



Anthropology and Odor: From Manhattan to Mato Grosso

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The sense of smell is one of the important ways humans have of sensing and interpreting their environment, and odors are an influential part of any person's being. Yet very few anthropologists have given serious attention to odors. This lack of interest is probably more a result of 19th Century Euro-American cultural biases that downplay odors or isolate the odoriferous in specialized, private rooms and domains than it is a reflection of the little importance given to odors in societies around the world.

Although thousands of anthropologists have investigated different aspects of human societies, only a few have written about odor.⁴ The study of the association of odors with other aspects of human experience has hardly begun.^{1,3,4,6}

If they have ignored odor, anthropologists have devoted more attention to some of the other senses, including vision (color perception) and audition (music). On that basis, we can expect two features of olfaction to be similar to the other senses studied. First, odors will be described differently in different societies. Although all

humans can perceive scents, in some societies odors will be more explicitly elaborated, more frequently discussed, and more culturally important than in others. Second, the specific scents thought to be beautiful, high status, or awful will vary to a certain extent from society to society. They may also vary within the same society over time, or even within different groups in any society.

Cultural Variability

The physiology of smelling and the biochemistry of the brain are similar in all human beings. However, the meanings given to most scents and the importance of different scents to different societies apparently do not reside only in biochemistry but in the meanings attributed to the odors by the members of societies.

The extent to which a group of people makes odors an object of reflection and uses them to express ideas, intentions, and values is a *cultural* phenomenon. It is neither "natural" nor an inevitable development within European societies to bathe frequently to remove smells of body and sexual odors or to privilege the smell of flowers.



Instead, these values are learned and transmitted. They are integrated into a whole set of ideas that we can loosely call “cosmology” or “culture” in the anthropological sense.

For example, in a small-scale tribal society in the Bay of Bengal scents were used to mark time:

In the jungles of the Andamans it is possible to recognize a distinct succession of odours during considerable parts of the year as one after another the commoner trees and lianas come into flower . . . The Andamanese have therefore adopted an original method of marking the different periods of the year by means of the different odoriferous flowers that are in bloom at different times. Their calendar is a calendar of scents.⁷

Yet in early eighteenth century France, flowers were not as highly valued as other scents for marking personal attributes:

. . . the vigor of the individual was associated with the intensity of his body odor, particularly the “*aura seminalis*,” which was considered vital to sexual attraction. Women were equally expressive: they used the then fashionable animal scents such as musk “not to mask their odor but to emphasize it” (pp 36-7, 73).²

Scents often communicate (or are used to classify) social status. If you sat in the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York and discovered that your neighbor smelled strongly of cows, you would probably move away from that person in some alarm or disgust. In the Grand Ballroom cow scent would be considered an inappropriate aroma.

Yet if smelling like a cow is negatively valued in midtown Manhattan as indicative of rural origins, manual labor, low status and lack of water, among the Dassanech, a pastoral people of Southwest Ethiopia, those smells are given a very positive value. There men smell like cattle.

. . . not so much because they work with cattle or spend a good deal of time near cattle, but mainly because they anoint themselves with the body products of cattle. They often wash their hands in cattle urine; men smear manure on their bodies to advertise the fertility of their herds; and nubile girls and fertile women smear *ghee* [clarified butter] to attract men and [it] is the “perfume,” so to speak, of women (p. 109).¹

One of the reasons that Dassanech herders wanted to smell like cattle was that it differentiated them from their neighbors who had no cattle, but lived by fishing. To have no cattle was to be poor and worthless, and the Dassanech—smelling of their bovine accumulation—complained that the fishing people really stank, unlike cattle-rearing people. Anointing them-

selves with the odoriferous byproducts of their pastoral wealth, the Dassanech used odors to distinguish among status groups just as we do, but with the different values.

Among the Suyá Indians of Brazil

I was born and raised amidst the smells of Greenwich village—exhaust fumes, many different kinds of food aromas, coal smoke, and the omnipresent reminder of the number of dogs in the city. My wife and I went to live with an Indian community in the Brazilian jungle to study music, but soon discovered that to make sense of the world we had arrived in we would have to give considerably more attention to aromas than we had ever imagined. This was not because the Indians we lived with smelled. On the contrary, they bathed several times a day and accurately complained that Whites whom they had met—sweating heavily in unclean clothes—had a rancid smell of their own.

We had to understand the Suyá ideas about scents because they used odors to classify and talk about many more things than most Americans do. If I were to understand why the Suyá classified children the way they did, or cooked food the way they did, and ate or avoided eating

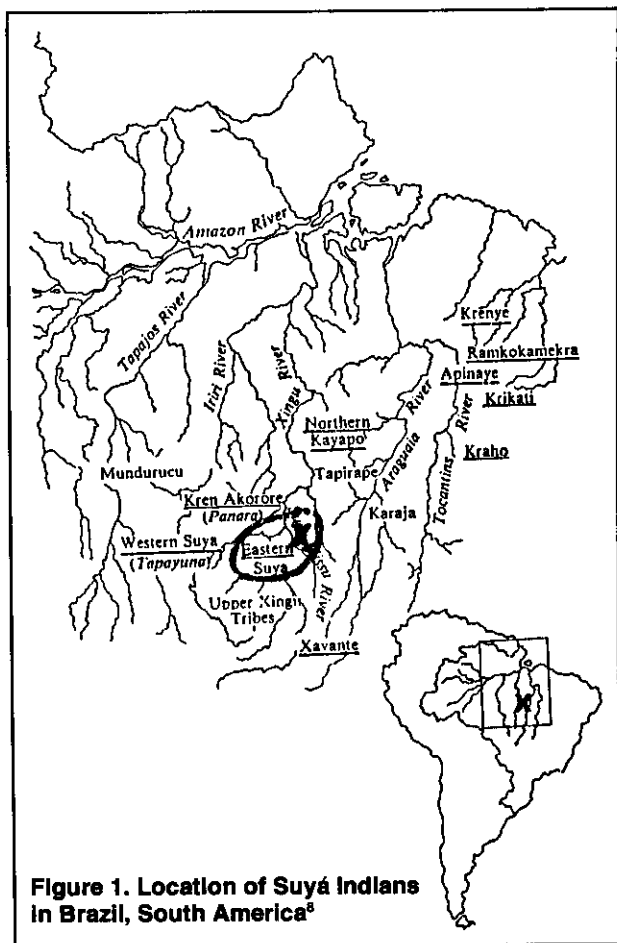


Figure 1. Location of Suyá Indians in Brazil, South America⁸



Table I. Classification of Some Body Odors^a

Substance	Strong Smelling (kü-kumeni)	Pungent (kutü-kumeni)	Rotten (kraw-kumeni)
Blood (all)	X		
Breast milk	X		
Vaginal fluids	X		
Semen	X		
Sweat		X	
Feces			X
Unwashed female genitals			X

certain animals, I had to understand not only how they described odors, but what they meant by “strong odor” and how odors affect human beings.

The Suyá Indians live in the northern reaches of the State of Mato Grosso, Brazil, in the Xingu National Indian Park (see figure 1). Decimated by disease and violence in the first two thirds of this century, they number about 180 individuals today—a size not uncommon among Amazonian Indian populations. At the time they lived in a single circular village on the edge of the “little Suya River” (Rio Suiá-missu), where they subsisted on hunting, fishing, and slash-and-burn horticulture. My wife and I lived among them for a total of twenty-four months between 1971 and 1982, learning to speak their language and

Table II. Suyá Classification by Odor of Animal^b

Strong Smelling (kü-kumeni)	Pungent (kutü-kumeni)	Bland (kutwä-kumeni)	Rotten (kraw-kumeni)
Mammals			
Jaguar	Wild pigs (Queix- ada, caltetu)	Mice	Opossum
Wild cats		Small armadillo (tatu bole)	
Tapir	Giant anteater	All bats	
All species of deer	Lesser anteater	All monkeys except howlers	
"Fox"	Giant armadillo	Cutia	
"Wolf"	Lesser armadillo (tatu galinha)	Paca	
Giant otter	Coati	Kinkajou	
Capybara	Porcupine		
Three-toed sloth	Weasel		
Two-toed sloth	Skunk		
	Howler monkey		
Birds			
Fishing hawk	Hawk (acauã)	Hawk	Vultures
Storks	Owl (corujao orelhundo)	Owls (coruja de campo, murucutatu)	
Heron		Parrots	
Ibis	Macaw	Mataica	
		Larger parakeets (do not eat smaller ones)	
		Toucans	
		Woodpeckers	
		Pigeons	
		Curassow	
		Tinamou	
		Partridge	
		Emu	
		Muscovy duck	
		Goatsucker	
		Swallow	
		João-conga	
		Cuckoo	
		Hummingbird	
		Thrush	
Reptiles and Amphibians			
Lizards (lagarto, calango do rabo verde)	Cayman (Western Suya)	Cayman (Eastern Suya)	Land turtle
		River turtle	
		Lizard (lagartixa)	



studying their cosmology, social organization, and music.

The Suyá had a developed terminology for odors which is difficult to translate because they applied it to so many domains, but can be roughly laid out as follows:

- Kutwā*: tasty, good smelling
- kutü*: pungent, having a medium amount of odor
- kü*: strong smelling: very odorous
- kraw*: rotten, the smell of something decomposing.

Since odors are hard to translate, it is probably best to give the Suyá classification of certain human body odors to give an idea of how these words are used (Table I).

The Suyá also used odors to classify most animals (Table II). Yet their classification does not necessarily coincide with our own. Fish, for example, are bland-smelling, wild pigs are pungent (even though one species has a musk gland) and deer are strong smelling.

The Suyá extended the classification by smell to people. A child from its birth until puberty was said to be "strong smelling" (prepubescent girls were sometimes excepted from this and said to have no smell). The reason for this is that Suyá said infants retain the odor of the semen and blood that created their bodies (the Suyá would have been shocked at the scent of the Parisian gentlemen described by Corbin above: they would have called the courtiers semi-animal barbarians).

After their initiation young men pass to having no odor, while a woman after puberty is said to be "strong smelling." Men continue to have no odor (unless it is bland because of the oil they put on themselves) until they are grandfathers, when they become "pungent smelling." The only exceptions are particularly violent war leaders who are said to be pungent smelling even when younger. Women continue to have a strong odor until they become grandmothers, whereupon they become "pungent smelling" also.

For the Suyá odors are not a temporary trait, but something having to do with an animal's or a person's essential identity—something that will only change when the person changes status. This is a very different concept from what we find in Manhattan, where a bath and some cologne or perfume are sufficient to change a person's odor.

Nor did the Suyá classification of things by odors stop at humans, it permeated their under-

standing of and use of the plant world for medicinal purposes. Suyá medicines consisted of roughly two types: first, songs that used metaphors to transfer to a patient qualities desired for him or her and, second, plant medicines. In the songs, for example, a person with a shortness of breath would have a song sung over him that named the giant river otter, because otters can swim for a long time underwater and do not get out of breath. The singing of the song is supposed to instill that particular otter trait into the person.

Most of the plant medicines were crushed and either rubbed directly onto the skin or boiled in water under the hammock of the sick person who would be infused by its steam. With a single exception—a "bland" smelling plant rubbed on the skin—every medicinal plant was described as "pungent."⁸ But in the medicinal domain, the Suyá distinguished three kinds of pungency: "slightly pungent," "pungent" and "very pungent." The less pungent plants were safe for children, but might not work; the very pungent plants might be too strong, but they could be very effective.



How do we make sense of this sometimes titillating, sometimes tedious set of data? The anthropological approach is to take a lot of information of this sort and order it by demonstrating that a native theory underlies it. From the ideas above, and many other kinds of information presented in my ethnography, I think I can construct a Suyá theory of scents.

For the Suyá, strong odor is powerful, dangerous, and should be avoided. Strong and rotten smelling things are dangerous because they can transform human beings into something less than human, less than healthy, and can even kill.

Rotten smells were said to rot a person from the inside out. Whenever Suyá smelled feces, or a fart, they would spit. When they noticed I was politely not doing so, they exhorted me to spit, too, to eliminate the rotten smell and avoid the possibility of internal rotting. The only time, they said, when one should not make a point of spitting loudly was when it was one's mother- or father-in-law who farted. Then one had to take one's chances in the interest of an etiquette of silence and respect.

Strong-smelling things can transform people as well. That is why most strong-smelling animals are never eaten, and the consumption of the others is surrounded by taboos: one should only ingest that kind of powerful food when one is in good health and has no young children who might be affected by the strength of it. Pungent things can transform people, but not as violently or as much. People who are ill do not consume pungent smelling animals, but they do use pungent medicines to be transformed back to good health. Bland things are safe—safe to eat, safe to inhale, and don't transform people. So safe are they, in fact, that bland smelling things are virtually useless as medicines.

In this small Brazilian Indian society, we have a people who have taken odor as a measure of the world and use it to interpret power and express danger. They have taken what is sometimes considered to be a non-essential feature of animals and humans and turned it into a major way of interpreting their universe.

Are the smells they describe objective smells? Would a chemist discover the similarities and differences among the groups of animals the Suyá distinguish? I don't think so, beyond the odors of certain biological processes.

Although odor is chemical, its interpretation is a cultural act of classification and interpretation. What is important in animals is not only their chemical reality, but also what they mean to the Suyá. Jaguars, for example, are large carnivores that are truly dangerous and figure prominently

in Suyá myths. Their cosmological and real power are possibly converted by the Suyá into olfactory power by calling them "strong-smelling."

While the chemistry of olfaction and the biochemistry of the brain may be basically similar in all humans, the particular scents that arouse interest and are given significance vary from society to society.

Conclusion

This paper has two simple conclusions. First, I have demonstrated that the values given to specific odors—flowers, semen, cattle—vary from society to society, and within any society over time. Second, I have shown that the degree to which members of a group use *odor* to interpret the world also varies. The Suyá, a small Brazilian Indian society, may have attributed powerful and cosmological significance to strong odors in a way we ourselves only do in a more peripheral way.

Yet if we do not employ the sense of scent to as great a degree as the Suyá, it is certain that odors are far more important to the human being than the scant attention given to them by anthropologists to date. Perhaps we shall learn from the people we study and give olfaction fuller treatment in the future.

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