



HAL
open science

Sensory Expression in the Saharan Context

Marie-Luce Gélard

► **To cite this version:**

Marie-Luce Gélard. Sensory Expression in the Saharan Context. Senses and Society, 2016, Contemporary French Sensory Ethnography, 11 (3), pp.286 - 297. <10.1080/17458927.2016.1195111>. <hal-03137571>

HAL Id: hal-03137571

<https://hal.science/hal-03137571v1>

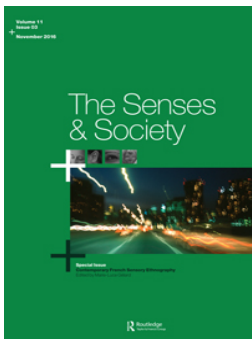
Submitted on 10 Feb 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization



Sensory Expression in the Saharan Context

Marie-Luce G elard

To cite this article: Marie-Luce G elard (2016) Sensory Expression in the Saharan Context, The Senses and Society, 11:3, 286-297, DOI: [10.1080/17458927.2016.1195111](https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2016.1195111)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2016.1195111>



Published online: 13 Oct 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Sensory Expression in the Saharan Context

Translated by Carmen Ruschensky

Marie-Luce Gélard

Marie-Luce Gélard is a Professor of Anthropology at the Université Paris Descartes, Sorbonne Paris Cité and a member of the Institut Universitaire de France (IUF). Her research focuses on forms of sensory perception and corporeal coding in the Moroccan Sahara.
mlgelard@yahoo.fr

ABSTRACT In southeastern Morocco, sensory expression is a common substitute for spoken language. Men and women often communicate without recourse to speech, which is deemed inappropriate due to rules of modesty, for example. Decoding these sensory displays requires an intimate knowledge of the particular society. Once identified, the codes become precious methodological tools. In the Saharan context, they reveal that sensory well-being is characterized by heat and dryness.

KEYWORDS: senses, dryness, Sahara, sensory expression



Among the Imazighen (or “Berber”) tribe of Ait Khebbach in the Saharan region of Tafilalet, Morocco,¹ corporeal and sensory expressions are common modes of communication, but they are often overlooked by the outside observer. “Sensory expression” here

Figure 1

Village of Merzouga. View of the palm grove and dunes of Erg Chebbi.
© M.L. Gélard, 2014.



refers to individuals' volitional use of the senses to express and position themselves in relation to others. This article aims to provide insight into this particular domain of sensory anthropology² by focusing on the auditory and olfactory sensory registers and then showing how these are related to heat and dryness.

The program laid out in Georg Simmel's "Sociology of the Senses" ([1907] 1993) already suggested the importance of a "social microscopy" keyed to the senses. It is regrettable that Simmel's approach has not attracted more attention within anthropology,³ for it is highly useful for analyzing how individuals' interrelated sensory expressions give meaning to experience and contribute to the genesis of distinct cultural styles of self-expression: "The prevalence of one or the other sense in the contact of individuals often provides this contact with a sociological nuance that could otherwise not be produced" (Simmel [1907] 1993, 110).

Sensory Ethnography of Gender Relations

Having conducted research in the Sahara for many years and studied gender relations there, I have often noticed the separation between men and women that accompanies nearly every festive ritual (*tasmiya*,⁴ circumcision, marriage, religious holidays, etc.). This separation is often accomplished by a simple screen – a wall of no more than a few feet high or a transparent fabric swaying in the wind.⁵ These rituals bring men and women together while keeping them physically separate and distinct. As customary observances, they are related to the careful avoidance of accidental or unexpected contact between men and women in everyday life.

In the village, as in the palm groves (where the practice of subsistence farming necessitates mixing), encounters between men and women give rise to discreet corporeal and sensory displays to avoid



Figure 2

Incense (wood and bark)
© M.L. Gélard, 2012.



Figure 3

Preparing sheep intestines
for desiccation. © M.L.
Gélard, 2008.

confrontations that would make both parties feel uncomfortable. Observing the extreme subtlety of these messages was for me an opportunity to understand and immerse myself in a universe that is too often observed from the outside, resulting in reductive analyses that fail to register these mutual attentions. Anthropology has a long history of describing and analyzing the gender divisions of society, and the ethnography of the Maghreb region is no exception. However, the heavy emphasis on gender boundaries that pervades this literature tends to obfuscate the porousness and permeability of gender relations that are expressed through various skillful, subtle and

Figure 4

Sheep intestines hung to dry. The dish is generally preferred dried. © M.L. Gélard, 2012.



complex exchanges. By way of illustration of this porousness, consider Béatrice Lecestre-Rollier's observation. Writing of Morocco's mountain-dwelling amazighophone communities, she observes that "the same site can be sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine depending on the activity that takes place there, depending on the time of day, the season or the circumstances. It is important to reveal the interactions continually taking place: avoiding eye-contact, crossing paths without being seen, but also showing oneself while respecting the conventions, conforming, that is, to the norms of separation in times and places that are in fact shared on a daily basis" (2012, 204–205).

It is through the methodology of sensory ethnography that I discovered these specific cultural manifestations and what they reveal about the construction of gender identities, considered here as differences rather than as divisions, oppositions or hierarchies. I first centered my analysis on self-expression through sound within domestic interiors. In these contexts, women wear a head veil embellished with aluminum beads. When the body is in movement, these beads produce a tinkling sound that can be more or less loud, depending on the circumstances. This is also true of the gold bracelets that have replaced the heavy silver jewelry that used to be worn. Women's discretion and calm are personal qualities that are indispensable and appreciated. Raising one's voice is considered disgraceful – shouting is associated with loss of self-control – and, in the case of a dispute, one must have the delicacy to "make noise without making noise," especially inside the dwelling. By contrast, a man entering the house goes out of his way to make noise, loudly rattling his keys, knocking hard on the front door, or even shouting to address the occupants. These noisy entries are expected of men.

In other situations, various more-or-less noisy activities signal the presence of women in the interior courtyards. A good example is one of the daily tasks, which consists of crushing, one by one, the date pits that are fed to the animals. The cylindrical stone grinder used to accomplish this makes a specific muffled sound that is recognizable to everyone and thus signals the presence of one or several women within the dwelling.⁶ This repetitive and boring task is most often done collectively at the end of the day. Men, alerted by the sound, are careful not to intrude on women in groups, for if they did the women would be inclined to jest or even make fun of them, much to the men's' chagrin.

The sensory displays conveyed through these micro-activities present an anthropology of the senses that is quite distinct from analyses of "soundscapes" or "acoustic atmospheres," a more general terminology that is totalizing and tends to dilute individual experience. Such generalizations are no longer informed by ethnography or, ethnographic description anyway. However, this fine-tuned analysis is precisely the kind of research that scholars should be devoting themselves to, as Olivier Féraud's (2010) studies of the Spanish Quarters of Naples have shown. Indeed, it is primarily architects, sociologists, historians, and acousticians who have initiated this research and who continue to pursue it to this day. Clearly, their theoretical and methodological approaches, to a very large extent transposable to anthropology, should be studied and applied. While the above-mentioned disciplines have all investigated the senses in various ways, the sometimes similar, sometimes distinct approaches emerging from this work have yet to be fully appreciated within anthropology.

It is only in sharing experiences over time, immersed in people's lived environments, that this kind of minute observation becomes possible, because it necessitates an intimate attention to and knowledge of the particular society. It is essential to be able to experience this for oneself and thus propose an anthropology from within, from the inside.

However, it is also, paradoxically, through the methodological bias of a limited sensory proximity that I was able to acquire a deeper understanding of sensory expressions and displays, in the first place. Lacking a solid knowledge of the Berber language during my first years in the field, I was attentive to the non-verbal exchanges between people. I thus naturally, though unintentionally, paid more attention to the auditory and olfactory expressions that were always present. With respect to odors, for example, the fragrance of a certain incense composed of amber, myrrh, and benzoin resins and animal scents (musk, civet) plays a role in corporeal encodings that are as precise as they are subtle. This scent is only used in specific rituals (birth and marriage) and is allegorically associated with femininity and maternity. It is also the "women's odor" that men refer to. The fragrance becomes a source of information. Men are often

informed of the birth of a child in their neighborhood by crossing a group of women giving off this particular scent. A pregnancy, birth or marriage arrangement is not announced verbally. Rather, people are informed in other ways, through a refined and subtle attention to different behaviors, in this case, a certain bodily odor. These observations take place naturally and are rarely verbalized explicitly. The ethnographer is thus obliged to take note of seemingly insignificant details that most often go undetected without a thorough knowledge of the cultural context in which they are taking place.

Daily examples of these olfactory attentions are numerous. Men say they know when meals are ready without having to ask (which would be considered insensitive, even rude). The daily bread is cooked by women in collective ovens in the village. The ovens are a site of intense female sociality (access to men being formally prohibited), and women spend about one hour per day there. The oven is a room measuring about 10 square meters, in which the only opening is the door. A dense smoke collects in this room, and its aroma penetrates the clothing of the women and young girls responsible for cooking the bread. It is this odor permeating the women's clothes that signals to men the meal's imminence. These informative practices are naturally discreet and subtly coded, revealing themselves in the shared routines of everyday life.

Odors are implicated not only in the codification of relationships between men and women but also in communicating status. The language of scents is intimately connected to status. Marriage, for example, comes with an acquired right to a certain fragrant adornment. This invisible ornament, acquired by the bride through marriage, assures her entry into the female world of perfumed wives. It was through a very rapid and furtive ritual that I discovered this particular signification.⁷ While the new bride is still restricted to the point of total immobility inside the ceremonial tent (marriage rituals last about three days and always take place in the said tent, even in sedentary contexts), shortly after the wedding night and just prior to the bloody sacrifice marking her official passage into her spouse's family,⁸ she stands up and scatters two handfuls of a scented powder (aromatic plants that are dried, crushed and reduced to a loose powder). From that moment on, she is entitled to use perfumes (with incense or scented necklaces) reserved for the universe of married women to which she has just gained entry. Use of this perfume thus marks "licit" access to sexuality. To my knowledge men do not have a perfume apart from the use of musk or alcohol-based perfumes imported from the West, the use of which is not very common.

These few examples of sensory displays of the self reveal how the body and senses can become a substitute for verbal discourse and how their use is determined by the nature of relations between the sexes and age groups and their underlying hierarchies.

These sensory languages (the language of scent, the language of sound, etc.) are rarely described or analyzed by researchers. I

use the term “language” intentionally, because individuals use the senses intentionally in the same way they use language and words. For those committed to observing the senses, these sensory languages reveal themselves to be highly developed and refined. But to recognize how this is so, at least for a Westerner, entails overcoming deep-set mental habits. In the West, there is a certain distancing vis-à-vis the senses – through a hierarchical privileging of vision – that goes along with a deeply engrained mind/body dichotomy. Today, it seems to me, sensory studies scholars, no longer bound to this schism (Descola 2005), can breathe new life into social sciences analysis. An interdisciplinary dialogue is in the making.

The presentation of the sensory body as a manifestation of self, of one’s sexual identity and position within statutory hierarchies (child, young girl, married women, etc.), provides a fertile ground for exploring the importance of the use, the instrumentalization even, of the senses in relationships between the sexes. In Aït Khebbach society, the hierarchy of dispositions and sensory displays is very instructive, insofar as the visual order is explicit and coded compared to other invisible sensory messages, through which subtle information is transmitted between self and other in everyday life as in festive rituals.

In most studies, ritual representations and words reveal an iterative confusion between difference and hierarchy. However, male and female worlds are more frequently in dialogue and interaction than in opposition and distinction, whether the context is temporal and/or spatial. Communication between men and women is rarely verbalized due to norms related to modesty, thus corporeal and sensory languages are substituted for words. As a result, the opposition or boundary between male and female is much more porous than classical analyses would suggest.

Aesthetics and Therapeutics of Heat and Dryness

The study of sensory displays offers new perspectives. Specifically, the path to understanding a particular society is through uncovering its “sensory ethos,”⁹ (notably in relations of seduction) and careful analysis of the nuances of different sensory languages. In the Saharan context, this ethos is notably characterized by a valorization of desiccation. Thus, we can observe repeatedly how the two principal characteristics of the Saharan climate (heat and dryness) are considered to be the body’s most effective therapeutic and aesthetic attributes.

Bodily treatments in the Sahara highlight the importance of categories related to dryness and heat. This way of conceiving of body care is rooted in a particular geographic environment. The Saharan universe is considered by its inhabitants to be the *only* suitable place for existence, fulfillment and sensory well-being. This territorial inscription of the body can be related to the debate initiated

by Jean-Pierre Warnier (2009) in which he insists on the analysis of the body in action and on individuals' relation to their surrounding world. Clearly, the study and detailed, attentive description of sensory worlds are precious means through which anthropologists can arrive at understanding different societies.

In Aït Khebbach society, dry odors serve as the basis for a precise emotional register. The distinction between the sensory worlds of dryness and humidity systematically privileges the former.

For some, the Sahara is but a place to contemplate, not a place to live.¹⁰ The region is characterized by climatic conditions always presented as negative and seen as producing a natural environment hostile to human existence. Oasis agriculture is described as a brilliant technical feat by such observers, typically outsiders. According to the latter, complex farming techniques rely on precipitation. And not only is there an absence of water in the Sahara, but temperatures are so hot that the only creatures thought to thrive in the desert carry negative social connotations: scorpions, horned vipers (*Cerastes cerastes*), etc. Descriptions like these are numerous, and only images of sand dunes, an enduring source of fascination for travelers and tourists, counteract this perception of a natural environment that is unforgiving, desolate and inhospitable. Yet, in shifting our attention to the perceptions of people inhabiting this territory – the Aït Khebbach – we are surprised to discover an opposite view of Saharan society and environment. In fact, anything related to dryness and heat tends to be subject to an over-valorization in various types of daily routines, healing rituals (sulfur burnings, sand baths,¹¹ fumigations), aesthetic practices (incense, scented necklaces) or alimentary practices (dried meats and vegetables, dehydrated foods for the livestock, etc.), as well as on the level of social and symbolic representations.

Perfumes used for aesthetic purposes are chosen according to a register in which the associated scents refer to a complete absence of humidity. Alcohol-based perfumes are considered humid or damp. The most highly valued fragrances are made of dry ingredients (aromatic peelings, powders, resins, ambers, perfumed oils, etc.). This is also the case with incense and fumigations, wherein the smoke belongs to this same category of dryness. Women's perfumes and body care confer the "good odor." Odors are sensory categories, but they are also related to moral values, and aesthetic values, too. These values delineate sensory worlds according to precise significations, and it is these defining features that privilege "dry" odors: the insistence on desiccation.

The importance of desiccation is entirely sensorial and is clearly related to the sensory expressions and displays that give it prominence. The value ascribed to drying techniques also applies to food preparations. The drying of meats, for example, though rendered unnecessary with the advent of refrigeration techniques, is still practiced. In this regard, gustatory and cultural preferences ensure the

continuation of ancient practices. This interest in drying foods is also evident in the context of migrations, whether the migratory routes are national or international. Thanks to these techniques of desiccation, meats prepared for the “feast of sacrifice” (Eid al-Kabir) can be transported to nomads who are absent from the ceremonies. Foods used for livestock are no exception and include the dried peelings of citrus fruits during the winter, or melons, during the summer, as well as tea leaves, leftover bread, etc. It is assumed, moreover, that the best meat comes from animals that have been nourished only by the dry products of the desert – animals, for example, sent out to graze by nomads traveling in the south of Erg Chebbi. The gustatory qualities of dried foods are also associated with prophylactic effects, in particular, protection against rickets and diabetes.

The merits of aridity and heat are numerous, while humidity is disparaged, being considered responsible for various ailments. Injuries or pains are treated by applying white-hot sulfur,¹² burning with hot irons or immersion in hot sand (sand baths). Certain bodily experiences, manifested and expressed through the senses, are indispensable to the success of the treatments. The first step of treatment, regardless of the illness, consists in heating the body to extract the excess humidity considered to be responsible for the disorder. In Western allopathic medicine, drying medications are used to absorb serous fluids, while, here, in the Sahara, the property of dryness pertains to the body's interior.

These examples of the devaluing of humidity would seem to contradict idealized images of the presence of water in the Saharan universe. Water is essential of course, but, in excess, it becomes negative. A similar attitude influences irrigation techniques. It is important that the earth receives water, but it should not be left to stagnate – the water must penetrate the soil.

Consider the following crisis, which involved a confusion of the senses as well as the elements, and cast attitudes towards water into relief. In 2010, the agricultural zone irrigated by rainwater (from accumulated water that creates a temporary lake¹³ east of the village Merzouga) became the object of a symptomatic representation. In 2010, heavy rainfall kept the lake filled during several months. After a certain period of time, the nomads who bring their herds to drink there began hearing unusual cries, which, little by little, became a source of concern for many inhabitants. Several groups went to the lake at night to listen to the sonorous “monster” (*bkho*). The noise (a mix of shrieking sounds) would stop as soon as anyone entered the water. Over the entire summer of 2010, inhabitants often alluded to the presence of a “monster,” a rumor that had become very real for those who had witnessed it. Authorities of the Province of Errachidia, which the region depends on, had even sent a boat. Faced with this general concern, villagers gathered near the lake and decided to perform the sacrifice of a cow in order to drive out the monster, which represented, for some, the incarnation of “evil.” The sacri-

fice took place and almost all of the surrounding villages' inhabitants contributed financially and participated in the ritual, which included the sacrifice as well as a collective meal.

The presence of a "sonorous monster" (emitting sounds up until then unknown to the region's inhabitants) attests to the harmful effects associated with an excess of water.¹⁴ Desiccation, on the other hand, is regarded as life-saving in many domains. Consider, for example, the hammams where vapor, rather than water, is used for cleansing, and all of the hygienic procedures that revolve around avoiding excess dampness (sweat must always be wiped away before washing). In general, any abrupt passage from one state to another (from hot to cold, from dry to wet, from a lit to an extinguished fire) creates an imbalance in the world that lends itself to the proliferation of evil spirits (*jinûn*). Thus, to avoid attracting these evil spirits and allowing them access to the human world, these abrupt transitions should also be avoided.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an ethnography that is attentive to the senses illustrates, on the one hand, the importance of discerning and decoding the sensory expressions that underlie individuals' ways of presenting themselves. This is especially true of exchanges between men and women who tactfully express, primarily through auditory and olfactory means, that which is forbidden in oral language, deemed too direct or contrary to the norms of modesty. On the other hand, it reveals the important influence of the environment on subtle sensory practices, representations and preferences. Sensory displays of the self are thus closely related to social choices, involving, in this case, different forms of desiccation. In the Saharan context, heat and dryness are clearly essential to being, well-being and sensory harmony.

Acknowledgments

My most sincere thanks to David Howes for his editorial work. I wish to thank the Institut Universitaire de France (IUF) for its financial support of the translation of many of the texts included in this special issue, including this one.

Notes

1. The Tafilat, situated in south-eastern Morocco, is a Saharan oasis whose inhabitants comprise a very diverse population, including Haratin (former descendants of slaves), Berbers (Imazighen), and Arabs (Igurramn and Surfa). The Saharan region of Erg Chebbi to the east is primarily inhabited by the amazighophone tribe of des Aït Khebbach, which is part of

the powerful Ait Atta confederation. I use the term Imazighen (meaning Berbers in Tamazight), which is the name used by the Ait Khebbach themselves. Note, however, that official terminologies set by the Institut Royal de la Culture Amazigh (IRCAM) use the Latinized form "Amazighs" instead of Imazighen.

2. For lack of space here, see my historical overview of sensory anthropology in France (G elard 2016).
3. While relatively unknown in anthropology, Simmel's approach has had a strong influence on American sociology.
4. This is a ceremony during which newborn babies are named, on the seventh day after their birth.
5. In the courtyards of the dwellings, these structures are often the remains of enclosures destined for the preparation of the adobe.
6. Certain activities are disappearing. This is the case with grinding (an activity that is very time-consuming), which, since 2011–2012 is increasingly accomplished mechanically (with mills) in neighboring areas. Even though this necessitates transporting the kernels and paying to do so, the practice is becoming more common.
7. I had to observe dozens of marriages before noticing this ritual, which is, however, systematic.
8. The sacrifice of a sheep in front of the bride's tent marks the recognition of the bride's definitive integration.
9. The notion of ethos was forged by Robert Lowie in his 1920 *Primitive Society* (Lowie 1961). Related to the notion of habitus, ethos is an ensemble of acquired dispositions, which links it also to the notion of a corporeal hexis.
10. This refers of course to common representations and not to scholarly discourse on or about the Sahara. I have addressed some of these analyses in a forthcoming publication (G elard [Forthcoming](#)).
11. "Sand baths," which have grown in popularity over the past several years, consist in immersing the body in hot sand during the summer season. These baths, which take the form of a "cure" that lasts several days, are therapeutic practices used to treat joint pain and rheumatism. It is a type of therapeutic tourism (G elard 2013).
12. Sulfur has astringent properties. It is also worn in a pouch in young children's necklaces to protect them and calm their fears.
13. This type of lake is called Daya or Dayet. It is a closed hollow where rain water collects, forming a temporary lake.
14. The sound came from a species of migratory birds having, up until then, never stopped in the area, thus it was unknown to the inhabitants of the region.

References

- Descola, P. 2005. *Par delà nature et culture [Beyond Nature and Culture]*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Féraud, O. 2010. "Voix publiques. Environnements sonores, représentations et usages d'habitation dans un quartier populaire de Naples [Voicing Public Space. Acoustic Environments, Representations and Housing Practices in a Working-class Neighborhood of Naples]." PhD thesis, École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), Paris.
- Gélard, M. L. *Forthcoming*. "Alimentation, thérapeutiques et rapports de séduction en contexte saharien (Sud-Est marocain): la valorisation du sec [Food, Healing and Seduction in the Saharan Context (Southeastern Morocco): The Valorization of Dryness]." *Cahiers d'Emam*.
- Gélard, M. L. 2016. "L'anthropologie sensorielle en France: un champ en devenir [Sensorial Anthropology in France: A Discipline in the Making?]." *L'Homme* 217: 91–107.
- Gélard, M. L. 2013. "Les "bains de sable" dans le Tafilalt. Pratiques et représentations de l'immersion des corps en contexte saharien ['Sand Baths' in the Tafilalt. Practices and Representations of Bodily Immersion in the Saharan Context]." *Techniques & Cultures* 61: 100–121.
- Lecestre-Rollier, B. 2012. "Dichotomie homme/femme ou porosité des genres? Activités, techniques et objets dans le Haut Atlas marocain [Male/Female Dichotomy or Gender Porosity? Activities, Techniques and Objects in the Moroccan High Atlas Mountains]." In *Les objets ont-ils un genre? [Do Objects Have a Gender?]* edited by E. Anstett and M. L. Gélard, 191–205. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Lowie, R. H. 1961. *Primitive Society*. New York: Harper.
- Simmel, G. [1907] 1997. "Sociology of the Senses." In *Simmel on Culture*, translated by Mark Ritter and David Frisby, and edited by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, 109–120. London: Sage.
- Warnier, J.-P. 2009. *Régner au Cameroun. Le Roi-Pot [The Pot-King: The Body and Technologies of Power]*. Paris: Karthala.