

**Anthropology of the senses: empirical research on smell, taste, and touch (Prof. Bettina Beer, Yi Chen MA, Janika Gassner MA, Petra Panenka MA)**

Since the early 1990s, interest in the formation, use and meanings of the senses (as well as relations among them) has grown in anthropology. Talk of a 'sensory revolution' (Howes 2006) might, however, be thought premature given how little substantive empirical work has so far been done. Of the influential publications that have appeared in this literature, several have focused on Melanesia, notably, Steven Feld's Kaluli acoustemology (1990) and David Howes' comparison between Massim and Middle Sepik ways of sensing the world (2003). David Howes and The Concordia Sensoria Research Team have focused on variations in the sense hierarchies of different societies. This approach has been criticized by Tim Ingold (among others) for "its naturalisation of the properties of seeing, hearing and other sensory modalities, leading to the mistaken belief that differences between cultures in the ways people perceive the world around them may be attributed to the relative balance, in each, of a certain sense or senses over others." (Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill* p. 281 [London, New York: Routledge. 2000]).

Building on the notion of a sensorium, understood as a set of senses inflected by and used within contexts defined by specific cultural meanings, the following central problems, topics and questions emerge as foci for further discussions:

1. Is it possible to speak of how "a culture senses the world" (Howes) if age, gender and specific situations condition the way senses are developed and used?
2. Sensorial experiences are not stable across individuals nor (for a given individual) across situations; they are often transformed by context and synaesthesia, context dependent, and heterogenous.
3. A "sense" should not be thought of as operating in isolation. Senses interact with one another (drum beats, for example, are sometimes felt as well as heard and one might experience seeing something sacred as a form of touch) and might be transformed by particular circumstances, for example, in rituals.
4. Our senses are not merely anatomical features or "groups of receptors", but constitute an active engagement with the world.
5. Our senses come into being through culturally mediated processes. The way children learn to use their senses is of central interest for the ongoing and planned research projects.
6. Emic and etic descriptions of the senses must be treated very carefully. The taste of hot chilli, for example, is described by biologists as a perception mediated by pain receptors, while it is classified in many local contexts as one "taste" among others.

7. Often the senses that are not involved in an experience are as important as those that are. Blindfolding or darkness in rituals, for example, gives the other senses a different priority and decisively affects the experience of a given setting.
8. In many ethnographic contexts, the senses are central media of communication with spirits, human beings and the environment.
9. The ethnographer's problems in learning different ways of sensing and understanding, and in translating sensual experiences are central to an anthropology of the senses.

The project includes research on the senses in the Philippines (Visayas) and among the Wampar in Papua New Guinea (B. Beer) and ongoing research by Yi Chen, "Taste and food classification among Chinese living in Germany"