

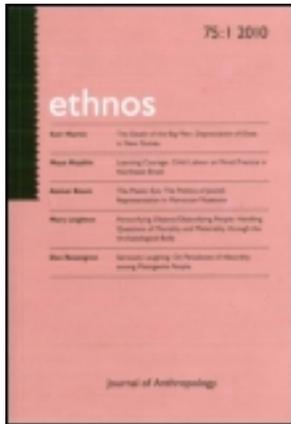
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# Sensory Shifts and ‘Synaesthetics’ in Sukuma Healing

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**ABSTRACT** *Sensorial anthropologies come, broadly speaking, in two forms. The first, multi-sensory approach depicts cultures as specializing in a sensory mode such as tactility (Howes) or kinaesthesia (Geurts) and associates individual cultures with one dominant mode. The second, cross-sensory approach rejects this sensorial essentialization (Ingold) and suggests that cultures differ in their ‘perspectives’ or, as I suggest, in sensory ‘codes’. However, the article argues that this latter approach verges on cultural essentialization as it overlooks the presence in any one culture of multiple sensory ‘codes’ and culturally warranted shifts between them. In this article on the Sukuma in northwestern Tanzania I outline an approach that takes into account both the modes and codes of sensory perception. I focus on the visual mode, and shifts between different codes, in Sukuma rituals of divination, exorcism and spirit possession.*

**KEYWORDS** *Senses, magic, Sukuma, healing ritual, visual*

**T**he anthropology of the senses has largely been a post-colonial endeavour. Part of its impetus is the ongoing discomfort among some anthropologists with the imperialist tradition of science, which is thought to rely excessively on visual evidence. One strand of sensorial anthropology challenges this ocularcentrism through an ‘anti-scopie’ approach. Ethnographers such as Howes (1991) and Geurts (2002) focus on non-verbal and multi-sensorial experiences in non-Western cultures, based on the assumption that every culture is prone to elaborate on one of the sensory modes – the ocular, tactile, kinaesthetic, and so on – at the expense of the others.

Another strand of sensorial anthropology, as formulated by Ingold (2000), questions the anti-scopie overtones of the first. In particular, it questions the association of sensory modes with evaluative qualities. Ingold frees vision from its ‘representational’ (intrusive) reputation by referring to the Arctic

hunter's 'non-representational' (receptive) type of vision. He thus deprives the anti-scopio programme of much of its charm (Bendix 2005:8). However, his two cross-sensory perspectives, the 'representational' as opposed to 'non-representational' perspective, also risk essentializing Western as opposed to non-Western cultures. How will he account for Western mystics snapping out of a representational perspective, or for Arctic hunters in a moment of crisis suspending their receptivity? When Ingold suggests that vision need not be representational and could be non-representational, he implicitly refers to what I shall call 'sensory codes'. Vision can be coded as intrusive or receptive. Alternatively, touch can be coded as receptive or intrusive. The following ethnography of Sukuma rituals in northwestern Tanzania suggests that a sensory mode like vision has more than two codes. I will outline four codes, tentatively described as receptivity, intrusion, expulsion and synchrony, and discuss the shifts between them, as they structure sensory experience in magic, bewitchment, sacrifice and spirit mediumship respectively.

The two-dimensional approach to the senses in terms of sensory modes and sensory codes promises to be useful for medical anthropologists attempting to account for both the biological and the cultural in their study of therapeutic efficacy and in their search for cross-cultural continuities between culturally specific practices. It provides the basis for a new epistemology of magic according to which, provocatively put, matter is meaning. As long as anthropologists consider meaning to be a non-physical attribute of physical substances, magical remedies will remain incomprehensible to them. I argue that magic and ritual make meaning material. Analogous to clinical synaesthesia (colours generating sounds), magic and ritual may be seen to generate meaning by operating on a 'synaesthetics' that couples fairly discrete semantic codes with specific bodily sensations. While cultures may predispose to the coupling of meaning and matter, healers, in particular, have a knack for further codification of the senses. A patient's insertion into a healer's particular synaesthetics of turning meaning into matter is part of the healing process. This I learned from living and working with Sukuma healers from 1995 to 1997, and during short-term return visits in 2000, 2003 and 2007.

### **The Sukuma Sensorium**

Before discussing the sensory shifts that are pivotal in Sukuma healing, an introduction to the human sensorium may be in order. As a Western ethnographer, I am inevitably influenced by Euro-American conceptions in which Aristotle's model of the five senses prevails (vision, hearing, smell, taste,

touch).<sup>1</sup> The model is based on bodily organs with *exteroceptive* orientation. The eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin form an interface between the body and the external environment. As for these exteroceptive senses, Sukuma terminology seems to emphasize seeing (*-bona*), tasting (*-loja*), and hearing (*-igwa*). They use the verb 'hearing' for smell and touch, which are 'heard.' I would not claim that Sukuma actually hear touch, or hear smell, but there is some cultural emphasis on hearing, and, as we will see, on receptivity. The passive form *-wa* in *-igwa*, 'to hear', seems to contrast with the activeness of sight (one could have chosen to close the eyes) and taste (which commonly presupposes voluntary ingestion of food). Moreover, hearing (*-igwa*) is the reflexive form of falling (*-gwa*), so that the literal translation of 'hearing' things would be things 'falling onto oneself.'

As Geurts (2002:8) notes, the classic model overlooks *interoceptive* sensations such as those pertaining to the stomach, oesophagus and intestines. Westerners tend to downplay interoceptive perception because of the seemingly limited information it provides about the external environment. What could the body's interior reveal save hunger or indigestion? Sukuma interoceptive terminology suggests otherwise. Some interoceptions have social connotations. The liver (*kitema*) registers pangs of jealousy indicative of a person's growing isolation in a group. Moreover, Sukuma terminology is extensive. The body has several 'snakes' (*nzoka*), one located under the skull, another in the spine, a third in the intestines. When feeling hungry, the third snake is said to convulse. To the rhythmic chanting of a leader, a group of farmers tills in eight-hour stretches, from the early morning until hunger calls as their intestinal snakes convulse. Another recurring sensation in this part of the world is malarial fever when the snake of the head is said to coil inside.

The interoceptive inclination of the Sukuma sensorium tallies well with the Sukuma diviner's search for truth in an animal's internal organs. The diviner carefully opens up a bird to check for defects such as bruises, ulcers and tears. The household's social status shows on the bird's stomach. Gossip is seen on the pancreas. Physical strength is evident on the gall bladder. Possible poisoning by a witch is detected on intestines and appendices. Sukuma divination is therapeutic rather than concerned with establishing crime. Oracular data come from the ancestral realm and interoceptive gut feeling is involved in their interpretation. The diviner's truth is not absolute. A witch may intervene in the divination process, scramble the data and in this way disturb the diviner's reading of the entrails. Not surprisingly, then, clients often consult several diviners.

Another type of divination is practised by mediums. The possessed are 'arrived by' (*-shikilwa*) the spirit. The spirit is said to 'climb' the medium. Entering through the top of the head the spirit descends to the throat and spine. There, the spirit speaks and sometimes makes the body dance. The spirit can also reach the diviner through 'dreams'. In both cases, the suggestion is of a sensory input whose origin is located beyond the range of the body's exteroception – the registering of data at or on the body. One could speak of an *ulteroceptive* mode to account for the spirit sensations which no other sensory mode registers.

### **The First Strand of Sensorial Anthropology: Anti-scopic and Multi-sensorial**

The previous section outlined some of the evidence of how Sukuma specialize in certain sensory modes. They exteroceptively see, taste and hear. They interoceptively sense liver, heart and snakes. When diviners read entrails, they refer also to interoception. When they act as divinatory mediums, they ulteroceptively feel the spirits in dancing, drumming and dreams. Sukuma hold a fairly relativist conception of truth, perhaps, as I suggested, because they do not exclusively rely on the exteroceptive senses favoured by Western traditions of empirical truth.

My discussion has so far been in line with the first strand of sensorial anthropology, which postulates that each culture has its own sensorium and which investigates whether, and to what extent sensorial specialization determines a people's mode of perception and way of thinking (or at least correlates with them). Howes (1991:10–11) explores the strong claim of sensorial determination. Following Gardner's (1983) concept of seven forms of intelligence, he proposes forms of reasoning, memory and attention that are more olfactory or gustatory, to take two examples, depending on a culture's sensorium. This strong claim poses an interesting methodological challenge for the ethnographer. Sukuma might experience sensations which I could never recognize, and their way of thinking might thereby largely elude me given my incomplete sensorial data.

The primacy of one sense in a cultural sensorium may correlate with the physical development of that sense in that culture (cf. Howes 1991:13).<sup>2</sup> The sense of hearing among Sukuma illustrates this nicely. Elderly men value speech highly. The rhythm of verbal delivery should harmonize with the interjections of the other speakers. To an outsider, their speech may resemble song. Like many Bantu languages, Kisukuma is a tonal language.

As a fieldworker, I soon discovered I would never approximate my hosts' analytic ability to hear the tones. Nor would I ever master the rhythmic skills demanded of an elder's speech.

Sensorial specialization does not merely elaborate certain skills, like speaking and listening among the Sukuma elders, it also privileges the development of certain moral norms. This is the intriguing idea behind Kathryn Geurts's (2002) ethnography, *Culture and the Senses* among the Anlo Ewe of Ghana. Geurts deals with a category of senses other than the above mentioned interoceptive and exteroceptive modes. The *proprioceptive* sense of kinaesthesia relates neither to the inside nor to the outside of the body, but to the body itself. The kinaesthetic sense of balance pervades both Anlo Ewe bodily comportment and their moral values. It underlies their thinking and is not merely a matter of perception. Geurts describes how Anlo children learn to maintain the proper balance, and how adults scorn poor posture or a meandering walk (p. 50) as well as how they look down on the unrestrained bodies of possessed dancers (p. 160). The book's cover shows an erect African woman gracefully carrying a basket on her head while looking self-confidently into the lens. What this kinaesthetic norm does not tell us, however, is that there may be contexts in which loss of balance is acceptable.

Howes (2005: 35) discusses a norm of tactility hardly imaginable by Westerners in a similarly metaphoric way when he writes about gender relations among the Kwoma in Papua New Guinea: 'Just as men avoid contact with debilitating, engulfing swamps, so also do they avoid contact with women, who are believed to have similar debilitating effects on men... Menstruating women are deemed to be particularly dangerous and swampy.' Kwoma men seem to negatively codify a woman's touch as swampy and dangerous and to be avoided. But surely, for the Kwoma to have children, there must be other contexts when a woman's touch is codified differently? This contextual shift comes better to light in an approach that differentiates between sensory codes within a sensory mode.

### **What Sensory Modes Don't Say**

The first strand of sensorial anthropology, which focuses on culture-specific sensory modes, ultimately feeds into a relativist programme. In spite of its post-colonial impetus, it may in fact magnify the difference between us and them. In the Kwoma example, I have suggested that a culture may encode the same sensory mode, say touch, in different ways depending on the social situation in which it is felt. The critique holds for the Anlo Ewe as well. Geurts

equated the sensory mode of balance with a fixed code, which people either obey or violate. This portrays Anlo villagers as disciplining the body. When she claims Anlo rebuke spirit possession for its lack of balance, it struck me that Geurts' informants were town-dwellers who might have been scorning villagers. Rather than interpreting spirit possession in light of balance as an all-pervasive norm, I suggest the possessed dancers adhere to a culturally given *additional* code of proprioception. Possession rites demonstrate the extent to which African communities can make room for social contexts where other proprioceptive codes are appropriate. Thinking in terms of plural codes available to a sensory mode like proprioception attends to the variations in social register within a culture.

Distinguishing sensory modes and codes would have prevented Geurts from presenting values as socialized into the flesh and as inescapably inscribed into Anlo bodies. The embodiment paradigm, which has been seminal in anthropology since the 1990s, has, in practice, often presented the body as an unconscious repository. Csordas (1994) and Devisch (1990) have from the onset been aware of the need to correct this. Besides being an organism of meaning, 'a repository of sign-images accumulated in past experience' (Fernandez 1991:330), they emphasized that the body also stands for the indeterminate, creative processes by which practice transforms the socio-symbolic order (Csordas 1994: 12). Much like Berger and Luckmann's (1973) social dialectic (on internalized norms changing as they get externalized), Bourdieu (1980) approached culture in dynamic terms: the socially and bodily 'structured' habitus is at the same time 'structuring', that is, generative. Geurts attends to the first half of Bourdieu's formula, the structured habitus, the body as 'history turned into nature' (Geurts 2002:249), but by focusing solely on a sensory mode, she appears not to account for the second half, the habitus' structuring potential, its capacity to externalize, to shift, or even change the codes of bodily comportment.

I mentioned the rhythm, or timing, which Sukuma cherish in their conversations, their jokes and laughter, their greetings and ways of moving. To push the analogy further a captivating image might be that of their nationally famous dancers lifting their limbs in improbable simultaneity. However, such emphasis on rhythm as obeying the code of harmony would 'sensotype' the Sukuma. For one thing, it would conceal the noise and whistles, the unpredictable interjections of the audience and the counterpoints that are always welcomed during synchronized singing, dance or drumming. Sensotyping the Sukuma through their dances would present them as a people passing

through life in the service of a harmonious, collective rhythm. It would ignore other social situations and sensory contexts when harmony is absent or not looked for. By distinguishing modes from codes, we can go beyond such cultural sensotyping.

### **The Second Strand of Sensorial Anthropology: Cross-sensory Comparisons**

The association of a sense with a value, such as vision with objectivism, is more than a strand of sensorial anthropological research; it figures centrally in the post-colonial critique of modernity. Howes's (1991) critique of Western ocularcentrism joined a wave of literature in the 1990s (Crary 1990, Jay 1993, Levin 1993, to name but a few). These writings revived the momentum of two previous anti-scopic waves. French philosophers, such as Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Foucault, attacked what they considered the scopic regime of Cartesianism. They followed in the footsteps of the early phenomenologists Husserl and Heidegger, who took issue with the so-called spectatorial epistemology, in which a looking subject could distance (Husserl) or enframe (Heidegger) its object, and hence objectify it (Levin 1993: 12). Ever since the temptation has been to associate science's striving for objectivism with vision.

Tim Ingold critiqued Howes, Ong (1991) and others for in fact reproducing a Western scientific ideology, namely that vision is all about representation. Ingold elegantly sums up the anthropologist's traditional preconception about seeing versus hearing:

[...] that sound penetrates whereas sight isolates, that what we hear are sounds that fill the space around us whereas what we see are things abstracted or 'cut out' from the space before us, that the body responds to sound like a resonant cavity and to light like a reflecting screen, that the auditory world is dynamic and the visual world static, that to hear is to participate whereas to see is to observe from a distance, that hearing is social whereas vision is asocial or individual, that hearing is morally virtuous whereas vision is intrinsically untrustworthy, and finally that hearing is sympathetic whereas vision is indifferent or even treacherous (Ingold 2000: 251–2).

The first strand of sensorial anthropology separates the sensory modalities of seeing and hearing, and opposes them. I agree with Ingold that data on the Inuit lifeworld disprove this opposition. The hunter's perception clearly points to a 'thorough-going ocularcentrism, albeit of a kind radically different

from that which we are familiar with in the West' (p. 253). The radical difference he hints at has less to do with vision than with a certain perspective that is cross-sensory, informing all the senses. Ingold describes the 'dwelling' perspective, exemplified by the hunter's bodily immersion in an environment already available. He opposes it to the 'building' perspective of the contemporary West, which sets out to make the world available and categorize it.

But again, one perceptual reality is understood to permeate one particular culture. By adhering to either the dwelling or building perspective, Ingold underestimates the possibility of variation within a culture. In this respect, his analysis is no better than Howes'. The second strand of sensorial anthropology is, like the first, one-dimensional. In place of contrasting sensory modes (scopic and other), it contrasts perspectives (representational and non-representational, building and dwelling). Ingold and Howes are both trapped in a post-colonialist critique that overdraws the distinction between us and them.

Furthermore, both are in danger of essentializing either the senses or different cultures because they do not sufficiently account for cross-cultural empathy and plurality within a culture. I agree with Ingold that vision depends on an immersion in light and is in this way no different from hearing that arises from an immersion in sound. However, there are different ways in which this immersion takes place. This plurality cannot be excluded from any culture in advance.

My analysis attends to both Howes' sensory modes and Ingold's 'perspectives', which I shall redefine as 'sensory codes'. In my analysis, Howes equates the visual mode with one particular code, the objectivist one, and overlooks any other codes available to vision (the same can be said for other sensory modes). As Ingold has demonstrated, a dwelling perspective applied to the visual mode alters the experience of seeing such that it is no longer objectivist and classificatory. However, among the Sukuma I found that this non-representational dwelling perspective is semantically layered. The visual mode among the Sukuma has in my analysis several codes.

Spirit mediumship may look like an unmediated state of receptivity (and so too may any other mystical experience of unity with nature), but the initiation ritual of Chwezi mediums among the Sukuma nuances any suggestion of effortless release and uncategorized immersion. During possession, the subjects scream or lose their voices and enter a trance, but the experience carries within itself a sophisticated sensory codification. Such unspoken semantic categorizations of sensory experience may characterize other experiences of 'dwelling' as well, such as tilling the land or herding

the cattle. The mediumistic experience depends on a shift in sensory code that enables the possessed to overcome the usual tendency to control one's behaviour and to distrust the voices within. While tilling the land, protective magic is used. Anticipations of bewitchment, a failed harvest, or lost cattle are integrated within the cultivator's dwelling perspective. My point is that immersions in the environment are semantically layered.

Finally, sensory codes also have cross-cultural relevance because they relate the social to the biological. In a brief section on the 'synaesthetics' of magic, I will suggest why healers are particularly interested in sensory codes. When through social interventions, such as ritual and magic, they aim at stimulating bodily recovery, they instigate shifts between sensory codes. These sensory shifts stimulate biological as much as social processes. The suggestion that the efficacy of magic and ritual depends on instigating shifts between sensory codes is one of cross-cultural relevance.

### Sensory Codes in Sukuma Culture

Bantu languages such as Kisukuma have no verb equivalent to 'having'. Possessing a thing is literally 'being with' it (*-li na*). This suggestion of being a companion rather than an owner of something may be indicative of Sukuma life philosophy. Sukuma gain status (*lukumo*, derived from the verb *kukuma*, to collect) by 'collecting' offspring, allies, membership in societies and medicinal knowledge, subject to the blessing (*lubango*) of ancestors. The agency of spirits parallels their activities, although every Sukuma will say 'I have never seen one'.

Being-with resembles Ingold's 'dwelling' perspective. In both cases, we are dealing with a specific sensory way of being in the world that has many social implications. In the Sukuma villages where I work, this sensory code could best be described as reciprocal receptivity. It shows, for example, in procedures of commensality and greeting, which are marked by an art of stalling and patience and respect. Greetings consist of an elaborate play on sensory signals, with eyes appropriately raised and lowered and a delicate touch that solicits rather than commands attention. Sukuma are well-known for potions of *samba*, 'attraction', meant to attract people from a distance. The magic is popular among a clientele as varied as dancers, prospective lovers and shop-keepers who aim to maintain a receptive attitude among clients even in the harsh domain of doing business. Tellingly perhaps, Sukuma say of evil that one has to learn to live *with* witches, for instance by protecting oneself through *lukago* (defensive) concoctions.

If 'being-with' represents the sensory code of daily life, situations of crisis reveal the existence of other sensory codes. Affliction or misfortune typically shifts a person's apprehension of the world. Where social norms are usually seen as negotiable, with village solidarity allowing for much personal autonomy, an afflicted person's experience changes. Both at home and in the healer's hospital, I was struck how often patients were vexed by doubt and questioned themselves. They speculated about witches and their motives. They talked about a relative or neighbour reproaching them over liberties taken in the past. They wondered if they might have caused envy. The ancestors that used to protect their descendents were depicted as angry. The ancestral spirit, *isamva*, literally 'the provoked one', had become *ndagu*, a 'curse', who conspires with a witch. The witch no longer was a trickster or dancer, but an envious secretive other, endowed with surprisingly moral overtones reminiscent of one's ancestors. Most Sukuma patients (male and female) I worked with suspected a female member of kin as the witch, often a mother, aunt or grandmother. The patients' explanations were intriguingly similar: 'Is the witch not entitled to the life of my offspring?'

Crucially, such talk of indebtedness does not tally with the usual way of perceiving the world and the everyday code of sensing social relations, because indebtedness is considered part of life. Everyone depends on the ancestor's blessing. An adult is someone willing to become indebted. I learned this in the *ihane* village initiation: the initiated become feathers of 'the Sukuma wing' (*inana lya kisukuma*), they depend on each other. Yet, confronted with a grave illness or when mourning the death of a loved one, people can become haunted by the idea of an unpaid debt. To them, the ancestor, or a moral figure in the family, has turned against them. This shift in perception arises mainly in situations of affliction.

When we consider more closely what patients say, we note that the idea of the witch, and the guilty feelings attached, are not fixed beliefs. The particular features of the witch arise from and are shaped by the concrete (sensory) experience of affliction. The witch is an idea enfolded (or a sensation ideated) expressing the pain and intrusion the patient physically experiences.<sup>3</sup> Patients attend to the slightest interoceptive changes. The poison of bewitchment may be felt in the stomach. Oracles on a bird's entrails show whether poison has entered the body. Did it enter through the mouth, the diviner asks, or the feet? From interviews with patients and transcripts of oracles, it appears that the intrusion can also be aural; nocturnal sounds,

whispers, sand pebbles brushing the roof at night, or the giggle of a hyena can indicate the presence of the witch.

The intrusive sensory code cross-cuts several sensory modes. The sensory intrusion is cognized in suspicions about a particular person, often female kin. The intrusion is thought to indicate the presumed motive of the witch: 'You will see my revenge'. It is conceptualized in the word *ibona*, a 'vengeful look'. 'Seeing' (*kubona*) forms the word stem. The reciprocal and receptive vision (*kulola*), which seeks contact with others in a greeting or invites to a dance, has been replaced by an intrusive seeing in probably the most active form imaginable, a reproachful, silent stare that kills. Victims call the witch (*nogi*) emphatically *ngwi-bon-eeji*, literally 'the one who persistently makes you see yourself'.

In sum, we observe a radical change of the sensory code underlying the subtle everyday play on attraction and distance in a greeting. In the case of bewitchment, 'being-with' has perverted into the intrusive condition of a permeable body invaded by poison. The witch is said to claim the victim's life because of the latter's 'debt', or *shili*, literally 'the eating thing'. In the face of death approaching – an experience relatively common in Sukuma villages but no less existential and rupturing – the victim discovers the witch's right to kill. We are dealing with a kind of perception quite different from the receptive code of 'being-with'. I suggest we call it the 'sensory code of intrusion'.

The next section describes how divination in its initial phase links up with the patient's sensory code of feeling threatened by intrusion. It does so by taking a critical look at the world and thereby establishing its wretched state in terms of unreliable ancestors and envy, and the desire among kin to kill other kin. This need to identify evil is very different from the attempt to live with the uncertainties of life (being-with). Indeed, the oracular signs and categories have much in common with the representational perspective that according to Ingold (2000:168) marks the dominant Western scientific code of looking. The bewitched seems to perceive the world devoid of the ancestor's soothing influence, a world in which debts are fixed and people categorized. The intrusive code of perception, which comes close to the representational perspective Ingold attributes to modern science, is thus also found among the Sukuma, but only in times of crisis. In the next phase, after empathizing with the patient's sensory code, the diviner exorcizes the idea of an intrusive, moral Other entitled to the victim's life. The diviner achieves this by making this Other present and instantiating the ancestor, thereby instigating yet another shift in sensory code.

### Ancestral Presence and Representation During Witch-Detection

If illness causes a shift from a reciprocal-receptive to an intrusive sensory code, as in the case of bewitchment, diviners have invented a sensory shift to counter it. Vision is not merely reciprocal, as in the play of the eye's glances in greeting, or intrusive, as in the witch's look. Diviners and healers operate on a third code of vision, one that refers to the presence of the ancestral spirit in oracles. It is literally called 'the eye' (*liso*; or, in chicken divination, 'the canoe-seat' (*nhebe*), a synonym for the eye).<sup>4</sup>

The eye of ancestral presence encapsulates clients and healers in a reassuring, centripetal relationship with authority. The ancestral 'blessing' (*lubango*) which lingers in the background of one's daily activities and which disappears in the sensory experience of affliction, now comes to the fore. Diviner and client feel they can see through the world and locate intrusive forces. I will argue that this instantiation of the eye, which is felt to signal ancestral presence, has therapeutic effects.

The ancestral presence is detected on the bird's spleen in the form of a small ulcer. If the canoe-seat is missing, the oracle will be called 'eyeless' (*Itina miso*) and rejected. For the participants, the canoe-seat is evidence that the ancestor (and not the witch) is guiding the oracle. It is important to appreciate the contingency of the eye's guidance that divination produces. All forms of divination are characterized by a moment of contingent, unpredictable intervention. Their efficacy depends on this contingency. Divination differs in this way from other modes of dealing with the crisis such as conversations with friends or elderly advisors. The presence of the eye prepares the participants for a radical sensory shift. It will lead them away from the sensory condition that their crisis put them in and into new territory; among the Sukuma, into the invisible realm of ancestral spirits.

In his famous paper on shamanism, Lévi-Strauss (1963:197) claimed that metaphors (combined with the shaman's authority) express inexpressible psychic states and render pain tolerable through externalization. Most commentaries have agreed with the social and psychic effectiveness of shamanic healing, but, wedded to a Cartesian dichotomy between meaning and matter, rejected any physiological effects as fantasy (Neu 1975:285). Metaphors belong in the domain of meaning. In contrast, I argue that shifts between sensory codes are meaning-initiated physiological events. They are not instantly effected. The oracle removes the patient's sense of absolute isolation in several stages. First, the diviner stages the arrival of an ancestral spirit who appears to side with the client. Second, the diviner literally represents the witch by identifying her

through a variety of marks on the bird's entrails and underneath the feathers (cf. Stroeken 2004). Initially deemed an unknown other who has the right to 'eat' her victim, the witch becomes an identifiable culprit. The witch can be beaten by stronger magic. This shift away from a sense of intrusion and towards a sense of expulsion allows for concrete measures of counter-magic. What we are observing in the readiness of the patient for magical combat is not a reduction of anxiety but a radical transformation in how body and senses are orientated in the environment.

Ritual exorcism resembles divination in causing a shift to an expulsive-presentational sensory code, which rids patient and family of the curse known as *ndagu*. In one such ritual, which I witnessed, all members of the household were involved. The oracle attributed the curse to a member of kin and a conspiring ancestor. At dawn, a goat was chosen, the *mbuli ya ng'huba*, 'goat of lack', to placate the ancestor. Just like the oracle's 'eye', the goat makes the ancestor present. It accompanied us throughout the exorcism. Around noon, the patient and all household members gathered inside the house to be anointed with protective medicine. It was not applied to the whole body (as in daily medicinal therapies) but only strategic spots, thought to be vulnerable to occult intrusion, especially the top of the head, the centre of the chest, and the soles of the feet. Participants were thought to be particularly vulnerable to the witch's grudge, as they would be during any exorcism ritual. When night fell, they went out and stood in the centre of a crossroads, all facing west. A pit was dug between the two converging paths, into which each household member put a black concoction of counter-magic. They repeated the healer's words, verse by verse. The expulsive sensory code was inscribed in the facial expression and in verbal intonations of the participants. I could not help but notice the determined look on a five-year-old boy's face as he confronted the illness of his mother after mourning the death of his little sister. Together, they sent the curse back to where it belongs, to the deep waters of the lake. The healer's formula ended with a standard reference to the notoriously cruel king Luhinda.

I deploy my *ndagu* healing. Me, Ichaniki, I summon you, Ndagu, who has been convoked at my homestead and at my body. Now I expel you from my body. I leave you at this crossroads or remit you to the witch who has sent you. I expel you to the lake, so that you will be eaten by the crocodiles. Go away and die in the lake, go, grandchild of Luhinda.

Then the goat's ear was cut and the blood was collected, mixed with the

medicine and smeared on the spearhead held by the head of the household. Each participant had to lick the spear before it was prodded into the pit. The healer made two heaps of grass and lit them while muttering words similar to the earlier incantation. The father held the goat, while the healer went around them with the burning grass. The fire was then extinguished by sticking the bundle of grass in the pit. In close formation all household members left the spot without looking back, to prevent the curse from returning. The healer stayed behind with the goat. The household members entered the hut, from whence they had started. The healer's assistant incised each on their head, chest and armpits, and rubbed in a protective ointment. Every morning, for four days, the household members smeared their bodies with the ointment. This terminated the therapeutic cycle.

The oracle, the ritual and the medicinal treatment (or 'magic') are different practices to treat the patient's sense of intrusion. Traditionally, ethnographers would be satisfied with describing the symbols of expulsion. The study of shifts between sensory codes in Sukuma divination and exorcism, by contrast, suggests that meaning is made into matter. A central principle of Sukuma magic is to couple an object with a beneficial meaning. For example, an anticid to purify the stomach will not only contain anticidic plant ingredients but also the piece of a broom, which metaphorically denotes the medicine's purpose. This object is called 'the access', *shingila* (from *ku-ingila*, to enter), for it permits the medicine to gain 'access' to a desired bodily and social condition, usually that of 'coolness' (*mhola*). Patients suffering from bewitchment stay at the healer's place for a year or more to internalize the physical coupling of plant and purpose, matter and meaning. Patients learn about the ingredients and the many *shingila* of their medicine. They learn how to prepare them and the coupling that heals thereby grows on them. After that, they themselves become healers. Thanks to this long-term therapeutic initiation the application of the magic affects the patient's body. The effect is acquired, and not innate like in synaesthesia, and I therefore use the toned down adjective 'synaesthetic' to describe it.<sup>5</sup> Sukuma magic is 'synaesthetic' in coupling matter and meaning, thus challenging the Cartesian dichotomy that prevented earlier commentators such as Neu (see *supra*) from considering the therapeutic, and possibly cross-cultural relevance of magic.

### The Multiple Layers of Mystical Union

Three sensory codes have been described thus far: the reciprocal-receptive code of social exchange (being-with), the intrusive code of witchcraft sus-

pitions, and the expulsive-presentational code of divination and exorcism. I have also referred to synaesthetics to specify magical therapy. The sensory shifts between the three major codes round off a cycle of balance, breach and restoration, which has social, cultural, mental and physical relevance. This section points to yet another sensory code. It too is suggested by the Sukuma who, instead of restoring the balance, seek to break out of the cycle, as they do in spirit possession.

Spirit possession is an alternative to traditional Sukuma healing in that it accepts intrusion and does not aim to expel it. As explained elsewhere (Stroeken 2006), Chwezi mediums describe this alternative perspective as 'stalking the stalker'. Mediums are after the spirit who is after them. In more than one way, the Chwezi spirit cult can be considered a terminal point, or an 'ending' (*lushilo*) as the cult's magical recipe is fittingly called. A man blindfolded with leopard skin uses *lushilo* to circumscribe the cult's ritual space. Within this circle the power of the envious witch and the power of village norms end. The cult members are blind to society's distinctions of gender, age and kinship. As the spirit takes over, men and women are equal; seniority and kinship no longer count. (To underline this, novices are introduced to a so-called parent with whom they should pretend to copulate.) Once social blindness is established, there is no reason to gain status, 'collect' and 'be-with' others (the first sensory code of reciprocal receptivity), nor to fear debt, guilt, envy, and witchcraft (the second sensory code of intrusion), nor to combat the witch and redress the capacity to engage in social exchange (the third sensory code of expulsion). The fourth sensory code differs from the other three codes in that the self of the possessed seeks to synchronize with the other (a spirit) rather than reciprocate or be with it, feel intruded by it, or do away with it. The blindfold and the 'ending' of sociality both evoke this state of synchrony and utter receptivity. This experience of immersion is again reminiscent of Ingold's definition of the dwelling perspective. However, as the relations between the four codes indicate, a multi-layered perception of the world is at work.

During possession, the novices will lose consciousness. Wearing *luduta* ('pulling') bracelets, the more than thirty novices attempt to 'pull' the spirits towards them and hope to be 'reached' (*washikilwa*). As one Chwezi song goes, the spirit then 'cuts the skin that concealed me' (*waibuta ing'hingi iyo yanijamyaga*) and 'cuts the shade that protected me' (*waibuta imbeho iyo nikingijaga*). During the following days, the novices move into the forest at night to regain their senses and then dance. This happens ritually and quite

sensually, as they consecutively taste, smell, hear and feel the spirit. First, they drink water poured onto the base of the termite hill that houses the spirit. Then small groups take turns in assembling around a pot of medicinal water. Boiling hot hearthstones are dropped into the pot that has been dug into the ground. Each group, covered by a large cloth, inhales the fragrant steam. Soon after, the heat is dispelled with the coldness of a mud massage. For the rest of the night, the patients dance topless in a circle while their bodies are covered with fresh mud, made of wet soil, cow-dung, and herbs. The initiated help the novices by playing the drums that please the Chwezi spirits.

The Chwezi compare the mud to the flour-mixture which healers pour on their ancestral altars. The mud massage turns the novice into an altar for the ancestor. Thus, while the senses are revived they are also refashioned in a certain way. The code through which the possessed perceive the world is not that of being-with, which translates into reciprocal glancing, as in greetings and dance where attraction and distance are balanced. Nor is it the second code of the intrusive reproaching look, or the third code of the 'eye' that uncovers the invisible. It is a fourth code of vision, one that blindfolds the medium. The blindfold does not take away vision, nor does it render categorization impossible. The senseless cries or silence of the possessed should not fool us. The Chwezi novices discover another way of seeing, another way of categorizing the world. By 'stalking the stalker' the initiation ritual aims to transform the senses so as to make possible a synchrony with the intruding spirit. This requires that the novices overcome, rather than simply ignore, the dominant ways of categorizing the world, which all stipulate that intrusive thoughts or dreams are curses that should be expelled. Broadly conceived, this fourth sensory code suggests mystical experiences which are not limited to one culture.<sup>6</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Practices can be distinguished in terms of the sensory code that qualifies (all or a number of) the senses in a distinctive way. In divination, Sukuma make use of the sensory code of the 'eye' that is both perspicacious and reassuring. In spirit mediumship, the senses have a different, synchronous quality. Vision, hearing and other modes attune themselves to the occasion, and the occasion, in turn, depends on that sensory codification. To give another example, an oracle loses its meaning if the senses are attuned to entertainment. A dance is no longer a dance if participants use their senses to study and objectify every move. Sukuma healing rituals, I have argued, exploit these fairly distinct sensory codes.

The two dominant strands of sensorial anthropology tend to ignore this dynamic and plurality of sensory modes and sensory codes in one culture. As a result, the multi-sensory strand risks essentializing the senses; the cross-sensory strand risks essentializing cultures. Both strands criticize the intrusive look that objectifies persons and situations in Western traditions. Yet, as I have argued, this sensory code can be recognized in the way Sukuma represent and identify witches. Instead of rejecting it, I suggest that we see it as one among other codes, each appropriate to the occasion.

In sensory perception, I argue, codes from society (to some extent cross-culturally relevant) converge with modes from the body (to some extent cross-culturally relevant). The hypothesis of sensory codes has been helpful in revealing the play on sensory shifts in Sukuma healing practices. By instigating such shifts in sensory codes in the patient, healers turn meaning into matter. This opens up new avenues for research into the efficacy of magic.

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### Notes

1. Once cognitive scientists began to disconnect sensory perception from consciousness, their taxonomy of the senses expanded (Nelkin 1990: 149). In this vein, Keeley (2002) proposes that the human nose not only houses the conscious perception of smell but also a non-conscious modality of exteroception, namely the vomeronasal system, which detects pheromones mediating reproductive behaviour.
2. The correlation is far from necessary though. For example, the current Western interest in the vomeronasal system as a second sense located in the nose does not correspond to a change within our perceptive apparatus. It more probably arises from a growing cultural interest in the role of the non-conscious in experiences.
3. This is the upshot of Bruce Kapferer's (1997:2) take on sorcery in Sri Lanka: 'The senses through which human beings extend and realize their existence in the world – those of sound, smell, taste, touch, and sight – become, in the notions of sorcery, the processes whereby human beings are disrupted and inhabited by others to ill-effect.' The sensorial dimension of bewitchment and of counter-magic is explicit.
4. The oracle is likened to a canoe-trip on an imaginary river, which cannot be safely done without a canoe-seat.
5. The eventual effect could be compared to clinical synaesthesia (e.g., spontaneous perception of colours in response to discrete sounds). See also Diane Young (2005), who has evocatively portrayed 'cultural' synaesthesia, such as the way greenness and certain smells after the rain correspond to each other for Aboriginals of the

Australian Western Desert. In the 'synaesthetics' of Sukuma healers we suggest that the process has cross-cultural relevance.

6. One may note the cross-cultural affinity between the code of synchrony among Chwezi spirit mediums and these words by a Western philosopher: 'Every time I experience a sensation, I experience that it does not concern my own being, over which I take responsibility and make decisions, but another me that has already taken sides with the world; that has already opened itself to certain of its aspects and has synchronized itself with them.' (Merleau-Ponty 1945:250).

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