

The Taste of Ethnographic Things

*The
Senses
in
Anthropology*

Paul Stoller



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UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS



Philadelphia

Jacket illustration: "Spice Bazaar." Photo by Cheryl Olkes
Frontispiece: "A Lamb Roast in Mehanna, Niger." Photo by the author

Figures 2, 9, photos by Cheryl Olkes. All other figures photos by the author

Portions of Chapter 8 from *Discourse and the Social Life of Meaning*, ed. P. Chock and J. Wyman. Copyright © 1986 by the Smithsonian Institution. Reprinted by permission.

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stoller, Paul.

The taste of ethnographic things : the senses in anthropology /
Paul Stoller.

p. cm.—(University of Pennsylvania Press contemporary
ethnography series)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8122-8186-1.—ISBN 0-8122-1292-4 (pbk.)

1. Songhai (African people) 2. Sense and sensation—Cross-
cultural studies. 3. Ethnology—Niger—Field work. I. Title.
II. Series.

DT547.45.S65S765 1989

306'.096626—dc20

89-33670

CIP

Third paperback printing 1992

Acknowledgments

This book is the result of the collective efforts of many people and many institutions. I could not have traveled to Niger over the years without generous support from foundations and U.S. Government Agencies. Fieldwork in 1976–77 was financed through grants from the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Program (G00–76–03659) and from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (No. 3175). Research in Niger in 1979–80 was made possible through a NATO Postdoctoral Fellowship in Science. My work in Niger in 1981 and 1982–83 was made possible through grants from the American Philosophical Society and West Chester University. Grants from the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and West Chester University made possible field studies in the summer of 1984. Further grants from West Chester University enabled me to conduct research in Niger in 1985–86 and 1987.

The perspective of this book has been influenced greatly by my graduate studies in sociolinguistics at Georgetown University and in linguistic anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. At Georgetown Roger Shuy taught me a great deal about the relation between language and society, and Joan Rubin introduced me to anthropology. At the University of Texas at Austin the intellectual guidance offered me by Annette B. Weiner and Joel Sherzer has been invaluable. At the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, Jean Rouch patiently pointed a near-sighted student in the right direction. In Niger, I must honor the memory of the late Seyni Kountché, President of the Republic, who granted me numerous authorizations to conduct ethnographic field research in his country. At the Institut de Recherches en Sciences Humaines I have received warm encouragement and support

from Djouldé Laya, Djibo Hamani, and Hamidou Arouna Sidikou, past directors, and Boubé Gado, the present director. After months in the Nigerien bush, Jean-François Berger, Tom and Barbara Hale, Jim and Heidi Lowenthal, Tom Price, the Djibo family, and Kathleen Heffron invited me into their homes and received me with graciousness and kindness.

Many people have commented on the various chapters in this book. In particular I acknowledge the insightful commentary of Jeanne Favret-Saada, Jean-Marie Gibbal, Martin Murphy, Dan Rose, Judith Gleason, John Chernoff, Smadar Lavie, Philip Kilbride, and Norman Whitten, Jr. Members of the staff of the University of Pennsylvania Press, particularly Patricia Smith, have worked with great dedication to transform this project into a fine book. I thank them for their considerable efforts.

I would also like to acknowledge three other people whose work and efforts on my behalf have contributed greatly to the birth of this book. The first is James Fernandez, who has been a continuous source of intellectual support, guidance, and encouragement. The second is Paul Riesman, who died suddenly in 1988. Paul's field site among the Fulani of Burkina Faso was a few hundred kilometers west of mine in Niger. Early on, Paul Riesman saw something in my work that others failed to see. He encouraged me during frustrating times with his unforgettable warmth and kindness. His was an important voice in the anthropological community, and I hope this volume is in a small way a testament to his sense of anthropology. Cheryl Olkes has been involved in my work from its beginning. We have shared many joys in the field and the office. It is through her considerable efforts that this book is readable and coherent.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the wisdom of my Songhay teacher, Sohanci Adamu Jenitongo, who died in 1988 at the age of 106. I was privileged to have known him and learned from him. He taught me not only a great deal about Songhay, but a great deal about anthropology as well.

* * *

Much of this book consists of previously published material that has been expanded, revised, and updated. An earlier version of Chapter 1 was published as "Bad Sauce, Good Ethnography" in *Cultural Anthropology* 1: 336–52. Chapter 2, "Eye, Mind, and Word in Anthropology," was revised from an article published in the French journal *L'Homme* 24: 93–114. " 'Gazing' at the Space of Songhay Politics" was fashioned from two previously published articles, "The Negotiation of Songhay Space: Phenomenology in the Heart of Darkness," *American Ethnologist* 7: 419–31, and "Relativity and the Anthropologist's Gaze," *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly* 7(4): 2–10. Chapter 4 is a revised version of an article that originally appeared in

the *American Ethnologist* 9: 750–62. Material in Chapter 5 was revised from an article that appeared in *Anthropology Quarterly* 60: 114–24. Chapters 6 and 7 were fashioned—with the inclusion of much new information—from one article, “Sound in Songhay Cultural Experience,” published in *American Ethnologist* 11: 559–70. Chapter 8 is also a revision of a previously published article. “The Reconstruction of Ethnography” was first delivered as a lecture to the Anthropological Society of Washington in 1983 and then appeared in P. Chock and J. Wyman’s edited volume, *Discourse and the Social Life of Meaning* (pp. 51–75), published for the Anthropological Society of Washington by the Smithsonian Institution Press. The material in Chapter 9 has not been previously published.

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Today you are learning about us, but to understand us you will have to grow old with us.

Adamu Jenitongo, zima of Tillaberi, Niger

I really do think with my pen, because my head often knows nothing about what my hand is writing.

Wittgenstein

Introduction: A Return to the Senses

In the summer of 1969 I went to the Republic of Niger for the first time. As a recently recruited English teacher, I spent my first two weeks there as a guest of the government. They housed me in a spacious villa and provided me a government chef who had been trained in Paris. My plush air-conditioned quarters protected me from the heat, mosquitoes, and dust of summer in Niger.

This luxurious arrangement initially diverted me from the sensual realities of urban Niger: naked children defecating into the ditches which carried the city's sewage; clouds of aromatic smoke rising from grills on which butchers roasted mouth-watering slices of mutton; dirt roads rendered impassable by rat-infested hills of rotting garbage; gentle winds carrying the pungent smell of freshly pounded ginger; skeletal lepers thrusting their stump-hands in people's faces—their way of asking for money; portly men wrapped in elaborately embroidered blue damask robes, emerging from their Mercedes sedans; blind and crippled beggars, dressed in grimy rags, singing for their meals.

After a two-week dream holiday, I walked into that world and remained there for two years. What did I experience? At first I dove into the sensual world of the city. I was particularly struck by the misery of the “have-nots” juxtaposed with the insouciance of the “haves.” The misery of the “have-nots” was at once horrifying and fascinating. It was horrifying because nothing in my twenty-two years of life had prepared me for such human deprivation. It was fascinating for the same reason that makes motorists slow down or stop at the scene of a gruesome automobile accident. The insouciance of the “haves” was also horrifying and fascinating.

How could people with so much be blind to those with so little? At first Africa assailed my senses. I smelled and tasted ethnographic things and was both repelled by and attracted to a new spectrum of odors, flavors, sights, and sounds.

My sensual openness, however, was shortlived. I quickly lost touch with those scenes of abject deprivation which blended into those of insensitive consumption. I soon lost scent of the nose-crinkling stench of the open sewer that gave way to the aromatic aromas of roasting meat. My ears soon deafened to the moans of a sick child that were overwhelmed by the happy laughter of a healthy one. I had become an experience-hardened Africa hand. My immersion in Niger, in Africa, had been, in short, distanciated, intellectualized—taken out of the realm of sensual sentiment. The world of ethnographic things had lost its tastes.

My intellectualist vision compelled me to write about my early experience in Niger for a variety of publications in the United States. It also propelled me toward graduate study, first in linguistics and then in social anthropology. I wanted to master Niger—Africa—by understanding her deeply. My graduate studies sharpened my intellectualist vision and narrowed my sensual horizons. One does fieldwork, I learned, to gather “data” from informants. One collects these data, brings them “home” and then, from an objective distance, analyzes them. The analysis focuses on an intellectual problem—kinship, sociocultural change, symbolic meaning—the solution to which refines social theory. The underlying premise of this epistemology is fundamental: one *can* separate thought from feeling and action.

So I believed when I returned to Niger in 1976 to conduct my doctoral research. My project was to assess the impact of ritual language on local politics among the Songhay. My methods consisted of an assortment of research interventions: a language attitude survey, a census, and tape-recorded linguistic data of everyday interactions and religious ceremonies. My findings would then be used to make a contribution to theory in linguistic anthropology.

In the field, as most anthropologists know,

The best laid schemes o' mice and men
Gang aft a-gley.¹

There is nothing wrong with the conventional research methods I used, but they failed, nonetheless, because most Songhay refused to cooperate with me. They scarcely knew this man who had the temerity to ask strange questions and write down the responses. In fact, my gaze was so narrowly focused in 1976–77 that I missed much of what “went on” during my first year in the field. I had made a number of friends during that period, friends

who were impressed by my command of the Songhay language, but despite my linguistic facility they revealed little of themselves to me. When it came time for me to leave, I promised to return, but I don't think many of my friends believed me. For them, one must demonstrate friendship over a long period of time. Then, and only then, do the seeds of trust germinate.

I returned to Niger in 1979–80, 1981, 1982–83, 1984, 1985–86, 1987, and 1988. On each successive trip budding relationships grew into fully rooted friendships, friendships that bore the fruit of trust. Some people admitted to having told me only parts of their stories. Other people asked me to join their families as a “fictive son.” Adamu Jenitongo, who became my Songhay “father” and my principal teacher, built me a small mudbrick house in his compound. A few people came to trust me deeply because, in the words of Amadu Zima, an old possession priest, they “liked me, liked me a lot.” When I traveled to Niger in March of 1988 to attend Adamu Jenitongo's funeral, the members of his family were deeply moved.

“You came all this way to see Baba?” one of his wives asked.

“Love,” I answered, “is something” (*Bakasine hyfo no*).

In fact, it is the play of personalities, the presentation of self, and the presence of sentiment—not only the soundness of conventional research methods—that have become the reasons for my deep immersion into the Songhay world. Slowly, I uncovered an important rule: one cannot separate thought from feeling and action; they are inextricably linked.

This realization opened my senses once again to the world of ethnographic things, to Niger. In 1969 my senses were tuned to the otherness, to the squalor of Niger; my senses of taste, smell, hearing, and sight entered into Nigerien settings. Now I let the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of Niger flow into me.² This fundamental rule in epistemological humility taught me that taste, smell, and hearing are often more important for the Songhay than sight, the privileged sense of the West. In Songhay one can taste kinship, smell witches, and hear the ancestors.

THE STUDY AND RESTUDY OF SONGHAY

The Songhay are a people proud of their past, tracing their origins to the eighth century and the coming of the legendary Aliaman Za to the Niger River basin near the present-day city of Gao, in Mali. Along the banks of the Niger, Za founded the first Songhay dynasty, the Zās; it remained intact until the fourteenth century, when Ali Kolon, who had freed Songhay from the yoke of the Mali Empire, declared a second dynasty, the Sonnis. The Sonni dynasty reached the zenith of its power with the reign of Sonni Ali Ber (1463–91). Sonni Ali Ber expanded the influence and power of Songhay during his epoch. His successor, Askia Mohammed Touré (1493–1528), who founded the third and final Songhay dynasty, the Askia, bureaucratized

the Empire and extended its borders. After the reign of Askia Mohammed the influence and power of the Empire waned. In 1591, the armies of the Moroccan, El Mansur, defeated Songhay and ended the independent rule of what had been a great Sahelian empire.

In the wake of this calamitous defeat, Songhay nobles fled to the south and established a southern empire, which, because of internecine conflicts, was soon balkanized into five principalities. These polities maintained their autonomy until the coming of French armies during the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The Songhay still live along the Niger River basin in western Niger, eastern Mali, and northern Benin. As in the past, they farm millet in most regions and cultivate rice in riverine areas. The society is divided into three general groups of unequal status: the nobles, who trace their descent patrilineally to Askia Mohammed Touré; former slaves, who trace their descent patrilineally to prisoners of precolonial wars; and foreigners, peoples who have migrated into Songhay country in the distant or recent past.

This summary of the historic past and the social present is the result of my study of Songhay society. It is based on both library and field research in 1976–77. My restudies, conducted in 1979–80, 1981, 1982–83, 1984, 1985–86, and 1987 have revealed a great deal more. The tripartite pattern of Songhay social organization has recently been undermined, not by the excesses of colonialism and independence, but by incessant drought, famine, and urban migration. Haunted by dry skies, dusty soil, and barren fields, many Songhay have left the countryside, abandoning in the dust some of their cultural traditions. In the face of this sociocultural dessication, the Songhay nonetheless remember their proud past and maintain their distinct cultural identity.

Besides giving me the perspective to assess social change, long term study of Songhay has plunged me into the Songhay worlds of sorcery and possession, worlds the wisdom of which is closed to outsiders—even Songhay outsiders. My insistence on long term study forced me to confront the interpretative errors of earlier visits. Restudying Songhay also enabled me to get a bit closer to “getting it right.” But I have just begun to walk my path. As Adamu Jenitongo once told me, “Today you are learning about us, but to understand us, you will have to grow old with us.”

Although restudy has long been a research methodology among French ethnologists, many Anglo-American anthropologists have been content to visit the field one, two, or perhaps three times during their academic careers. This tendency is methodologically disastrous. Like the essays in George Foster’s volume *Long Term Field Research in Social Anthropology*, the chapters of this book reflect the methodological and intellectual rewards of long term study in anthropology. This book suggests that one can discover a

great many “ethnographic facts” in one year of fieldwork, but it takes years, no matter the perspicacity of the observer, to develop a deep comprehension of others.

Ongoing study of Songhay has also compelled me to tune my senses to the frequencies of Songhay sensibilities. Had I limited my fieldwork in Songhay to one year or two, I would have produced intellectualist tracts, just like the summary above of Songhay history and social organization, in which individual Songhay are “edited out” of the discourse, and in which the sense of sight is prior to those of smell, taste, and sound. Returning to Niger year after year taught me that Songhay use senses other than sight to categorize their sociocultural experience. If anthropologists are to produce knowledge, how can they ignore how their own sensual biases affect the information they produce? This book demonstrates why anthropologists should open their senses to the worlds of their others.

THE SENSES AND ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING

My rediscovery of the sensual aspects of Songhay social life is unfortunately the exception rather than the rule in the Western academy. For us, dry first principles are generally more important than mouth-watering aromas. It was not always this way, however. In sixteenth-century France savants only rarely used visual metaphors to explain natural phenomena. In fact a number of scholars believe that prior to the eighteenth century the sense of sight was far less developed, cognitively speaking, than those of touch, smell, or hearing.

A case in point brought forward by David Howes concerns the medieval adjudication of claims that a person died a saint.

Exhuming his body about a year after burial, people discovered in every case that a sweet fragrance rose from the saint’s tomb. The flesh had largely vanished from the bones; and the redolence that remained indicated the absence of putrefaction. The pleasing aroma, called the *odor of sanctity*, proved that the saint had miraculously exuviated his flesh. Possessed therefore of an excarnate form rendering him impervious both to desires and to the sins of the flesh, the saint received divine power.³

As Howes argues, here is an analysis based on an olfactory as opposed to a visual bias.⁴

This sensualism stood in stark contrast to the ethos of the Middle Ages, throughout which sensualists were considered blasphemers. With the Enlightenment, Suzanne Langer wrote, “the senses, long despised and attributed to the interesting but improper domain of the devil, were recognized as man’s most valuable servants, and were rescued from their classical disgrace to wait on him in his new venture.”⁵ Sense data, espe-

cially visual, became all-important to the emerging scientific culture. Empiricism eclipsed rationalism. The emphasis on empirical observation raised sight to a privileged position, soon replacing the bias of the “lower senses” (especially smell and touch).

In medicine, as Foucault reminds us, the coronation of sight occurred in the late eighteenth century. Prior to the emergence of clinical medicine, physicians believed that odor could indicate as well as spread disease. With the advent of anatomy, the body was for the first time “opened up” to the observing eyes of physicians who began to spatialize and categorize tissues, bones, and organs.⁶

In philosophy, Kant’s seminal *Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790, was the pioneering effort in the distancing of observer from observed. In his *Critique* Kant intellectualized and imagined priorities among the senses, relegating smell, taste, and touch to the level of brute as opposed to aesthetic sensation. Combined with the visual intellectualism of the Enlightenment thinkers, the influence of Kant removed Western observers from the arena of sensuality, consequently expunging the so-called lower senses from our discourse, resulting in what Suzanne Langer might have called “reason’s disgrace.”

Anthropological writers have become full partners in “reason’s disgrace.” In 1922 Malinowski established the goal of ethnographic writing: to write a document that gives the reader a *sense* of what it is like to live in the lands of others. Although Malinowski’s writing was full of dense ethnographic detail, it also featured many sensual passages that described the sights and sounds of Trobriand social life on land and sea.

Occasionally a wave leaps up and above the platform, and the canoe—unwieldy, square craft as it seems at first—heaves lengthways and crossways, mounting the furrows with graceful agility. When the sail is hoisted, its heavy, stiff folds of golden matting unroll with a characteristic swishing and crackling noise, and the canoe begins to make way; when the water rushes away below with a hiss, and the yellow sail glows against the intense blue of sea and sky—then indeed the romance of sailing seems to open through a new vista.⁷

Since Malinowski’s time, however, anthropology has become more and more scientific. Vivid descriptions of the sensoria of ethnographic situations have been largely overshadowed by a dry, analytical prose. In problem-oriented ethnography, data—excluding in large measure the non-visual senses—are used to refine aspects of social theory. Lost on this dry steppe of intellectualized prose are characterizations of others as they lead their social lives. Such a trend has unfortunately narrowed the readership for most ethnographies, and has made anthropology a discipline in which practitioners increasingly speak only to each other—not to multiple audiences. One path out of this morass, as I argue in this book, is to write