

SENSE OF SMELL: THE STRATEGIES OF
ACCOMMODATION AND APPROPRIATION AMONG
THE SAMBAL AYTA OF BOTOLAN ZAMBALES

Ma. Teresa G. de Guzman*

Abstract

This study explores the concept of scent among the Sambal Ayta, one of the ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines. Using ethnographic anthropological research methods, this study interviewed 100 cultural consultants to determine the concept of scent among the Sambal Ayta and its influence to their lifestyle. This study found that scent is considered as a social intermediary of the body, a presentation of self, and a tool for communication. The findings are relevant to the conduct of studies on survival, adaptation, and accommodation and its transformation towards a more evocative, reflexive, and ethnographic writing on senses, particularly on scent.

Keywords: smell; accommodation, adaptation, appropriation, self

* Phd, Associate Professor, Departamento of Behavioral Sciences, University of the Philippines, Manila, Padre Faura Manila

Introduction

Senses are significant mediums for the expression of cultural values. In particular, the sense of scent can predetermine cultural practices and behaviors as it varies among cultures.

In 1999, Rasmussen found that odors or aromas have meanings, which are either individually or socially constructed and are inevitably linked to one's life. Hence, these scents have a positive or negative value of a remembered context (Rasmussen, 1999).

Using scents in identifying an individual have then been found to be a "foundational ontology of the body" (as a pre-social material entity) and a "social constructionist epistemology." These refer to the notions of how the "physical" body transforms into the "social" body as identified by the Goffmanian concepts (Williams and Bendelow 1998:7).

Smell as a social medium requires "olfactory acceptance," which refers to the person's social and moral approval of the senses. The body serves as a repository of social meanings that are at once presented by the individual and perceived by social others. Presentation of oneself may include person's concern to smell "nice" before or during any social interaction. This illustrates the roles of smell in the everyday life experiences of a person, which may further identify hygienic practices and determine sensitivity to smells, personhood, and social acceptance (Low 2006).

The significance of the sense of smell is clearly depicted among the Sambal Ayta of Botolan Zambales in the northeast part of the Philippines. They identify "odor" as a tool, a strategy, and a medium for communication that eventually regulates social behaviors, social boundaries, social relations, as well as mechanisms for survival, accommodation, appropriation and adaptation in a changing social and physical environments.

Before the Mt. Pinatubo eruption in 1991, the Sambal Ayta settled in "*Baytan*". To survive, they identified their sense of smell as one of the most important tools for haunting. After the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo, they transferred to "*Banwa*," wherein a nearby lake and

the “*unat*” or lowlanders are found. The easily accessible water and the presence of the “*unat*” urged them to be more sensitive of odors as they have tried to take a bath, use soap and powder. In both instances, they accommodated and appropriated themselves to deal and adapt with their changing roles and environments.

Hence, this study will determine the cultural significance of odor among the Sambal Ayta of Botolan Zambales. Further, it aims to explore their concept of odor as a tool, strategy, and medium for communication, accommodation and appropriation.

Using ethnographic type of research, the study will focus on the use of non-verbal languages, specifically the olfactory senses. The study is divided, as follows: 1) brief ethnographic review on the existing literature on smells among hunting communities in the Philippines; 2) research methods used; 3) theoretical overview of the Powsland’s theory of accommodation and appropriation, and Goffman’s concept of social interaction; and, 4) research findings.

The research findings describe the olfactory sensations among Sambal Ayta, the cultural meanings and purposes of these scents, and the strategies of adaptation using these scents in a social and physical environment. Further, this study emphasizes the significance of olfaction on issues concerning personhood and survival.

Research Site

The study was conducted among the Sambal Ayta an indigenous group of Botolan Zambales in Northeastern Luzon. “*Botolan*,” derived from the word “*boto-an*” (a sweet and seedy banana used to grow abundantly in the area), is one of the 13 municipalities in the province of Zambales. In Sambal language, the word “*botol*” also means “*seed*” and locative affix “*-an*” refers to “*with*.”

Specifically, the research was conducted in barangays (community/village) “*Old Moraza*” and “*New Moraza*” in Botolan Zambales. The Barangay Old Moraza is better

known as “*Baytan*,” which is the original settlement of the Sambal Ayta. It is located at the foot of Mt. Pinatubo and is approximately 42 kilometers away from the town proper. Meanwhile, the Barangay New Moraza, which is one of the resettlement sites in the area, is where the Sambal Ayta transferred after the eruption. This area is approximately 15-minute “tricycle” ride away from the town proper.

These barangays are one of the 31 barangays in Botolan. It has a land area of approximately 10,080 hectares of mountains, plateaus, rivers and streams. It is composed of five “*sitios*” (hamlets), wherein each is usually bounded by mountains.

There are two ways to reach Brgy. Moraza: using truck during the dry or summer season and using carabao-driven cart called “*bagon*” during the rainy season. The six-wheeler truck used by the residents is also known as “*weapon’s carrier*” because it was first used during the Second World War to carry weapons. During the rainy seasons, trucks often get stuck in the mud along the way and cannot pass the lahar-filled rivers; hence, residents use the “*bagon*” instead. The ride using the truck approximately takes 2 ½ to 3 hours, while the “*bagon*” takes 1 day.

The Sambal Ayta as the Cultural Consultants

Cultural consultants for this study comprised of 100 Sambal Ayta individuals – 50 males and 50 females, from the Old and New Moraza barangays who have been going back and forth from the “*Loob-Bunga Resettlement Site*,” which is composed primarily of the “*Banwa*” and “*Baytan*” (foot of Mt. Pinatubo).

One of the indigenous groups doubly marginalized after the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991 are the Sambal Ayta. At present, there are three kinds of Sambal Ayta in Botolan: 1) “*Ayta Banwa*,” 2) “*Ayta Baytan*,” and the 3) “*Pilaok*”.

The “*Ayta Baytan*,” was born, raised, and is staying in “*Baytan*.” They were the original settlers at the foot of Mt. Pinatubo. Meanwhile, the “*Ayta Banwa*” was born either in

towns “*Banwa*” or in “*JESMAG*,” a place named after *Jesus Magsayasay* who lent his name to the Ayta in 1995. They also stayed in town “*Banwa*” or at the “*Loob-Bunga Resettlement Area*”. They are also known as the “*Bagong Ayta*” (New Ayta) or the “*Bagong Kulaw*” because their children follow the traditions of the lowlanders (“*unat*”). Lastly, a “*Pilaok*” is a child of a lowlander (“*unat*”) and an Ayta (“*kulot*”) couple. They are the hybrid of both the “*Ayta Baytan*” and “*Ayta Banwa*” born out of interracial marriages or exogamies.

The Sambal Ayta can also be classified according to their physical characteristics, as follows: “*kulot*,” “*unat*,” and “*pilaok*.”

An “*unat*” is described as straight-haired, tall (*matang-ay*), not black-complexioned, smells differently, dressed differently, studies and resides near “*Baytan*,” specifically near the “*Bucao river*,” and in the town proper (*Bayan*). They are usually “*Ilokano*,” “*Kapampangan*,” or “*Tagalog*.” Meanwhile, a “*Kulot*” (*kinky-haired*) is usually found in the mountainous area (*bakil*) or in Baytan. They are black-complexioned (*mangitit*) and small (*mayamo* or *may-apa*). Lastly, a “*Pilaok*,” is fair to brown-skinned with a black and either straight or kinky hair.

In this ethnography of odor, the theories used were from Giles and Powesland (1997), which lies in the socio-psychological research on similarity-attraction. This suggests that an individual can persuade other persons for social approval by reducing dissimilarities between peoples. One example is the process of speech accommodation. The accommodative act may involve the speaker to identify change in terms of speech and expect a potential reward for this act. These rewards may be in more concrete terms like an increased perceived status that would depend upon the situation and the particular linguistic level upon which accommodation occurred. Accommodation through speech can be regarded as an attempt on the part of the speaker to modify his persona in order to make it more acceptable to the person (Giles and Powesland 1997).

In the case of the Ayta, accommodation means to accommodate themselves through verbal and non-verbal means. The verbal means use the vernacular language to communicate

and transact with mainstream culture. On the other hand, non-verbal means are carried out through a change in their clothing, food, everyday activities, and odor/scent.

Heider (1958) suggests that we should understand a person's behavior, and hence evaluate the person himself, in terms of motives and intentions that we attribute as the cause of his actions. He proposed that a perceiver considers these three factors when attributing motives to an act: the other's ability, his effort and the external pressures impelling him to perform in the manner in which he did.

Considering the "*Theory of Self*" and "*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*" by Irving Goffman (1959), "*performance*" is shaped by the environment and audience, and is constructed to provide others with "*impressions*" in accord with the desired goals of the actor. In the case of the Sambal Ayta, the necessity to maintain and change his or her performance is imperative in order to conform and survive with the strong pressure from his or her changing social and physical environment.

Odor or "*daep*" in Sambal language plays an important role in changing one's self or identity. Among the Sambal Ayta, they believe that odor has a fundamental role in changing their identity. They assumed that "*different odors are for different purposes*". Further, they categorized odors in reference with the animals and people they encounter.

Smell as tool for survival

Odor or scent is primarily used as a survival tool of the Sambal Ayta. For example, the "*pandaep nin apoy*" (smell of fire) is a signal used by the Sambal Ayta to warn animals of their stay in the place. This causes animals, particularly the wild animals, to evade the place as fire is always associated with human presence.

Other smells used as a surviving tool are the "*pandaep nin lindol*" for earthquakes, the "*pandaep nin uran*" for rain, and the "*pandaep nin asupre*" for sulfur. These were used by the Ayta to survive the 1990 earthquake and the 1991 Mt. Pinatubo eruption that hit them.

Informants said that even before the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHILVOLCS) raised the alarm for the Mt. Pinatubo eruption, the Ayta already anticipated it because of the strong smell of sulfur. They also knew the upcoming rain because of the smell of the surroundings and found that these help to avoid contracting malaria.

Aside from anticipating weather disturbances or calamities, the Ayta also used their sense of smell to identify edible fruits. Even at a distance, they can also identify which fruits are ripe. One example is the “*pandaep nin haa*” (the smell of banana), which serves not only as food but also an indicator of the presence of most animals that also consume banana.

Unfortunately, upon their transfer from “Baytan” to the resettlement area, their sense of smell also differed, along with their ability to adapt with their physical environment. For example, in *Baytan*, they are used to smell like a horse or goat, also known as “*malanghit amoy kabayo*” or “*amoy kambing.*” They used this smell as a tool to hunt animals easier. They also consider their nose (*balongo*) as an important tool for hunting (*pangangaho*) and gathering food (*pagagahak*) since the smell of animals (*pandaep nin hayop*) can be used to trace the animals’ territory. However, upon their transfer to the resettlement area, these were not as effective.

The Aytas believe that a strong sense of smell (*makhaw nin pandaep*) similar to that of dogs is essential. Further, as hunters, they have to blend with the prevailing odor in the forest to be able to move freely and be able to track down animals.

One informant shared that in hunting, they have to mimic animals because even these animals are very sensitive to human odor and can even determine whether a person is wearing a perfume. Even at a distance, they can sense human presence in their territory. If an Ayta cannot do this, he or she cannot hunt effectively and will more likely be attacked by animals.

Aytas also believe that every person has a unique body smell, which is now known as “*pheromones*”. The Aytas believe that pheromones also play a significant role in hunting.

Since large animals preyed upon by hunters are aversive to all human odors, male and female alike, the issue is whether sex-related differences in odor would significantly influence encounter and capture rates (1978:242, 1976; see Hayden 1981:403).

The Aytas prohibit women from hunting when they have their monthly periods or menstruation (*buwan nin andayaen*) because animals can smell these odor even from a far. In some instances, this is also considered as a cause of bad luck. This is similar with the findings of Dobkin de Rios and Hayden (1985), who found that female odors associated with menstruation, pregnancy and lactation prevent women from hunting since the odors alert animals, thereby detrimental to the hunt, and thus contributed to a sexual division of labor among hunters-gatherers. They also noted that cases wherein females hunt are peculiar.

Similarly, Dobkin de Rios found that the odors associated with menstruation, lactation, and pregnancy trigger “flight or fight” animal response. The scent of human blood can lessen success in hunting since it also signals human predator to the animals. This was tested in two experimental settings, wherein a deer was found to be more aversive to food scented with human blood unless exceptionally hungry (March 1980; Nunley 1981).

However, Estioko-Griggin and Griffin (1981) found a different case in the Philippines, wherein the “Agta” women often hunt and continue to do so even after giving birth. Although reports say that they use dogs to mask the female odors, this is however occasional. The only reason found that prevented Agta women from hunting is lactation since the smell of the breast milk can drive animals away. Meanwhile, they found that male smells can be covered, removed by bathing, or avoided (through sexual abstinence) more easily than female smells, and are not as strong.

This was supported by Testart (1986:26-27 in Knight 1995), who noted that women can also mask their smells through certain techniques that disguise their odors. He also argued that menstrual odors will only account for a small fraction of the women’s potential to hunt.

Scent and social relations

In many contexts, scent or aroma transcends the aesthetic and is used as a marker of social relations (Corbin 1986; Van Beek 1992: 38-59). It also establishes a group's identity. The ascription of characteristic odors to different races and different social groups is a universal trait and has a certain empirical basis. Body odors can differ from culture to culture, partly because of the different foods consumed and partly because of genetic factors (Moncrieff 1966:209).

While every person is attributed to certain odors, most people are so accustomed to their own personal and group scents. This led them to be unaware of their own odors, noticing only the odors of others.

Reichel-Dolmatoff (1985) found that among the Amazonian culture, all members of a tribe share the same general body odor. This odor was found to mark the territory of the tribe similar to how animals mark their territories through odor. This territorial odor is called *mahsd seir'ri* and has the metaphorical meaning of "sympathy" or "tribal feeling."

The difference in the food customarily eaten by each tribal group also attributed to their odor. For example, the intermarrying tribes of "*Desana*," "*Pira-Tapuya*," and "*Tukano*" found that each tribe has specific odors attributed to their customary foods, with the "*De-Sana*" (hunters) smelling like meat, the "*Pira-Tapuya*" (fishers) smelling like fish, and the "*Tukano*," (farmers) smelling like roots. Hence, there is a possibility to recognize the identity of each exogamic groups within the general communal territory through these "odor trails" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985b:125- 126). Another example is the Indian, wherein "*when travelling from one region to another [the Indians] continually sniff the air*" and remark on the different territorial and tribal odors (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985b:125).

These distinct tribal odors all have different symbolic associations that serve to order the interaction between one tribe and another (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985a:24, 33). Thus, odor

functions in this Amazonian society as a marker of tribal identity and territory, and as a regulator of intertribal relations.

For the Sambal Ayta, their transfer to the resettlement area obliged them to use their smells for social relations rather than for hunting. Since there were no lands to plant and animals to hunt during the lean months of May to August the Ayta resort to paid labor, they worked as maid or *mangangamuhan* lowlanders (*unats*). As such, the Ayta should smell like the lowlanders (*unats*) too. Hence, the Ayta began modifying their odors from having an animal-like smell to becoming more like the lowlanders (*unats*). The inability to adapt with odors can differentiate them from their neighboring communities and even led to discrimination as their smell (*amoy malanghit* or Ayta Odor) was often used as jokes in the workplaces. The major changes in their economic, social and ecological living conditions also influenced their body odors.

The Ayta, who were able to accommodate and appropriate themselves working in the “*Banwa*” or “*Bayan*,” has to buy Avon products like Amari powder, lipstick, and deodorants to prevent themselves from smelling like horses (*pandaep nin kabayo*). Some buy these products using an installment (*pahulugan*) basis.

This was found by Aytas to be important in finding a job, particularly during the lean seasons. Hence, the Ayta has no choice but to conform with the *unats*. Other instances that also compelled them to do so include community meetings such as the parent-teacher’s meetings in school, wherein people do not talk to them if they do not conform.

It was not only the Ayta adults that felt the discrimination but also their children, who went to public elementary school at the Resettlement site. In school, the Ayta children were discriminated by being accused of smelling like urine (*maalbeng*), because of not taking a bath before going to school. The practice of not taking a bath is common in *Baytan* since children are often required to help their parents in their daily activities such as tilling the land, gathering food like sweet potato (*camote*) or collecting honey (*pulot*). To be effective at these chores, the Ayta children have to smell like the animals in the field to protect themselves and

reduce attacks by insects like wasps, bees and mosquitoes and even the ferocious animals. Blending (through their odor) with the forest becomes an effective tool for continued survival.

Not all Ayta residing in *Banwa*, though, can afford to buy perfume to smell good. It must be remembered that their sources of income are limited and that they have to address food requirements before smelling good. Most Ayta instead use detergent bars when they are in *Banwa*. According to them, the detergent bar is more effective for their kinky hair, which is an important part of their body to show their ethnicity.

Summary

Cultural values are expressed in various ways. Odors smells vary between cultures illustrating cultural habits, preferences and idiosyncrasies. Cultures value odors differently and that includes the Sambal Ayta of Botolan Zambales. The body odor or *daep nin nawini* is considered as tool, strategy and as a medium for communication to regulate social relations for the maintenance of social roles as well as for survival by appropriating and accommodating themselves in their social and physical environment.

The Sambal Ayta graphically illustrates this. When they are in Baytan (their original locality), they do not take a bath nor put on those perfume to smell like animals to become effective hunters. On the other hand, when they are in Banwa (town), they have to take a bath, use soap and powder to smell like the *unat* (lowlanders). In both instances, they are able to cope with the changing environments and roles.

The above is not always the case though. There are also others who will still see themselves as Ayta and those they have their own identity that need not to be changed to cope with the changing roles and environments.

References:

Bandelow, G. (1998) *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues*, by Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow. London & New York: Routledge, 1998.

Corbin, J. (1986). Qualitative data analysis for grounded theory. Dans W. C. Chenitz & J. M. Swanson (Eds.), *From practice to grounded theory : Qualitative research in nursing* (p. 91-101). Menlo Park, CA : Addison-Wesley.

Dobkin de Rios, Marlene, and Brian Hayden. "Odors Differentiation and Variability in the Sexual Division of Labor among Hunter/Gatherers." *Journal of Human Evolution* 14 (1985): 219–228 March 1980 Ed. Buckley and Gottlieb. *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*. 1988 California Press.

Estioko-Griffin, Agnes A. and P. Bion Griffin 1981 'Woman the hunter; The Agta', in: Frances Dahlberg (ed.) , *Woman the gatherer*, pp. 121-51. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Giles, H. et al. (1987). Speech accommodation theory: The first decade and beyond. In M.L. McLaughlin (Ed), *Communication yearbook 10* (pp. 13048). Newbury Parl, CA: Sage

Giles and Powesland (1997). *Accommodation Theory in Sociolinguistics: A Reader and Coursebook*. Ed. Copuland and Jaworski. MacMillan.

Hayden, Brian 1981. Subsistence and ecological adaptation among modern hunter/gatherers. In *Omnivorous Primates: Gathering and Hunting in Human Evolution*. Edited by R.S.O. Harding and Geza Teleki, pp. 344-421. New York: Columbia University Press.

Heider, F. (1958). *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. Hillsdale, New Jersey. United States of America

Knight, C. (1995) *Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*. Excel Typesetters Co., Hongkong

Low, K. (2006) Presenting The Self, The Social Body, and The Olfactory: Managing Smells in Everyday Life Experiences. *Sociological Perspectives*. Vol. 49, No. 4 pp. 607-631. University of California Press

Moncrieff, R. W. 1970 *Odours*. London: William Heinemann Medical Books.

Moncrieff, R. W. 1970 *Odour Preferences*. New York: John Wiley.

Nunley 1981 Ed. Buckley and Gottlieb. *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*. 1988 California Press

Rasmussen LEL. (1999) Evolution of chemical signals in the Asian elephant, *Elephas maximus*: behavioural and ecological influences. *J. Biosci.* 24 (2): 241-251.

Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo (1985). *Los Kogi: Una tribu de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia*. 2nd ed. 2 vols. Bogotá: Procultura.

Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo (1987). "The Great Mother and the Kogi Universe: A Concise Overview." *Journal of Latin American Lore* 13:73-113.

Van Beek (1992). The Dirty Smith: Smell as a Social Frontier among Kapsiki/Higi of North Cameroon and North Nigeria. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* Vol. 62, No. 1 (1992), pp. 38-58 Published by: Cambridge University Press