and Civilization*, 70. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. ISBN 978-0-415-35059-4.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from *An Anonymous Andalusian cookbook of the 13th century*, translated from the original Arabic by Charles Perry.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Titley, Norah M. (2004). *The Ni'matnama Manuscript of the Sultans of Mandu: The Sultan's Book of Delights*. Routledge Studies in South Asia. London, UK: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-35059-4.

<sup>7</sup> Passage and citations taken from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camphor>.

doses creating feelings of warmth and comfort in the stomach, but at large doses causing seizures and even death.

### Quotes on Elevated Meanings

Now we look outward across the bridge of meaning to see where it may be leading us. Here are some passages offering elevated usages of the term ‘camphor’, first a passage from the Qur’án of Muhammad, and then two from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh:

*In a right way have we guided him, be he thankful or ungrateful.  
For the Infidels we have got ready chains and collars and flaming  
fire.  
But a wine cup tempered at the camphor fountain the just shall  
quaff:  
Fount whence the servants of God shall drink, and guide by  
channels from place to place;  
They who fulfilled their vows, and feared the day whose woes will  
spread far and wide;  
Who though longing for it themselves, bestowed their food on the  
poor and the orphan and the captive:  
‘We feed you for the sake of God: we seek from you neither  
recompense nor thanks:  
A stern and calamitous day dread we from our Lord.’<sup>8 9</sup>*

Bahá’u’lláh, the Manifestation of God in our time, authenticates through His own authority the mentions of camphor in the Qur’án and its outflow of traditions:

*He who hath attained this station is sanctified from all that pertaineth to the world. Wherefore, if those who have come to the sea of His presence are found to possess none of the limited things of this perishable world, whether it be outer wealth or personal opinions, it mattereth not. For whatever the creatures have is limited by their own limits, and whatever the True One hath is sanctified therefrom; this utterance must be deeply pondered that its purport may be clear. “Verily the righteous shall drink of a winecup tempered at the camphor fountain.” If the interpretation of “camphor” become known, the true intention will be evident. This state is that poverty of which it is said, ‘Poverty is My glory.’<sup>10</sup>*

---

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad, *The Qur’án*, Sura 76:5 --MAN [LII.] (tr. Rodwell).

<sup>9</sup> An extensive article on this mention can be found at <https://indomedieval.medium.com/camphor-in-the-qur%C4%81n-8201083b17f6>.

<sup>10</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, Seven Valleys, The Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness, 3d para. This Valley is the last in the human spiritual journey, that condition described as “*dying from self and the living in God, being poor in self and rich in the Desired One.*”

*The Apostle of God—may the blessings of God and His salutations be upon Him—is reported to have said: ‘Blessed the man that hath visited ‘Akká, and blessed he that hath visited the visitor of ‘Akká. Blessed the one that hath drunk from the Spring of the Cow and washed in its waters, for the black-eyed damsels quaff the camphor in Paradise, which hath come from the Spring of the Cow, and from the Spring of Salván (Siloam), and the Well of Zamzam. Well is it with him that hath drunk from these springs, and washed in their waters, for God hath forbidden the fire of hell to touch him and his body on the Day of Resurrection.’<sup>11</sup>*

The Bahá’í Writings make frequent mention of the ‘fountain’ and the “camphor fountain”.<sup>12</sup>

### **Onto the Bridge of Meaning**

The use of the term ‘camphor’ in religious writings as offered here appears to draw on the positive aspects of the physical experience of its effects, most particularly the excitation effect and its concomitant warmth and comfort. In order to grasp more fully the richer meanings in these writings concerning camphor, one must examine the metaphorical connections between the mundane and the religious usages.

In innumerable poetic and religious works, metaphor serves as a primary conduit from mundane experience toward transcendence of thought and feeling beyond the possibilities of the everyday. Naturally the reader of such works begins with the mundane level of the text in order to follow the metaphorical conduit to some higher, otherwise-inaccessible meaning. In references to camphor as in the Qur’án, in the Writings of the Báb, or in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, the reader often begins with the beneficial effects for which camphor is known in our everyday experience: taste enhancement, cognitive elevation, healing, and soothing.

In order to better comprehend the metaphorical connections bridging from mundane meaning to higher significances, one turns to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words:

*For physical things are signs and imprints of spiritual things; every lower thing is an image and counterpart of a higher thing. Nay, earthly and heavenly, material and spiritual, accidental and essential, particular and universal, structure and foundation, appearance and reality and the essence of all things, both inward and outward -- all of these are connected one with another and are interrelated in such a manner that you will find that drops are patterned after seas, and that atoms are structured after suns in proportion to their capacities and potentialities. For particulars in relation to what*

---

<sup>11</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, from final pages.

<sup>12</sup> See Mark A. Foster, *Camphor Fountain: Compilation and Commentary*, which lists both Bahá’í and Islamic sources and uses of the term. It is at: [https://bahai-library.com/foster\\_camphor\\_fountain](https://bahai-library.com/foster_camphor_fountain).

*is below them are universals, and what are great universals in the sight of those whose eyes are veiled are in fact particulars in relation to the realities and beings which are superior to them...*<sup>13</sup>

The opening of this passage suggests to us that the things of our mundane existence are signs, imprints, images of corresponding things of our inner, spiritual existence. Due to our material beginnings and enduring bonds with this physical existence, we start by seeing the correspondence upside down: to us, the reality seems to be the physical, mundane world, while the derived, dependent ideas seem less meaningful. Which is the reality, and which is the sign or image? The question brings to mind the story of Plato's Cave, in which the experience of the shadows seems the reality to the dwellers of the cave, while the reality is in truth the unseen entities casting those shadows.

Thus 'camphor', as we understand the term in our world, can be understood as merely a sign, an image, a token, for the divine bestowals on the elevated soul. To gain appreciation for the true camphor of the divine realm requires that we detach our attention from the detailed, mundane associations of the term in this material world, gather potential elevated meanings from a harmonized sense of all of these mundane aspects, and grasp thereby some insight into the inner meanings of spiritual life that look toward the incomprehensible joy of drinking from "a wine cup tempered at the camphor fountain".

To approach such insight is the work of a lifetime, akin to traveling a long and narrow bridge, spanning above a depthless abyss, from our everyday beginnings to our spiritual uplifting. We are born, live, and die in that great journey. In this life there is always bridge ahead of us, always more to learn.

A radiant, ethereal expression appears in one of the quotations offered earlier: *'the black-eyed damsels quaff the camphor in Paradise'* The Arabic word used in such contexts for 'damsel' or 'maiden' is 'húrí', sometimes spelled 'hourí' when using French transliterations. Arabic weaves deep and intimate connections among its terms, and 'húrí' is closely related to the word 'hára', a word having an arresting series of meanings in its various forms, including these: *'to return to or from, be perplexed, go back, become dazzled by a thing which one looked on so that the eyes were turned away from it'; 'to converse with another, hold a conference, argue'; 'intense whiteness of the eyeballs and lustrous blackness of the iris'; 'pure and clean intellect; purity and beauty'; 'one tried and found to be free from vice and faults; person of pure and unsullied character; one*

---

<sup>13</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, from "Tablet of the Universe", originally published in *Makátib-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Volume 1, pages 13-32, 1997, translated anonymously and provisionally, and posted at [http://bahai-library.com/abdulbaha\\_lawh\\_aflakiyyih](http://bahai-library.com/abdulbaha_lawh_aflakiyyih).

who advises or counsels or acts honestly and faithfully'.<sup>14</sup> All of these meanings carry a shared thread of potent, glorious purity, and more.

### **Camphor: The Word**

The Arabic word for 'camphor', 'kafur', has a root with a set of meanings seemingly unrelated to its physical referent, the chemical substance. Its lone appearance in the Qur'án among usages related to the root meaning may puzzle some readers except for the fact that 'kafur' ( كَافُورًا ), appears to be simply a phonetic Arabic representation of the Malay name 'kapur' for the camphor tree, perhaps via Sanskrit 'karpuram'.<sup>15</sup> The neutrality of this reference contrasts sharply with the character of the definitions given for the root 'kafara': '*To cover, deny, hide, renounce, reject, disbelieve, be ungrateful, negligent, expiate, darken.*'; other meanings follow for 'Kafir': '*Disbeliever; Cultivator; Tiller; Husband; One who covers the sown seed with earth... Dark cloud; Night; Coat of mail; Impious.*'<sup>16</sup>

To gather elevated meaning here is to generate an organic fusion or integration of all of these associations and references into a living entity beyond any worldly definition. That classical Arabic invites verbal play of contrastive meanings having closely-similar sounds, as exemplified in the use of 'kafur' here, suggests a sense of surprise bestowed in the revealed Word of Muhammad in the Sura quoted above; the initial mental reaction to the familiar root-related meanings in the context jars the hearer until the term for camphor can be summoned in the cognitive process.

This may seem an overly-subtle point for readers here whose backgrounds resemble the present author's, but the use of such verbal devices of association and contrast is widespread in Arabic and the Middle East, and deserves highlighting here. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

*Call thou to mind the days of Christ, and the afflictions heaped upon Him by the people, and all the torments and tribulations inflicted upon His disciples. Since ye are lovers of the Abhá Beauty, ye also must, for His love's sake, incur the peoples' blame, and all that befell those of a former age must likewise befall you. Then will the faces of the chosen be alight with the splendors of the Kingdom of God, and will shine down the ages, yea, down all the cycles of time, while the deniers shall remain in their manifest loss. It will be even as was said by the Lord Christ: they shall persecute you for My name's sake.*

---

<sup>14</sup> 'Abdul Mannan 'Omar, *Dictionary of The Holy Qur'án: Arabic Words – English Meanings* (Noor Foundation International 2010), pp.140-141.

<sup>15</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary at <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=camphor> .

<sup>16</sup> Mannan, op. cit.

*Remind them of these words and say unto them: ‘Verily did the Pharisees rise up against Messiah, despite the bright beauty of His face and all His comeliness, and they cried out that He was not Messiah [Masíh] but a monster [Masikh], because He had claimed to be Almighty God, the sovereign Lord of all, and told them, “I am God’s Son, and verily in the inmost being of His only Son, His mighty Ward, clearly revealed with all His attributes, all His perfections, standeth the Father.” This, they said, was open blasphemy and slander against the Lord according to the clear and irrefutable texts of the Old Testament.’<sup>17</sup>*

This play on Masíh and Masikh is also found in other places, attesting to its potency. In a study of the Qur’án, the title of Masíh for Jesus Christ is explored in the holy text itself and in the traditions, e.g.:

*Qurtubí interprets masíh to mean “one who is anointed (mamsúh) with the ointment of blessings with which prophets were anointed. It is of sweet odor.” Still another interpretation is that he was so called because he was anointed with beauty. Qurtubí offers still another curious interpretation which states that al-masíh is the opposite of al-masikh, which means deformed, disfigured, or transmuted from a human into a subhuman form. Thus, al-Masih is the righteous one while al-Masikh is the one eyed liar, al-Dajjál.<sup>18</sup>*

The word ‘kafur’ ( كَافُرًا ) appears only once in the entire Qur’án, in Sura 76 as presented above. This sura’s verses describe beautifully the realm of the righteous, contrasting it starkly with the abode of the wrongdoer. These verses celebrate the drinking of the wine tempered with camphor – an image seemingly at variance with the teachings of Islam and the Bahá’í Faith concerning the use of wine in any worldly sense.<sup>19</sup>

As with the mention of camphor, this image of drinking wine reveals a sharp contrast showing the vital divine realm against the backdrop shadow of the material realm, a seeming paradox that demands attention and stimulates wonder.

## **On The Bridge**

Sharp contrast of meanings is often used in literature and memorization as a means of embedding ideas and experiences more firmly in one’s memory. The deliberate, conscious practice of contrastive memorization dates to antiquity. In one Latin text on the subject, written around 90 BCE, the reader finds:

---

<sup>17</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, from No. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur’án and Its Interpreters, Volume II: Surah 3*, p. 132 (SUNY Press)

<sup>19</sup> See Frank Lewis, *Camphor and the Camphor Fountain*, which furnishes the reader with a great deal of valuable insight. It appears here: [https://bahai-library.com/lewis\\_camphor\\_fountain](https://bahai-library.com/lewis_camphor_fountain).

*We ought, then, to set up images of a kind that can adhere longest in the memory. And we shall do so if we establish likenesses as striking as possible; if we set up images that are not many or vague, but doing something; if we assign to them exceptional beauty or singular ugliness; if we dress some of them with crowns or purple cloaks, for example, so that the likeness may be more distinct to us; or if we somehow disfigure them, as by introducing one stained with blood or soiled with mud or smeared with red paint, so that its form is more striking, or by assigning certain comic effects to our images, for that, too, will ensure our remembering them more readily.<sup>20</sup>*

Consider the sweet, calming, stimulating effects of camphor in tempering a beverage, contrasted with the resonant counter-meanings of concealment, shadowing, and covering urged by the similar root term in Arabic. Integrate with this the purity and radiance of the damsels consuming the beverage, the darkness of their shining eyes hypnotically drawing one's gaze, and the image mounts into an ecstatic, vibrant, unforgettable scene.

The play of opposites of similar sound generates rhetorical, semantic, mnemonic, and cognitive potency that the use of 'kafur' can be seen to generate in the phrasing in the reported Islamic tradition quoted by Bahá'u'lláh Himself: *'the black-eyed damsels quaff the camphor in Paradise'*.

In the glorious energy of this mystical scene we can sense flashes of warning. As with any element generating excitation, excess of use brings risk. In the mortal plane of existence, camphor's elevation of mood and feeling turns to intoxication and poisoning on continued consumption. By the same token, material camphor serves as an insecticide and preservative against the onslaught of microbes, protecting the cherished from that which corrupts it. This quality is a metaphorical mirror – an imprint of the higher meaning – for the quaffing of the inner truths of the greater world: in our unquenchable desire to gain understanding, we lose our lesser selves in annihilation in the splendor we approach. This process draws us toward the last of the Seven Valleys of the spiritual voyage, if for this stage we are well-conditioned:

*For when the true lover and devoted friend reacheth to the presence of the Beloved, the sparkling beauty of the Loved One and the fire of the lover's heart will kindle a blaze and burn away all veils and wrappings. Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend.<sup>21</sup>*

In reflecting on these words we find ourselves witness to an intimate drama of blinding power and staggering, mysterious meaning. As we attempt to tease out some degree of

---

<sup>20</sup> Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, No. 22, tr. Harry Caplan (Loeb 1954). Found at [http://www.laits.utexas.edu/memoria/Ad\\_Herennium\\_Passages.html](http://www.laits.utexas.edu/memoria/Ad_Herennium_Passages.html).

<sup>21</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, The Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness, opening paragraph.



understanding from this luminescent flow of holy language, we take halting steps on the bridge to more-elevated meaning and understanding, that perilous bridge of life:

*Take thou good heed that ye may all, under the leadership of Him Who is the Source of Divine Guidance, be enabled to direct thy steps aright upon the Bridge, which is sharper than the sword and finer than a hair, so that perchance the things which from the beginning of thy life till the end thou hast performed for the love of God, may not, all at once and unrealized by thyself, be turned to acts not acceptable in the sight of God. Verily God guideth whom He will into the path of absolute certitude.<sup>22</sup>*

On this Bridge we all travel together.

---

<sup>22</sup> The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, Excerpts from the Persian Bayán, VII, 2.