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The Cultural Senses of Homo Sapiens

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Abstract

Humans are a curious mix of biology and culture, and one interaction area between these two that has recently come into focus is located in the senses, our biological apparatus to connect with the world. In this essay, I address the variation in appreciation of the senses in various cultures, both historical and contemporaneous, in order to explore the extent to which culture steers not only our observations, but also our appreciation of the epistemological weight of those senses. I concentrate on three senses—vision, hearing, and smell—and show how the relative weight attributed to each of them shifts in different cultures or historical periods. Using data from anthropology, history, literature, psychology, and linguistics, I argue that vision, sound, and smell occupy different positions in various cultures, and that our sensory balance shifts with culture. Thus, our present epistemological dominance of sight over all other senses is neither a biological given nor a cultural necessity.

Keywords: senses; vision; hearing; smell; culture; balance

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1. Cultural Senses?

In his Phénoménologie de la Perception, the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 246) summarised his approach to embodiment as 'Je suis mon corps, comme esprit incarnée, ouvert au monde' (I am my body as an incarnate spirit, open to the world). He did not mean that we have an independent spirit that dwells inside our body, for such a Cartesian dualism would be exactly what he refutes, but rather that we perceive ourselves as an incarnate spirit, as something inexorably connected to our body yet operating somewhat independently. His first few words make any Cartesian notion untenable: 'I am my body'. An operative word is 'incarnate', embedded in the flesh, and as his (and our) focus is on perception, the main thrust of his maxim is that we are 'fleshy perceivers', carnal observers and corporeal interpreters of our observations. This is the position from which I want to start, the theoretical notion that we are our body, and that any outside influence comes through and is filtered by our senses as they form our bodily portal to the world. A recent and dynamic formulation of this stance would be dual inheritance theory or gene–culture co-evolution in which the transmission of information through genes and through culture become one interrelated process, with the mechanisms of cultural evolution working in tandem with genetic modification (Richerson & Boyd, 2005). However, as my approach will be synchronic and my aim is to balance and 'weigh' culture and biology, the ultimate convergence of genetics and culture in dual inheritance is an interesting panorama on the distant horizon, but in the here and now, culture and biology follow diverging pathways.[1]

In any case, my 'interactive' approach to the relationship between nature and culture implies that whatever we are and do always bears some imprint of our corporeal existence and just as inevitably of our culture, and that this interrelationship is always dynamic. We are not a corporeal tabula rasa on which culture inscribes, but biology-cum-culture in

any instant: our nature is mediated by culture just as our culture is grounded in nature. This implies that culture, which is the other factor in the transition of sensorial input to organised perception, is always intertwined with the body. Though cultural expressions follow rules different from biology, under the tremendous cultural variation lies the simple fact, increasingly acknowledged, that culture is mediated by biology, and—less generally acknowledged—that much of human biology is mediated by culture (Waring & Wood, 2021). It is on this latter mediation that my essay will dwell. And what could illustrate this cultural mediation of our basic biology better than our primary relation with the world, our senses?

The second operative word in Merleau-Ponty's quote is 'open to the world'. Senses make no sense without something to observe, and any weight the senses carry has to be read against the measuring rod of our interaction with the outside world. We live towards the world, and the world exists towards us. Take our ears for example: as animals go, we have reasonable ears (although any antelope would be ashamed of them). The way we use them, i.e., the meaning they transmit, has changed dramatically during our evolution. Language has been crucial in our anthropogenesis, so for humans, hearing is more important than it is for apes. Our primate ancestors had already long lost the agility of their ears, and evolution does not 'give things back'. Our head did become more versatile with a longer neck, and so our vision and hearing could and had to be directed through movements of the whole head. In intra-group communication, this directionality of the head was combined with the greater looseness of our face, allowing for a complex system of facial and verbal expression, which enabled the greatly increased volume of information our ears carry.[2]

But hearing is not only about information; it is also about aesthetics. All human cultures make music, i.e., all human beings like music (Sacks, 2007), even if what is considered music varies, and rhythm and melody seem to have their own history and dynamics. This apparently gene-based musicality of Homo sapiens is astonishing, as it is hard to see how our evolutionary history should have selected for it. So it might be a side-product of our evolution, unless, as Stephen Mithen argues, it has been essential in the evolution of language (Mithen, 2006), in which case our musicality makes excellent sense. There is no culture without people singing, and as far as I know, apes do not sing, so somewhere in the last few million years, this quality has been acquired, according to Mithen, with the Neanderthal. Some other animal species do sing, of course, like whales and birds, but these are communication systems clearly relevant to mating (whales) and territory (birds), and are therefore limited-purpose communication systems—as far as we can interpret them now. Human ears, on the other hand, not only open us towards the surrounding world but are especially tuned in to producers of meaning, i.e., fellow human beings; in short, we have a sensorial-cum-communication system that predisposes us towards our group members. Since, as has often been said, we are 'wired to hunt and gather in the savanna', our senses do define us as a relation-oriented ape, so we are 'wired for togetherness'. If, as Mithen suggests, 'society is the natural life-form for clever apes who learned to sing and dance before they learned to analyze and rationalize' (Mithen, 2006, p. 84), our aesthetic and sensorial apparatus is of even more importance in our anthropogenesis than the calculating neo-cortex, underscoring the weight of the senses in our human condition. That would mean that culture plays a role very early in our anthropogenesis, which renders the relation between biology and culture all the more relevant.

In this article, I explore this relationship in three of our senses—seeing, hearing, and smelling—trying to establish to what extent their relative importance varies with culture, and ultimately how it affects the balance between these three senses. Though my main

focus is on smell, in order to weigh the three senses against each other, I start with the eye versus the ear, and our first port of call is the Fulbe of Central Mali.

2. The Eye Against the (Good) Ear?

It was a beautiful moment. In the house of the Fulbe marabout Boura Moodi in the small village of Boni in Mali, a dozen dignitaries were gathered, as their local scholar would read to them from his books. We were introduced properly, as anthropologists, but they already knew my colleagues well, who both had been working in the area for several months. After some waiting, as was fit, Boura Moodi emerged from the house: a tall, dignified figure dressed in white, who greeted the people, his arms loaded with books. These were hand-written loose-leaf bundles of text, among which were the Qur'an, some commentaries, and the book we came for, the tarikh, the (handwritten) local history of the region. The scholar sat down and opened the book, a hush falling over the small crowd: recitation! Slowly and clearly, he read some passages, his finger following the lines of intricate writing, while his audience listened enraptured, us included (see Figure 1). Reading the book meant listening to the voice of the scholar, and through him to the voices of earlier scholars who had kept records through the generations. It was history in action through hearing; more than the written text, it was the spoken word that linked his audience with the past. The book was the vehicle for that very spoken word, and even if part of the text came from Boura Moodi himself, history was heard.

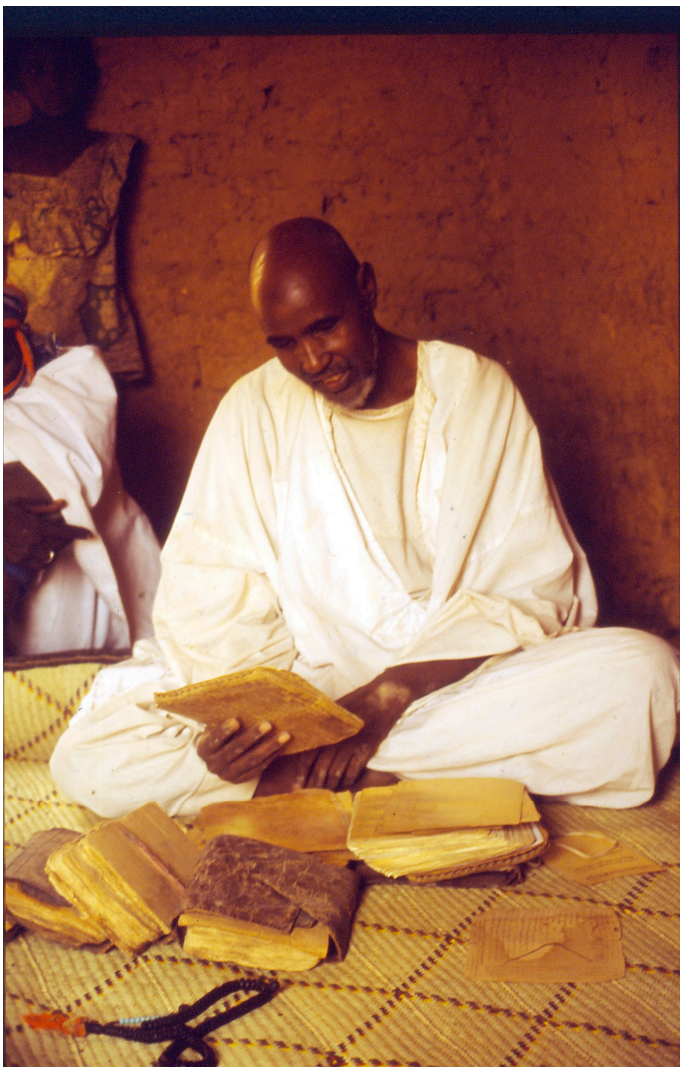

Figure 1. Boura Moodi reciting (Mali 1993).[3]

Here, as was common in our own culture until relatively recently, reading means listening, and the one who reads should do so aloud, listening to his own voice speaking the words of others. The change from reading aloud to reading quietly occurred in the 19th century, mainly as a corollary of the printing press, but a late one (A. Classen, 1998). The book changed from being a recitation device that was supposed to be heard, to a viewing device, and the social tongue + ear was replaced by a solitary pair of eyes. Western culture has become highly visual, with scholars taking the printing of books as a watershed, the so-called 'Gutenberg Galaxy' (McLuhan, cited in Ingold, 2000). Since the arrival of the printing press, our eyes have not only been given pictorial information but also written text: language has become a visual thing; information enters silently.

Now the screen has been added with its powerful combination of vision and sound, all the more powerful because it is interactive. The screen was first a movie screen without sound, but with oral explanation. Now it has become a world of its own, both as a window on the wider existence and as a carrier of its own virtual worlds with sight or sound. Screens are continuously on, even without people watching them, and the multitasking of speaking on the phone while watching TV is well known. Visual information is much more than a distraction or an illustration. We have learned more about the world around us through visual information than ever was possible with print alone. The screen gives us a model of the world, a visual input that has become the touchstone of information. But the visuals also impose their own standards. Advertising, theatre, and sports give us the models for the life to be lived, the person one might want to be and aspirations one should have. Role models have shifted from the heroes in tales to actors on the movie screen, later to be replaced by the lead singers of rock bands and, increasingly, top sportsmen and women; most recently, influencers, who tend to lack any obvious qualifications for excellence whatsoever, joined the parade of visual models. None of this would have been possible without visual over-feeding. It might be that the phenomenon of the pod-cast, in what has been termed the post-broadcast generation, represents a counter-trend, but that is for later analysis.

Our visual culture is clear in science as well. The computer is used for modelling and models are increasingly visual. For instance, major breakthroughs have been made in diagnostics and the visualisation of diseases. Important medical technological innovations include new ways of seeing problems: after X-rays came ultrasound scans, magnetic resonance, computer tomography, and the increased use of miniaturised viewing probes.

This change from the ear to the eye has been crucial. In anthropology, the orality–literacy debate of the 1970s and 1980s studied at length the transformations that resulted from the move from oral to written cultures (Ong, 1982). The implications have been huge: the transfer of spoken authority to text, another view of history, larger scales of organisation and bureaucracy, the composition of religious script, and a new view of one's own identity. Writing eliminated many of the life-like characteristics of oral performances; no longer did the rhythm of the text, style figures of redundancy and repetitions, audience participation, and praise songs bring us close to the lived experience, but instead we read lists, numbers, names, and stories in a strict timeline. Our little pastiche on the Fulbe books in Boni takes place in a traditional situation but exemplifies the changes. It is the person who can read who has authority, not the oldest man, as in neighbouring Dogon villages. The scholar himself alludes to the authority of the book, even if he wrote some of the text himself. The arrival of the book thus produces emotion, awe, and respect, and is a high point in itself.

The example also illustrates how many oral characteristics still remain after the introduction of writing: it served as coagulated speech for a long time, which is even more true for the sacred texts that have shaped world religions. What is 'real text'? The revolution of writing resulted in the Unsterblichkeitskarakter of text which became an Of-

fenbarungstrager (Graham, 1989), and the book itself became a 'heavenly book' (Cantwell Smith, 1989). In some religions, for example, in Tibet, in Mahayana Buddhism, and in Islam, a cult of the book developed, sometimes called 'bibliolatry'. Yet, despite their written form, many of these texts were based on recitation. When the 'Word' is mentioned as an act of creation (John 1: 1), it is the spoken word, not the written text; and when in the text of Apocalypse, a written book appears, it is first forbidden to write—because the text has to remain secret—and then the book is to be eaten, not read (Apocalypse 10: 9–10). The word Qu'ran means recitation, and indeed the book should be learnt by heart and then recited. The oldest texts in the world, the RigVeda, are known in a written form in Sanskrit but scholars have been adamant that, despite this old textual form, the 'real' Veda is the oral recitation as well as the performance of the texts during the rituals of early Hinduism. The Veda is considered as oral scripture: 'In the actual sounded syllables of the Veda lie the points of contact with transcendent reality' or 'Veda non sunt libri' (Veda are not books) (Graham, 1989, pp. 146, 147).

Scripture is thus originally an oral phenomenon, and this is made clear throughout the texts, for example, in the insistence on hearing: 'Whoever has ears to hear . . .,' and of course in the Shema, the ultimate Jewish credo: 'Hear, O Israel. The Lord is God. The Lord is one' (Deut 6: 4). Reciting a text is not the same as telling a story, since the recitation of a sacred text can be interpreted as God speaking. St Paul's letters, which were dictated to a scribe, are the most scriptural in the New Testament, but these too were meant to be read aloud.

Some theorists have stressed that viewing results in a different relationship with the world than hearing: vision divides the sensory experience into the viewer and the viewed, objectifying a world that is first of all lived in, not viewed. Hearing, they say, offers more unity with the world, less distance, and more co-existence. Ong's (1982, p. 91) remark breathes that spirit: 'The interiorizing force of the oral world relates in a special way to the sacral, to the ultimate concerns of existence'. One argument for this distinction is the way the blind participate in society compared to the way the deaf do. Sacks (1990, 1995, 2007) has written extensively on both. One of his cases is a blind man whose eyesight was restored surgically thanks to the tireless efforts of his fiancée (Sacks, 1995, p. 159). What followed illustrates how regaining one's eyesight—the paradigm miracle in the New Testament—was not as simple as has been portrayed. The formerly blind man in question must make major adaptations in his life and, in fact, failed to do so. When he looked at a statue, he easily fell back into his 'blind mode', feeling it with his hands for a 'proper sight'. In the end he returned to his blind existence, ended his engagement with his fiancée as well as with the sighted world, and settled for his familiar and comfortable blind life. In general, the blind find a niche in the margins of the sighted society quite easily, even if they remain marginalised.

The contrast with the life of the deaf is striking. Without special attention, deaf children have a huge problem developing language and not only remain marginalised but also have difficulties reaching their full potential as human beings (Sacks, 1990). The difference is, of course, language: without speech, man is barely considered human. This in itself would be an argument in favour of a special existential place of hearing, but when deaf people bond and develop their sign language, they clearly reach their full potential. Sacks convincingly argues that sign language is a full and complete language, comparable to natural acoustic languages. If the deaf are bereft of sign language, as has been the case in many countries due to well-meaning but ill-advised policies to thrust remnants of an acoustic language upon them and forbid sign language (because it was deemed inferior), they remain marginal and have problems with their development (Sacks, 1990). So, the deaf

as a category can function well as a separate society, an island of silence in the soundscape of the world. To be deaf calls for 'deafmanship' (Ingold, 2000, p. 274).

Another field experience occurred when one of my Utrecht anthropology students was going to conduct research on a school for the deaf in North Namibia. We arrived at noon at the school gate. Immediately our car was surrounded by a throng of beaming children, delight streaming out of their eyes, their hands waving at us: a sign of welcome. Not a sound was heard, except some low soft grunts while the children communicated fast with each other with their hands (see Figure 2). Never have I felt so welcome, and seldom so elated. The student later commented on her sense of isolation during her fieldwork, despite her command of sign language. The children made it very clear that she was now the outsider, as a speaker in the 'world of silence'.

Figure 2. Reception at the deaf school (Namibia 1995).

Today in our cities we have a general background of noise, as Karin Bijsterveld notes Bijsterveld (2008). In the 19th century, factories were in the middle of cities, with their sirens and machine noises, and the diabolical symphony of mechanical noises made silence only within reach for the lucky few. Technical innovations have made the 'civilisation' history of noise quite complex: nowadays we can live in a world of sound that we choose for ourselves, and the choice between a loudspeaker and a headphone implies that we can decide whether or not our neighbours will hear it too. Sound can be privatised, and whether we do so is an issue of public debate. Of course, some sounds, like trains, cars, and airports, cannot be shut down and, as such, are the arena of bitter fights and huge investments. In any case, silence is precious, and the larger the city, the more precious it becomes.

Sound carries emotion, sometimes independent of meaning. My own experiences with the emotional impact of hearing are from the Dogon in Mali, who have great respect for the ear. Someone with 'good ears' understands other people, and a wise man 'knows the words of the world'. Speaking is valued as an art, like story-telling, but especially

in blessings: old men are expected to utter a stream of blessings over the heads of their descendants, and virtuoso performers of this art are held in high esteem. The main ritual leaders of the village are those who have learned the sacred masque language to perfection and can perform their recitations in it: what matters is not what they say but the fact that they make no mistakes, plus the idea that women cannot understand them. In the ritual complex of the funeral, the apex of the many rituals is the performance of a lengthy song by a group of specialists between 23:00 and 06:00. This wonderful song, with its simple but captivating melody that indeed lasts all night and never stops during seven hours, is not so much listened to as it forms a soundscape for the women who sleep through most of the performance on the warm sand in the village's dancing area (Van Beek et al., 2025); see Figure 3.

Figure 3. The village audience during the all-night baja ni performance (Mali 2008).

During this performance, it is not so much the content of the songs that matters, for the meaning of the lyrics is hard to grasp, for several reasons. Not only are the texts in another Dogon language, but also the lyrics themselves are cryptic by their extensive use of parabolas, half-explained hints and commentaries on events long forgotten; in fact these songs are meant to be puzzles (Van Beek et al., 2025, p. 65). The songs' emotional impact is based on their origin from an esteemed singer/prophet from the deep past, and on their place in the ritual complex, both underwritten by the cryptic nature of the lyrics. Singing such an elusive text for a whole night is seen as an attempt to halt death, and thus as the proper way to mourn.

In her description of the culture of Ilongot in the Philippines, Michelle Rosaldo tells how her informants reacted on hearing an old song, one that she had recorded during a previous field stay. The hearing was eagerly anticipated, but when the tape started, one of her main informants brusquely motioned her to stop. Knowing how much the Ilongot love their music, she was puzzled, till another trusted informant explained to her why: the song brought home to them that the days of headhunting were over, once and for all, and that the grief that normally would have triggered headhunting would remain unabated (Rosaldo, 1980, p. 33). So, again it was not the text that made the impact, but the total ritual it embodied, plus all the associations that went with that crucial part of their culture.

One step further, it can just be the music without language. Basing himself on his research in Amazonia, Jonathan Hill stresses the primacy of the ear for his Arawak speakers in the Venezuelan forest. He calls this process 'musicalisation of the other' (Hill, 2022,

p. 281 ff) and describes how flutes and trumpets are used, sometimes in combination with singing, in order to integrate natural and cultural processes, through soundscapes that collapse the distinction between the two.

Positioning non-western examples against western ones runs the risk of being just another theory about 'us versus them', an aspect that always must be carefully vetted. After all, if there is anything we have learned from anthropology, it is that we have a deep common humanity. Especially in the present heyday of genetics, arguments for extreme cultural or linguistic relativism have a lot more to explain than five decades ago, when the debate on orality and the anthropology of the senses started. Ingold (2000, p. 277) rightly insists that the opposition between seeing and hearing should not be taken too far, since they are both coterminous as ways of relating to the world: 'But just because here vision, or there touch or hearing, have been singled out as vehicles for symbolic elaboration, this does not mean that people will see, hear or touch any differently in consequence.' His critique of the 'anthropology of the senses', as it started out in that period with its strong relativism, still stands, and I will follow him in that; in his overview of research on the senses, Alain Corbin voiced a similar criticism (Corbin, 1995). The important thing is not that people live 'in a world of hearing' instead of a 'world of seeing' but that through the internal discourse on the senses they shape the symbolism of the senses differently, and have a diverging appreciation of the information coming through the various senses. It is not the observations as such that differ, but the cognitive styles (Fabian, 2002, p. 123). In short, what weight does a culture attach to visual information and what to auditory evidence? Western science has developed the visual cognitive style to an unprecedented level, accepting visual information as prime evidence for correctness.

Moreover, viewing does not always carry information. When the Kapsiki of Cameroon experience a severe loss of a loved one, i.e., someone who died before his or her expected lifespan, the usual cultural tool of funeral rites, with their dances and plaintive songs, is no longer sufficient. Confronted with that much grief, one simply sits and looks, kanewe le ntsu, litt. 'look with the eyes', not so much to see people or things, but in order not to see them, to cut oneself off from the world, lost in one's own private world of grief through a visual void. Also in our western culture, looking-without viewing is a way to isolate oneself.

But anyway, the weight of auditory evidence is higher than in our Western society. Kapsiki and Dogon discourses on hearing primarily focus on the spoken word, so the relevant soundscape consists of oral communication, not of general background noise. Waking up in the morning in a Dogon village, one first hears the roosters crowing and some donkeys baulking, but the soundscape is soon dominated by human voices, by women greeting each other. As they go downhill to fetch water for the morning household chores, those on the way down greet the women on the way up, long, loud, and clear. As is standard in Dogon interaction, each asks for the well-being of the other, her husband, her children, and her family. Then the other woman asks the same, and always the answer is that all is well, thank you. With a heavy load on her head, a woman does not stop but performs the whole greeting ritual in passing, so towards the end, she has to raise her voice to be audible to her interlocutor way behind her back, her voice ricocheting against the backdrop of the cliff.

Human sound is much more important than non-human sound, and even animal sounds are often interpreted as human. Among the Kapsiki, an ethnic group inhabiting the Mandara Mountains of North Cameroon, the blacksmiths use a special bird that whistles inside a dark hut (Van Beek, 2015a). The communication is very direct and highly verbal: the client asks his questions directly to the 'bird' and receives a tone melody back in whistles, which is immediately filled in by the blacksmith as a sentence with the same tonal

structure,[4] offering the answer to the question asked. The evidence is here strictly aural, as the client never sees the 'bird', which for all practical purposes might be the result of ventriloquism. The principal divination method for the Kapsiki, however, is very visible. A crab is placed inside a pot of wet sand filled with fixed straws, indicating the relevant parties in the session, plus some moveable calabash shards (Van Beek, 2010, see Figure 4). The blacksmith then explains the problem and exhorts the crab to carry out its work: 'Speak, speak with your feet, speak clearly and do not lie'. The pot is closed for a quarter of an hour, and then the traces of the crab and the displacements of the shards are 'read' as the answer to the question. Again, it is the blacksmith who translates the visual information into words, and the main communication is achieved through language. The client has no key to read the prints of the crab and considers verbal information as the main outcome of the divination; so the crab does 'speak'.

Figure 4. The crab has 'spoken': Kapsiki crab divination (Cameroon 1973).

The Dogon have several methods of divination, the most famous being the fox divination in which the traces of fox paws in the sand are read as the answer to the client's question (Van Beek, 2007). Other animals could just as well be utilised for this divination, such as the hyena, the red ant, or the pigeon, though the eminence of the fox in predicting the future is established in mythical tales. After all, who can control a hyena and who can read the prints of an ant? As for the pigeon, its cooing is 'heard' as the tone of a standard Dogon utterance, like the Kapsiki 'bird'. In the case of fox divination, the client does not visit the sandy patch out in the fields but leaves everything to the diviner. The latter puts the questions into the sand in the evening, one patch per client, and comes back the next morning to see whether the fox has shown up. He then reads the traces and reports to his client who has been waiting in his compound (see Figure 5, where the diviner reads the traces of the fox in the absence of the client). In this case, there is a clear contrast between the very visibility, even the aesthetics, of the divination technique and the lack of interest of the client in the visual outcome. Europeans react very differently. Virtually all film makers who have worked among the Dogon—and numerous films were made about them—zoomed in on fox divination as a visual high point, while no Dogon client ever shows up at the patch. So here the diverging appreciation of the senses between Europeans and Dogon is evident: Europeans want to see traces of the fox; the Dogon want to 'hear' the fox. And being an anthropologist, I of course want both!

Figure 5. Ani Saye reading the prints of the fox (Mali 1987).

3. The Elusive Smell

They haven't got no noses
The fallen sons of Eve;
Even the smell of roses
Is not what they supposes
But more than mind discloses
And more than they believe.
Chesterton

This third section deals with the sense that has gained considerable attention in recent decades, smell (Pelosi, 2016).[5] As an animal species, our sense of smell is not particularly acute, but neither is it as badly developed as we are sometimes inclined to believe. In our culture, we have learnt to distrust our perceptions of smell (Deroy, 2022). Although a dog, a shark, or an elephant would be in trouble with our nose, we can still discern scores of molecular compounds in minute concentrations. One major problem with smell, as Leroy Gourhan (1993, p. 292) remarked, is that 'the sense of smell, being purely receptive, has no complementary organ for the emission of symbols of odours'. Smell lacks any symbolic system such as a referential grid, which makes it elusive but at the same time open to the influences of our cultural history. As Alfred Gell (2006, p. 404) put it, . . . 'a smell is always incomplete by itself; it acquires a meaning not by contrast with other smells, but by association with a context within which it is typical', while Drobnick (2006, p. 346) compared it to the fourth dimension.

In The Perfume, a gem in German literature and the towering novel in the international field of odours, Süskind (1985) stages a hero who can smell extraordinarily well, but who produces no smell himself. This alone sets him apart from the rest of humanity, though he himself becomes an expert on perfume. When he sets out to create his ultimate perfume, he is completely 'outside' humanity, for the perfume is an amalgam of a series of gruesome murders of young girls to retrieve their body fragrance as the basis of his final creation. According to C. Classen et al. (1994, p. 4), one of the attractions of the book is the 'confirmation of the validity of many of our most cherished olfactory stereotypes—the maniac sniffing out his prey; the fragrant, hapless maiden; the dangerous savagery inherent in the sense of smell'. Richard Gray analyses the cultural rationale in the novel, which has been translated into some 25 languages, as a reversal of the Enlightenment agenda. In the 19th century, Freud connected the rise of civilization with the suppression of olfactory stimuli, while Kant condemned the olfaction as 'opposed to freedom', since smells are unavoidable, and unworthy of cultivation (Gray, 2006, p. 237). Süskind's anti-hero Grenouille recognises both the inescapability and subliminal impact of odours, concluding 'He who rules scents ruled the hearts of people' (Gray, 2006, p. 239).[6] So, the novel is a fundamental critique on a purely rational view of man and on the dominance of ocular vision, and as such highlights Merleau-Ponty's warning: 'For a philosophy that is installed in pure vision, in the aerial view of the panorama, there can be no encounter with another: for the look dominates; it can dominate only things, and if it falls upon men it transforms them into puppets which move only by strings.' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, pp. 77–78).

Many authors have witnessed the power of smell in eliciting emotions, the most eloquent probably being Marcel Proust in À la recherche du temps perdu in which the smell of madeleine cookies brings back floods of memories and feelings, and also psychologists have elaborated on this aspect (Vroon et al., 1994; Engen, 1982; Keller & Young, 2023). Drobnick (2006, p. 350) calls this Nosealgia—the field of smell is full of puns and neologisms—a reaction that 'makes myths possible' (Drobnick, 2006, p. 371). In the Hindu tradition, smells can evoke former incarnations from a repressed karmic memory (Shulman, 2006, p. 417), not a déjà vu, but an extended déjà senti, one could say. And such memories are not always pleasant, since also the horrors of one's past can be evoked through the nose, like for those who have experienced the 'stenches of power', as testified by the experience of Khmer victims (Hinten et al., 2006) and holocaust survivors (Rindisbacher, 2006), or, in a more civilised register, the 'odour of law' (Marusek, 2023). Conversely, people experiencing a so-called after-death communication often speak of a fragrance coming over them when thinking of a beloved dead, a smell strongly associated with the deceased mother or father, and then not as a whiff, but as an extremely strong olfactory presence that does not fade quickly (Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 2006, p. 427); these reports are always positive.

Not only on the individual level can smell be crucial, but also for society as a whole. In his trailblazing study of odours in French history, Corbin (1986) describes the stench that must have pervaded French cities, and the transformation of society made possible by and through the 'deodorization' of France. Smell in France was a bit like noise in our cities: a continuous, inescapable presence, the mastery of which was a mark of election, of wealth and power, hence the tremendous importance of perfumes. In the process of civilisation, we have learned not to smell, to suppress our bodily odours, to choose non-intrusive smells and to clean up our backyards. The West has been deodorised in what C. Classen et al. (1994, p. 78) call the 'olfactory revolution'.

Analyses of other societies with different olfactory histories have followed in Corbin's footsteps: China (Huang, 2023), 19th century England (Tullett, 2019), and various others (Smith, 2019). Different olfactory histories give rise to varying smellscapes, which may be difficult to define in words, but are inescapable for those who live in them (Marinucci,

2023). Some of these are what Almagor (1990) calls an 'olfactory society', i.e., one in which smell is utilised to make lasting social distinctions. Almagor's example comes from Ethiopia, but other cases can be cited too: the Ilahita Arapesh of Papua New Guinea (Tuzin, 2006), or the Umeda Sepik of New Guinea (Tuzin, 2006), but this also holds for parts of a culture, like Japanese scent ceremonies (Gatten, 2006) or Arab devotional practices (Auballe-Sallenave, 2006).

My central case on smell is that of the aforementioned Kapsiki in northern Cameroon, who in northeastern Nigeria are known as the Higi. One major division runs through the many ethnic groups inhabiting the larger area, including the Kapsiki, viz. the distinction between blacksmiths and non-smiths (Van Beek, 2020). 'Blacksmith' means much more than just an iron worker, as the rerhɛ or blacksmiths have many roles and functions. They make up about 5% of Kapsiki society with many of the characteristics of a 'caste' in this village-based society: they are strictly endogamous, heed different food taboos, and are confined to a certain set of occupations. The rerhɛ forge iron, bury the dead, make pottery (the women), perform divinations, administer medicine/magic, and are the musicians on many occasions, especially during rituals. Eating is an important definition of self in Kapsiki society, and the blacksmiths eat several animals that the melu, the non-smith majority, shun, such as the meat of horses, donkeys, serpents, and other reptiles, cicadas, and black-feathered birds. I have analysed this as a culinary definition of self (Van Beek, 2015a), since the total picture of tabooed animals boils down to those that have a similar position in the animal world as blacksmiths have in the human world. So heeding their food taboos, the rerhɛ eat their 'mirror selves'.

One of the most important functions of the smith is to bury the dead, and smiths are absolutely indispensable in this central ritual; in fact, funerals would be impossible without them. A Kapsiki funeral focuses on the corpse itself, and over three days of ritual, the corpse is dressed up and smiths dance with it on their shoulders. The accompanying rituals—such as its dressing, drumming, playing the flutes, and digging the grave plus the actual burial—are also performed by the rerhɛ. Three days is a long time for a corpse to remain above ground in the tropics, and at the end of the third day, its odour pervades all the proceedings, including the smiths who carry the body. One emic rationale for keeping the corpse around for so long is the rhythm of the funeral proceedings themselves, for the mourners must see the deceased, and the deceased in return must 'see' them. These three days allow an ever-widening circle of relatives to attend the funeral: the first day is for immediate kin living nearby, while messengers go to neighbouring villages to announce the death. The whole village of some 3000–7000 people gather on the second day in a main dance to say a fond farewell to the deceased. The third day is for 'strangers', the neighbouring villages where the wives of the deceased came from originally and where his daughters are married now, his in-laws. Finally, at the end of that day, everybody has had their view of the elaborately dressed deceased and has danced in front of the corpse, wailing and lamenting. Then the proper burial can take place. It is the chief blacksmith who performs this in the presence of just a few kin of the deceased. With this rationale, the Kapsiki 'need' three days for a burial and are culturally obliged to bury the corpse when it has a definite 'olfactory impact'. In the past, the corpse's epidermis was washed away by the blacksmiths, but this ritual element has disappeared. For the Kapsiki, the smell of the corpse is crucial in the definition of smells, and for the blacksmiths as a group.

Now, in terms of individual smells, it is extremely difficult to construct a scientific classification of smells, as Leroy Gourhan (1993) and C. Classen et al. (1994) have remarked, because the number of chemical compounds detectable by our (mediocre) noses is enormous and amorphous: 'Odours have consistently defied attempts at rational (or 'objective") classification, and probably always will' (C. Classen et al., 1994, p. 103; see also Howes,

1991, pp. 139–140). This means that one has to rely on culture-specific distinctions, in this case on the emic distinctions the Kapsiki make between smells, through their special vocabulary of smells. European languages usually have very few words for different smells and those few relate either to taste (sweet, sour) or opinions (rotten, foul). In contrast, the Kapsiki/Higi language has fourteen lexemes indicating smells, most of them quite explicit, referring to the smell of something specific. The referent is usually an object—'it smells like . . .'—and the words belong to the class of ideophones, expressions of specific actions or observations. In fact, the Kapsiki language is quite rich in ideophones, using different ones for very detailed actions, such as 'biting with a large mouth', 'biting with a small mouth', 'the bite of a serpent', etc. The smell ideophones are as follows:

1. mɛdɛke: the smell of various animals;
2. vɛrvɛre: the smell of the civet;
3. rhwazhake: the smell of urine;
4. 'urduk'duk: the smell of milk;
5. shireshire: the smell of animal faeces;
6. ndrimin'ye: the smell of rotten food;
7. ndalɛke: the smell of a (three-day-old) corpse;
8. duf'duf: the smell of white millet beer;
9. hes'hese: the smell of roast food (peanuts, meat);
10. zebe: the smell of edible food;
11. kalawuvɛ: the smell of human excrement;
12. kamerhweme: the smell of old grain in a granary;
13. rhweredlake: the smell of fresh meat;
14. dzafe: the fleeting smell of something that is noticed just for a moment.

I was surprised at the ease with which various informants came up with all the fourteen lexemes on the list, and the general consensus on them. However, there are differences in the interpretation of these terms between smiths and non-smiths, as well as to a lesser extent between women and men (Van Beek, 1992, pp. 43, 44). Throughout, edibility is an important criterion, and that is something smiths and non-smiths define in their own ways. The biggest difference is smell no. 7 (ndalɛke), which is considered the worst smell of all by the non-smiths, but this smell of a corpse is not even mentioned by blacksmith informants. When pressed, they admit that the body does smell but not enough to honour it with its own ideophone. The women, smith as well as non-smith, have a sort of intermediate position in this, less diametrically opposed than the men. The whole 'smell machine' runs on the fact that non-smiths think that smiths smell bad, and the list reveals two reasons for this: the things they eat and the corpses they carry both make them malodorous (see Figure 6). Thus, a curious contradiction at the heart of the Kapsiki funeral comes to light in these odour terms. To bid a proper farewell to an honoured fellow member of society, they need so much time that the deceased turns into the foulest-smelling thing on earth. And the very people who bridge this divide and make the burial and the farewell possible in a proper fashion—the blacksmiths—turn into 'stinking people', a lower caste of corpse carriers, the underbelly of society. The smell of the smith is the smell of ambivalence, of 'people out of place', in the words of Mary Douglas. Kapsiki society is divided in two by the nose, so a major distinction between people in this 'olfactory society' is highlighted by smell. Of course, the daily reality might well be that everybody knows who is a blacksmith and who is not, and that the smell element follows social distinctions and not the reverse. But smell is a strong metaphor for hierarchical relations, and the discourse on smell is hard to counter.

Figure 6. Smith Kwada dances with a corpse (Cameroon 2003).

Uri Almagor reported a similar situation with the Ethiopian Dassanetch, where the distinction was made between cattle owners (smelling like cattle, so wonderful!) and their lower-ranked fishing compatriots 'reeking of old fish' (Almagor, 1987, 1990). And both groups washed frequently, as do the Kapsiki. Among the Serer Ndut of Senegal too, similar equations are made between smells and types of people. For instance, Europeans smell like 'urine' to the Serer Ndut, a definition of self in opposition to the other, because we barely smell ourselves but turn up our noses at the foreign other (Dupire, 1981, p. 13). Smelling well can be a class distinction too. In classical China, for instance during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), 'a woman or man of the upper classes lives in clouds of incense and mists of perfume. The body was perfumed, the costume was hung with sachets. The home was sweet smelling, the office was fragrant, the temple was redolent of a thousand sweet-smelling balms and essences.' (Schafer, 1963, p. 155).

So our 'small nose' can be discriminating, and talking about our nose can quite effectively separate people. There is no reason to suppose that the Kapsiki—or the Dassanetch—have different or better noses than people from other cultures, but they have chosen to elaborate upon this sense in a socially discriminatory discourse that runs through Kapsiki culture. Thus, they mediate a fundamental contradiction in their culture at the cost of constructing an underclass, a caste. In daily practice, the blacksmiths' lower position is to some extent balanced by their better nutrition, as they eat various animals that are quite nutritious, like serpents, horses, and donkeys, as well as the sacrificial goats they consume at each funeral. During that three-day ritual, the blacksmiths eat one goat for every day

the corpse is not buried, so they have every incentive not to bury it too quickly, and the advent of Islam and Christianity—with their faster burial of their dead—has been a threat. Increasingly, they resent their lower status, but they do cherish the economic gains they accrue and take full advantage of their position in new developments in the region (Van Beek, 2015b).

Smell can thus be important if a culture chooses to define it as such. Higher or lower than eye or ear is not a productive question, so the inclusion of this third sense in the debate between seeing and hearing shows that the notion of hierarchy has to be approached with some caution. Thus the preference for the ear over the eye, as expressed by Stoller (1989, 1997), C. Classen et al. (1994), and Howes (1991), may carry a subtext of criticism on our Western society, as an expression of the charm of those small-scale societies we not only study in depth but also readily identify with, a romantic streak in Western academic culture.

4. Discussion: Balancing the Senses

All senses are created equal
but some are more equal than others

The Kapsiki use of smell as evidence of their social differentiation points at a particular cognitive style, carrying a particular weight inside a cultural discourse. With its evocative power, smell is well suited to creating barriers between humans, and our Western culture has turned non-smelling into a lucrative business: smelling like a rose, overcoming the odour of the body, and not smelling one's environment have become conditional on what Gell calls 'the transcendence of a sweet life' (Alfred Gell, 2006, p. 405). We are far removed from Napoleon Bonaparte who, when writing to his beloved Josephine as he was returning from Moscow, requested that she not wash herself for the next two weeks because he liked the smell of her body so much (Corbin, 1986, p. 223). Reading Süskind, however, one understands. In our society, we have succeeded reasonably well in de-odourising ourselves and our environment and now face a challenge with noise similar to the one eighteenth-century France did with smell. Our ears should no longer be randomly bombarded with unwarranted noise, as we want to have control over our acoustic environment like we have over our odours. Technology offers us the options to either saturate our environment with the noise of our own choice or to privatise our hearing, reducing orchestras to earphones, and pop concerts to cell telephones. The same is true of our visuals: we want to be in control of our visual environment, and cleaning them up is extremely important. 'The eye also wants something' (het oog wil ook wat) is a Dutch expression indicating that the eye is not just a recording organ but also a demanding one, just like the ear and the nose (Howes, 2005). At least we have domesticated the nose.

City architecture and landscaping give us control over our environment, and woe betides the planner who wants to build a big industrial plant in the middle of a town near where workers live. The congestion on highways, resulting from the separation of home and work, has to be shielded from view and from the ear, as well as from the nose, which makes transport a purely technical way of changing places with as few links to the environment as possible: all our senses should be directed towards the hazards of the road, and with good reason too, which means we only look and nothing else. So we want to control the input into our senses, and our view of ourselves requires us to obey the dictates of our senses. Technically, the eye has one property different from the ear and the nose in that it can shut down, a difference that various theoreticians have interpreted in diverging ways (Ingold, 2000 vs. Stoller, 1997), either as a distancing organ (Howes, 1991) or as a sense that consciously includes oneself in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In practice, the difference is not that big. The dictates of these senses on our appreciation of our environment run parallel, towards an environment with a screened sensorial input.

All this is the aesthetic weight of our senses, our sensorial regime. The other question is about cognitive style, the cultural logic of the senses. How the input through our senses weighs into the ways we make up our minds does depend to some extent on one's culture. Ingold cogently argues that the notion of inversed hierarchies of the senses does not hold water, and he is right. It is not a question of simply inverting a hierarchy but of balancing input from various senses and deciding on their authority in a particular field. The cultural definition of what is an important sensorial input, and the persuasiveness of the senses, i.e., the weight people attach to the various senses in establishing their truth, do differ between cultures. Thus, the relationship between the eyes, the ear, and the nose is not competitive but a variable attribution of authority: which of the senses is to be trusted for what kind of information? The notions of 'smelling out witches' (Parkin, 1985), 'the immigrant odour' (Manalansan, 2006), and 'smelling the poor' (Talle, 1999) indicate that smells can be used to judge people, usually downwards in fact, as well as being a definition of ourselves (Low, 2007). On the other hand, smell can be erotic, like the smell of sweat (Tyrell, 2004; Mavor, 2006), or a sign of divine presence (Krügler, 2000; C. Classen, 2006; Toner, 2015) or essential in defining liminal times (Roubin, 2006). The point is that in our present Western culture, the information coming through ears and noses is valued less than the one offered by the eye, a cultural observation, not a biological one. The basis of odours is chemical, the instruments for observation biological, but the valuation is cultural. So, in my view, a stench could be defined simply as an 'odour out of place' (cf. 'dirt' Douglas, 1966) though that might take relativism a bit far.

> A text from ancient Egypt gives an example of how the hierarchy between people can be eloquently expressed in smell. The setting is the union of two godlike humans, the Pharao Tutmosis IV mating with his sister, the text is a temple inscription: 'He found her as she slept within the innermost part of her palace. She awoke on account of the divine fragrance and turned towards His Majesty. . .. His love, it entered her body. The palace was flooded with the divine fragrance and all his odours were those of the land of Punt'. (Cohn, 1993, p. 13)

It is not so much that the activity of seeing has become more important, but the weight of the information from looking has increased relative to that received by the ear or the nose. 'I see what you mean' is a frequently heard expression in oral communication, also between blind people. Our scientific endeavours focus on visualisation and visual models to understand and teach: we want to show more than to argue. In the Mande area of West Africa, it is widely understood that the world is continuously being constructed through a recited text. Whenever the Malian griots sing their version of the Sunjata epic, they recreate society through their vocal rendering of the past. Consequently, their versions diverge, which renders any historical approach tricky. It is the word that creates the world, not the other way around (Jansen, 2000).

To be wise among the Dogon of Mali is to 'know the words of the world', as the word is deemed to be the key to reality. Yet, no one could ever say that the Dogon are not into visuals, as through their mask performances and art, they create vivid spectacles to be experienced and relived. But that is what they call yogoro (entertainment), and not the real thing. The real link with the lived world is through the word, spoken, uttered without hesitation, without stuttering or stumbling, in a single prose performance, and if possible in the ritual language. Or it could be sung in an endless song during an interminable night, a song rendering the world so safe that women and children can sleep out in the open. In the daylight rituals of the Dogon funeral, the gods, spirits, and ancestors are given a splendid show of what the world is and should remain, but they react only when spoken to, when the right words are addressed in the correct fashion. And those words have their own requirements, their own regime: speaking carries weight because it is the proper

communication with the other side of the world that eyes cannot see, ears cannot hear, and the nose rarely smells. But words do reach them, and the smell of burnt sacrifices does titillate their noses.

If anything indicates the religious properties of smell, it is the use of incense in rituals. All over the world and through all ages, religions have created a pleasant smellscape for their gods, and thus for their followers, burning incense in many forms and varieties. Eastern religions have been using their local forms of incense for millennia; Ancient Egypt burned it for its manifold gods, and old Israel was commanded to put burning incense before the text of the Covenant (Ex. 30: 34–38). Almost routinely, the prayers of the faithful had to be reinforced by the strong smell of burning sage, cedar, or myrrh, especially frankincense, and also, in purification rituals and embalming procedures, these fragrances were absolutely essential, whether burned or used as essential oils. The smell of incense is the pure sign of devotion.

Frankincense (which literally means 'pure incense') offers the clearest example, for it is produced in a very restricted area only—the Horn of Africa and the adjoining corner of the Arabian peninsula; the tree species from which it is harvested attests to its holy nature—Boswellia sacra. One major trade route in the Middle East was based on it, the incense trail which ran on both sides of the Red Sea, later replaced by sea travel. Throughout the Ancient World, frankincense was both the emanation of godliness and the smell by which humanity reached out towards the divine, and though the gods might differ, they all loved the smell of frankincense: 'Where incense burns the gods assemble' (Nielsen, 1986, quoted in Feuchtwang & Rowlands, 2019, p. 72). Early Christianity eagerly adopted it—it has a respectable pedigree in the Bible as one of the gifts of the Magi—and still no Roman Catholic Mass is complete without a strong smell coming out of a swinging thurible.

Feuchtwang and Rowlands analyse the smell of frankincense, like the smell of the roasted meat of animal sacrifices, not just as way to please the gods, but also as a signal that highlights the distance between the human world and the supernatural one: the scented smoke billowing up to heaven may please the gods, but it does keep them at a distance (Feuchtwang & Rowlands, 2019, p. 72). Thus, the rising smell defines the spirit world as being literally supernatural.

Thus, smell is a highway into religion, into a world populated with invisible beings, gods, spirits, ancestors, genies, and the like. In defining the otherworld, or 'the supernatural' for that matter, it is usually the absence of vision that is mentioned, not sound or smell. Gods and spirits do speak, either directly in thunder or a gentle wind, or through intermediaries like prophets and diviners. Smell serves as the ultimate proof of otherness, convincing us of its inescapability, while its elusiveness feeds into notions of the divine. Humans burn incense to have the odours billow upwards to the heavens, but smell is also a sign of the divine itself, a sign from heaven to the faithful below. Mystics of early Christianity mystics were full of praise about the sweet smell of the Holy Spirit and the Breath of God (C. Classen, 2006), and one of the most persisting storylines in his field of smell revels over Christian saints with a magnificent after-death odour.

> Theresa of Avila, one of the most famous examples, not only was sweet smelling during her life, in death she retained a lasting fragrance: 'After Theresa's death, in 1582, her body retained its fragrance. So overpowering was this scent, indeed, that it was necessary to keep the window of the room open during the saint's wake. . . When Theresa was interred, odors were noted coming from the sepulchre, particularly on the feast days of those saints for whom she had had a special devotion. These odors were said to sometimes smell like lilies, and sometimes like jasmine or violet.' (C. Classen, 2006, p. 377). Her remains were later stolen by priests from her place of birth, leaving only one arm of her in Alba, the place

> of her convent. That arm on itself continued to smell wonderfully, and induced many healing miracles. Ultimately the pope ordered her body to be returned to Alba: 'On its trip back, in 1586, the body reportedly exhaled such an irresistible odor that, as it was carried by a cornfield, the workers were enticed to drop their flails, and follow it.'. (C. Classen, 2006, p. 379)

In cultures less into visual proof, the notion of invisible beings thus is less divorced from the visible world, because the fact that they cannot be seen carries less weight. The case of the tweaking bird in Kapsiki divination is an example: the being can be heard but not seen. My interpretation, as stated above, runs into ventriloquism, although of course I never mentioned this to my informants. However well adapted I may be to Kapsiki culture, as a Westerner I am fundamentally a 'visual agnostic': I have difficulty believing that something I cannot see does exist. When we were analysing the recording of the séance, my assistant noticed that the bird's answers were evasive, avoiding identification of any specific culprit. To me, this signalled a blacksmith who did not want to commit himself too deeply, but for him, it meant that the blacksmith was not as good a technician of the 'bird' as he should be 'He does not really know it'. The Kaspsiki live in a landscape where mythical history has left its trace; they pointed out to me some holes in the granite outcroppings that dot their plateau, explaining that when their culture hero Hwempetla fled from the pursuit of Death, he pierced this mountain in his flight. The holes can be seen, but can only be truly grasped as a story, for seeing these holes immediately invokes the well-known tale of Hwempetla, the village founder who initiated much of Kapsiki culture (see Figure 7 for such a performance). Seeing incites hearing, and seeing again is hearing again.

Figure 7. Teri Puwe telling the story of Hwempetla (Cameroon 2003).

Another example is the Kwoma opposition between seeing and smelling. For this New Guinea society, sight can be deceiving, especially for the non-initiated such as women and children, because the men have the visual powers both to see and to conceal. In this

society, it is the smell that reveals identities hidden from sight and thus is considered more reliable, since an olfactory identity endures despite changing visual appearances (Howes, 2003, pp. 146, 147). Vision cannot always be trusted, but smell is true. Similarly, all African masquerades testify that what you see is not what is really there. At least the women and small children who form the main audience are taught to believe that they see bush spirits dancing, while the men who shout exhortations to the dancers not only know that there are men inside, just like them, but also know exactly who is in which mask. But then, belief is never simple, and most women know the same, but are not allowed to show that they are 'in the know'. Senses, belief, and the invisible have a very complex relationship. Some masks are even not visible at all, just an acoustic presence by a lot of orchestrated noise, and this in no way detracts from their perceived reality (Van Beek & Leyten, 2023, 138 ff).

Within a historical religion, the shift from the 'authority of the ear' to the 'authority of the eye' is observable in the sacred texts. Of the recognised—canonised—prophets in the Old Testament, the majority (17) were called by the ear: 'The Lord came and spoke', 'the voice of the Lord', 'The Lord spoke',[7] sometimes to be followed by a vision,[8] but usually not. A minority (6) of the prophets were called in a vision,[9] which was always followed by a voice conveying the message. When we compare this with more recent hiërophanies in the Roman Catholic church, the ones that led to pilgrimage shrines, the difference is striking. As Nolan and Nolan (1989) show, the large majority of the total 3126 shrines they investigated started around an object, a relic, a miracle object, or an object that was healed. Of the 347 that started with an apparition (11%), it was nearly always a vision, very seldom a hearing.[10] One of the very few cases of hearing a voice was in Kevelaer in West Germany, where in 1641 and 1642, the travelling merchant Busman heard the voice of Mary. In fact, he had to hear it twice before he acted, and then he had to obtain—through his wife's dream—an object, a print of Mary from Luxemburg. The voice of Yahweh must be replaced by the image of Mary.

In a culture where smell and sound carry a more convincing argument than in our day and age, less burden of proof rests on the shoulders of invisible beings. When speaking about God's relationship with nature, the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal remarked that 'Nature shows us a God who hides himself' (Pascal, 2008, p. 76). This more or less sums up the attitude of many religions to their invisible world: the fact that spiritual beings cannot be seen highlights their existence and their power, as well as their ubiquitous presence in this world. One can hear them in trances, see them in dreams and visions, communicate in divination, and smell them in sacrifices (Clements, 2015). That is more than enough. Seeing them would make little difference and, in any case, not seeing them allows for a different relationship with them.

Yet the senses seem to translate into each other—the notion of synaesthesia. Ingold (2000, p. 276) speaks, with great verve, about the interchangeability of visual and auditory perception, i.e., about the 'hearing eye' and the 'seeing ear'. Although that discourse would run into some problems with smell, tactile hands can very well see—and that is one sense Homo sapiens excels at. The senses are not that separate. Sacks's title on the deaf is revealing: 'Seeing Voices'. On the road to Damascus, St. Paul encountered the risen Jesus mainly through his ears: bathed in light he heard a voice (Acts 9: 3–4). In his rendering of the event in his Letter to the Corinthians, he speaks of 'seeing the Lord' (I Cor. 9:1). In fact, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the senses are rarely separate, as perception does not occur in the sensorial organs but in the brain, which integrates all senses into one mode of perception. And our perceptual experience has always some totality: 'My body is not a collection of adjacent organs but a synergic system, all the functions of which are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 234, cited

in Ingold, 2000, p. 268). When more senses are involved, which is usually the case, it is difficult to separate and identify information coming from one or the other.

To be truly convincing, one indeed has to appeal to more senses, using the synergy of combined inputs. Rituals, the very expression of the presence of the invisible, routinely appeal to as many senses as possible, and combine theatrical performances, participation, and bodily exertion into an integrated experience of the otherworld. One spectacular example comes from incense—the smell of sanctity. After their long travel over the famous Camino de Santiago, faithful pilgrims gather in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela for the mass that forms the highlight of their journey. If they are lucky enough to chance upon a special mass, they witness the Botafumeiro, a giant incense thurible. Filled with smoking charcoal and frankincense, this great silver vase is suspended from the high cathedral ceiling. By rhythmic rope pulling, special operators called tiraboleiros make it swing in huge arcs through the transept, up till over 20 m high and going over 60 km per hour. Thus, at the high point of the mass, a captivating visual spectacle envelopes the audience in a cloud of divine fragrance. The fact that this has become a major tourist attraction is telling of our modern culture, and the historical accidents it has caused only add to its fame.

In his vivid and detailed description of Aztec rain rituals, Carrasco (1991) highlights the combined assault on the senses by the sacrificial procession winding through the sacred landscape of the valley of Mexico City. In fact, he portrays the colours, movements, smells, and songs of the impressive royal retinue so vividly that one almost forgets people are being sacrificed. Such a synergy of the senses overcomes any challenge of invisibility, and thus the ritual succeeds not only in negating the ravages of time, but also in eliminating any difference between this world and its other side. When the Dogon dance their masks during the final funeral rites of the dama, performing individually as well as in a group inside an overwhelming soundscape of drums, bells, and shouts in the secret language, the audience watches, enraptured. Though they do discern good from bad performances, the input through all their senses shouts the unity of the village with the bush, of animals and men, and of past and present. The invisible world becomes self-evident in the performance, as the senses, however differently they may be weighed, unite to ensure the collapse of all distinctions.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Most of the data used in the article are secondary and have already been published, and I took care to refer to each of these as correctly as possible. As for my own research, the field research on the Kapsiki started in 1971 and the last field period was in January 2012. The interviews from which the specific data on smell stemmed, took place in April 1973. The first publication of these data was in 1992, in the article in Africa mentioned in the text. At the time there was no ethics Board in the Utrecht University, my home university at the time. Institutional ethics requirements were still in the future. Also, at that ime, the Dutch Anthropological Association was developing an ethical code for anthropological fieldwork, an endeavour in which I was an active participant as member and later president of that Association.

Informed Consent Statement: Written informed consent could not be obtained, given that most informants were unschooled and lived far from urban areas and schools. Verbal consent, however, was obtained from all informants, while anyone consulted in the course of the research was completely free not to engage in this project. The introduction of the project in 1971 followed the following procedure. I was first introduced into the area by a local catholic missionary, situated in Sir, who led me to a catechist of his in Mogode, the central village. With the latter I went to the Lamido—the canton Chief—and introduced myself, and he welcomed my stay and research. Then I went to the village chief, and he also welcomed me and my research. The same was done later, when I started my longer stay in 1972, with all the ward chiefs. From the start it was completely clear that I was doing research on their history and culture, and nobody mistook my presence for anything else. I was given

a Kapsiki name, Zra Kangacé, to indicate their approval of my stay among them. With each revisit this bond has been reinforced and even fêted by the village. My publications all have been sent to the Kapsiki through my field assistant, and to the University of Yaoundé, later also the University of Maroua. In June 2025, I was in Yaoundé, and lectured at the Institute for Anthropology on my research, before an audience of Kapsiki living in the capital, among them children of my informants, with great acclaim. On 2 August 2025, a Kapsiki from Mogode, son of the catechist mentioned above, came to my home in Wageningen to hand to me a 'Diplôme d'Honneur' from the present Lamido (the son of the one I was introduced to in 1971). The framed document states 'Ce diplôme est attribué à Zra Kangache, en raison de sa qualité et des services rendus au Canton de Mogodé', signed Lamido Faissal, à Mogodé, 28 May 2025. Viewing this relationship, it is understandable that my informants are not anonymized, since they did not want to be so; instead, they want to be acknowledged as part of this project. Plus, they are proud of their cultural heritage, a pride I have helped to stimulate, so they want their names mentioned in full. Anyway, they consider privacy as only interesting for those who have something to hide.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interests.

Notes

[1] I thank my colleagues Raymond Corbey (Tilburg University) and Diederik Raven (Utrecht University) for their constructive and incisive comments on an earlier draft.

[2] It has become clear lately not only that language did evolve, but also that we can indeed say something sensible about its evolutionary pathways despite the decennia-long reticence among linguists to address the topic (Kenneally, 2007).

[3] All photos are by the author.

[4] Both the Kapsiki and the Dogon have a two-tone system, mainly lexical for Kapsiki (Psekye) and also syntactic for the Dogon. The author performed field research among both groups.

[5] And recently through the anosmia that results from COVID infections.

[6] Foul smells even today can be weaponised, for instance used by police in riot containment; see (Tremblay et al., 2023). It can also be used for tracking people in an oppressive totalitarian state: in the former DDR (East Germany), the secret police gathered and stored smells of their citizens to track them down later with dogs, as the Leipzig Stasi museum shows.

[7] Moses, Bileam, Joshua, Samuel, Nathan, Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

[8] Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Zechariah.

[9] Samson, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Nahum, Habakkuk.

[10] The same goes for the BIN database of the Royal Dutch Academy, 'Pilgrimages in the Netherlands' (*Bedevaartplaatsen in Nederland*). The Dutch apparition shrines are also almost exclusively visual. My thanks go to my Tilburg colleague Paul Post for his guidance in this matter.

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