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Strange smells, familiar smells and forbidden smells: Building the Fulbe imaginary through smell

Miriam del Pino Molina

Abstract

I have a highly developed sense of smell. That's what they tell me.

Years go by. I realize that I smell aromas that most people don't. Sometimes I feel pleasure, and sometimes disgust. Taste and smell in close relationship.

Doctoral thesis. Feminist sensory ethnography. Fieldwork with the Fulbe people. Sense of smell exposed.

Cooking among supu pots. Smell of billy goat. Hands smelling of animals and spices.

Bleach in the corners. Smell of cleanliness, my mother would say.

Incense camouflaging forbidden smells.

What does the Fulbe home smell like to the West?

Being aware that when we sense, we are not using just a single sense (Ingold, 2011; Candau, 2003), the feminist sensory ethnography I present here attempts to understand interlocutors as "organisms-in-context" (Ingold, 2011, in Estalella, 2020) through participant observation (García, 2017).

In this text, I will focus on interpreting the different realities that I lived in Fulbe homes during my fieldwork, using the sense they say I am best at—smell: a virtue—along with touch and taste—that, throughout history, has been associated with the female body, with what is wild, irrational, and exotic (García, 2017).

Smelling to remember people, moments and places, for example, when we are in thesis-writing mode; or remembering in order to smell, as we experienced during Covid-19 when smelling became

a fantasy. Two different situations in which the body acts as “an articulating element in the sensory dimension of remembering” (Del Valle, 1997, p. 59).

Sensing cultural estrangement through smelling as we move and live within our fieldwork. Smelling as a feminist practice and as one of “the bodily modes of gathering information” (Linn Geurts, 2003), a way to break away from the androcentrism and ocularcentrism that dominates the discipline of anthropology (García, 2017). Smelling to situate ourselves (Haraway, 1988), to commit to intersubjectivity and to inhabit our ethnographies “from the body and with the body” (Esteban, 2018, p. 347; Hernández, 2012; Gregorio, 2014; Castañeda, 2019).

Smelling to immerse myself in other cultures and sense the shared connections with them. Or simply to discover new smells and add them to the list of familiar aromas contained in my own cherished sense of smell.

Culturally inscribed smells. Pleasant or unpleasant, forbidden or allowed, strange or familiar, recent or past; aromas that evoke nostalgia, disgust, or pleasure. Aromas that move us and affect us and the environment that surrounds us; that connect us to sensations and emotions that, inevitably, we consciously or unconsciously incorporate into our research, in one way or another; aromas that end up enriching, constructing and transforming our ethnographic task, in general, and our interpretations and analyses, in particular (Osorio-Cabrera, Gandarias and Fulladosa, 2021).

Attending to smell or to any of our other senses—touch, taste—and incorporating them into our moments of participant perception (García, 2017; Howes, 2014, in Estalella, 2020) in the field gives value to other sensory and sentient experiences, which we might have trouble doing if we are only focused on the traditionally dominant and androcentric senses of hearing and sight. It gives us information about how we use language to categorise, interpret and judge—individually or collectively and within a particular space-time context—the same smell or various smells (Candau, 2003).

Acquired smells that spark other acquired impressions, sensations, and emotions, such as the ones I present below.

Familiarity with bleach: prototypical smell

The smell of being clean, of freshness.

Cleanliness: a value closely linked to the Muslim religion and the culture of al-Andalus in Spain. My culture, my ancestors. Cleanliness is associated with purity (Douglas, 1991), with a “neutral smell” (Classen, 1992). But it is also part of the religious and cultural practice of the Fulbe people resident in parts of Spain and who are the protagonists of this ethnography. It is linked to hygiene and personal purity as prescribed by Allah; according to the Koran, for example, ablutions are compulsory before each prayer:

You who believe, when you are about to pray, wash your faces and your hands and arms up to the elbows, wipe your heads, wash your feet up to the ankles, and if required, wash your whole body. If any of you is sick or on a journey, or has just relieved himself, or had intimate contact with a woman, and can find no water, then take some clean sand and wipe your face and hands with it (5: 6) (in Abdel Halem, 2004).

Cleanliness and purity are linked to the home—particularly the room where ablutions take place (Reklaityte, 2006)—and to the whiteness of one’s clothing. This is especially the case for Friday

prayer, the day of the week where the tradition is to wear white to go to the mosque. Hence, the two key objects that you find in the Fulbe's bathrooms—the ablution rooms—are a bottle of cheap bleach and a large watering can to perform ablutions before prayer.

Familiar odours like bleach change in relation to the person and context, the development of their pituitary gland, and, of course, their cultural and experiential baggage (Larrea, 1997; Candau, 2003); this is why, for some, the smell of bleach is unpleasant. But, for Corbin (1987), it could be a way of hiding or dispelling a smell that has been categorised as “bad” (in Larrea, 1997).

For me, cheap bleach smells stronger than expensive bleach. Expensive bleach usually has added chemicals that soften the smell of pure or cheap bleach, transforming its aroma into one that is artificial but more pleasant and muted. It is a smell that sparks nostalgia, evokes my home and childhood. Which bleach is chosen and how it is used can give us information about social class membership and the economic resources available to the people who use it—as does where they use it and what they clean with it.

The strangeness of the smell of supu: cooking with Benitte and company

Smells tell us about the daily habits of our interlocutors, their different sociocultural realities and class or social classification (Mata-Codesal, 2018), their gender, ethnicity and the religion they practice. The ethnographic scene I present here exemplifies this.

In West Africa, adding meat to food is a luxury that many families cannot afford. In other places where Fulbe migrants live—such as Spain, as is the case here—meat is not always affordable, though cheap meat, like billy goat, which the people profiled in this ethnography eat often, is.

Everyone is in the kitchen. The smell of goat and spices moves through my body, evoking different sensations. At first, I feel disgust. But, little by little, I become used to it. A bit later, the smell has permeated the space to the extent that I am no longer able to smell it (Porteus, 1995, in Mata-Codesal, 2018). My pituitary gland, hands, and clothing are now used to that strange and strong smell. A smell that is usually perceived as unpleasant in the West. My body had been permeated. I wasn't aware of the smell that the goat meat gave off until I left their houses, got on the bus and smelled my clothing.

You smell of animal, my flatmate said when I got home. But aren't we animals? I wondered.

The billy goat is a sacred symbol among Muslims in general and the Fulbe in particular. A sacred animal, linked to the arrival of a new life into this world, and the main character in the baptism ritual, a high point for the Fulbe people (Marí, 2012).

Marijuana: a forbidden smell camouflaged by incense

Incense was used in the 18th century for hygiene, to disinfect and clear the air (Larrea, 1997). In the Fulbe households I have lived in, it is an acceptable scent that serves to mask, hide, or dispel the smell of marijuana—a forbidden smell—inside homes. Such categorization responds to “power relations that establish the boundaries of allowable difference and rely on the coding of odours based on criteria that are never explicit and which furthermore vary as a function of the reference group” (Mata-Codesal, 2018, p. 25).

For some reason, I have never seen the Fulbe women smoking. The men, yes, although never in their homes. The men always give off a pleasant smell, one of being clean, of freshness: a fragrance that is nothing like the smell given off by a smoker.

The Koran prohibits smoking—or rather, it prohibits the use of substances that can damage your body.

Homes with a faint smell of marijuana and a strong smell of incense. If I relate these two smells with cleanliness and purity, which one would be the clean and pure smell? I suppose it would be incense, the smell that predominates and by which I deduce the aim is to mask the smell of forbidden substances, of the smell of men.

What does the Fulbe home smell like to the West?

Olfactory symbolism as an expression of identity and difference (Classen, 1992, in Mata-Codesal, 2018): “lived space is a highly sensory space in which conflicts, including those of the senses, cannot not exist” (Mata-Codesal, 2018, p. 33).

If asked about the olfactory sensations and perceptions I had during my fieldwork in Fulbe homes, I quickly pick out the following smells: bleach, billy goat, spices, incense, and the faint smell of marijuana.

Smells that blend and conflict: cheap bleach with food, especially supu; meat stews that smell of animal, of billy goat, permeating my clothes. The smells of the Fulbe home that I lived in.

Food and cleanliness: two fundamental elements of the Fulbe culture that were discovered via participant perception, particularly through smell.

Smells that tell us about their customs, their values, their beliefs, and perhaps their agencies and resistances (Butler, 2018). Smells that transport us to our childhood, to our fieldwork, to that old debate about the dichotomy of nature versus culture (Ortner, 2006), to colonialism, to racism and social, economic and gender inequality.

Strange smells to which we become accustomed. Smells that our pituitary gland converts into a concrete space-time of imperceptible essences (Porteous, 1985, in Mata-Codesal, 2018). Like when we made supu with Benitte and company.

Authors such as Illich (1989, in Larrea, 1997) speak about a potential cultural deodorising in the West as a utopian result linked to the bourgeoisie. Corbin (1987), on the other hand, links it to the disinfection that has taken place in specific moments in the history of the West. Bourgeoisie and disinfection: social class tied to cleanliness.

And I wonder: what does deodorisation in the Fulbe home smell like? Might we, in this text, refer to cheap bleach as an essential product for the poor to deodorise the home and to incense as the smell that masks and dispels bad, forbidden, and gendered smells?

Notes

[11](#) (Candau, 2003).

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