HAUSA SENSORY SYMBOLISM

Ian Ritchie
McGill University

Abstract: Hausa folk tales and proverbs suggest that Hausa culture traditionally placed a high value on non-visual modes of experiencing the world, especially those of taste and smell. Concomitantly, sight is de-emphasized in comparison to Western culture. Selected items of folk lore are examined and the relative roles of the different senses compared.

Résumé: Les contes folkloriques et les proverbes des Hausa suggèrent que la culture traditionelle Hausa attribua une grande importance aux modes non-visuels de l'expérience du monde et, plus particulièrement, à ceux de l'odeur et du goût. Ainsi on attribue moins d'importance à la vue que le fait la culture occidentale. Certains contes et traditions folkloriques sont étudiés et les rôles relatifs que jouent les sens différents sont comparés.

Introduction

This essay is a preliminary report on my research into Hausa sensory symbolism. The Hausa language is spoken by the peoples of the seven traditional Hausa city states in North-Central Nigeria, and seven additional city states called the "*banza bakwai.*" The term "Hausa" refers more to a language and culture than to a specific ethnic identity, though the ethnic component is also discernible.

The principal lines of evidence I shall be pursuing consist of the proverbial and folk tale literature. I begin with an examination of Pauline Ryan's (1976) study, "Colour Symbolism in Hausa Literature." Ryan makes a significant contribution to our knowledge of Hausa culture through her careful analysis of the symbolic values ascribed to white, black and red: the first denotes socially desirable qualities, the second their opposite, while red is ambiguous. However, my sense is that she has overstressed the visual dimension of the Hausa sensorium, and that other dimensions deserve equal, if not greater attention, if one is to abide by the sensory preferences of the Hausa themselves.

Anthropologica **XXXII (1990) 113-119**

For example, Ryan lists a number of colours, such as *kore-kore* (light green), *shudi-shudi* (light blue), *Ja mai bakin ruwa* (dark red) and *Rawaya* (yellow) (Ryan 1976:143) which virtually never occur in spoken Hausa. My Hausa instructor, Mallam Garba Adamu, (a "Katsina man") said that while colours other than *baki* (black), *fari* (white) and *ja* (red) do exist, most Hausa do not know these colours or refer to them. Ryan relies heavily on lexicons and this is perhaps the major weakness of her study, insofar as lexicographers, with typical collectors' zeal, often end up with a great collection of words which could be obtained only from one informant, or at best from a tiny élite within a society.

These words are atypical, and in some cases one may rightly question whether they should be included in the armature of a language at all. An example in this case would be Ryan's discussion of "*Algashi*" which she claims is an Arabic loan word for "green." Very few, if any, Hausas would know or use this word, though a few involved in industries such as the dyeing industry near Kano might use it because their profession requires finer colour specifications. She does admit that many of these terms are infrequently used (cf. regarding *kore* Ryan 1976:142), but she does not adequately emphasize this fact, with the result that she creates, perhaps inadvertently, a distorted perception of the Hausa life-world.

Ryan goes on to observe that in Whitting's (1940) entire collection of Hausa proverbs, amounting to well over 2000, there are only three proverbs which include *ja* (red) and that Abraham only lists one under this entry (Ryan 1976:149). This is telling! She proposes: "Perhaps a partial explanation for this dearth of proverbs containing *ja* may be that, as Turner suggests in his article on Ndembu color symbolism (Turner 1966) . . . , in certain contexts red becomes subsumed under black or white." (ibid.:149). I would suggest an additional explanation: it is because red, along with the entire visual spectrum, does not assume so prominent a role in the Hausa life-world as it does in Western culture, that one finds so little emphasis upon colour symbolism. Food symbolism, by contrast, is pervasive.

Taste

One notes in collections of Hausa folk tales and proverbs that the majority centre around food, tasting, eating or swallowing. Out of the 21 stories presented in the first volume of Rattray's (1913) *Hausa Folklore*, 15 give a very important role to eating something. The other six are the shortest six in the collection and do not have very developed plots. Similarly in Frank Edgar's collection of Hausa stories one finds that of the stories about Spider, virtually all of them revolve around Spider's insatiable appetite for meat, and the adventures he goes through to satisfy it (Skinner 1969).

More importantly, the eating of food usually seems to occur at a *pivotal* juncture in a story: it is not merely a decoration, nor an activity which happens in passing, in order to facilitate the developing relationships. It is *essential and integral* to what happens next in the story. After the eating of whatever is eaten, whether the item(s) had magical powers or not, the story moves off in an entirely new and unpredictable direction. For example, in Rattray's Story No. 5 a key actor is a magical spoon which comes to the rescue of a poor despised wife by providing her with an inexhaustible supply of food during a famine when she says the magic spoon's name: "Help me that I may taste" (Rattray 1913:80ff.). In Story No. 7 a dog has possession of magic implements which enable various visitors to cook whole pots of rice from a single grain, whole pots of meat from a single dry bone and perform other marvellous feats (ibid.:134ff.). This is crucial to the story's development.

In several of the folk tales, the story has barely gotten under way when already there is mention of eating something: in Number 9 and Number 19 eating takes place in the first eight lines of the story (Rattray 1913:186, 284). Often, tremendous powers of strength are attested to by the amount that a person can eat. Story Number 12 is about a man called "A man among men" whose strength is described by saying that "he eats twenty elephants, five of them for breakfast alone."(ibid.:226). This is in contrast to a lesser man who only ate 10 elephants (ibid.:218). In many of the stories plants or animals have prodigious eating capacities: in Number 21 a Gawo tree tries to swallow its nemesis the lizard, but each time the lizard comes out of the tree's body at a different place (ibid.:320).

A signal Hausa folk tale, the *Tale of Daudawar Batso*, is one in which all the actors of the drama are tastes! In this story Salt, Pepper, Nari (a savoury sauce made from peanut), Onion Leaves and Daudawar Batso (a special sauce with a strong smell) transform themselves into the forms of young maidens and go out to look for a certain young man who is not described visually, but is called "beautiful." They force Daudawar Batso to stay behind, however, because she has such a stench that she is not considered presentable. She remains behind but follows them at a distance. Salt, Pepper, Nari and Onion Leaves meet an old woman at a stream who asks them to rub her back, but they refuse and go along their way. When Daudawar Batso meets her, however, she agrees to rub the old woman's back, and as a reward the old woman tells her the name of the young man they are all searching for, (Daskandarini), who turns out to be her son. Eventually, Salt and Pepper and Onion Leaves reach the house where the young man is staying and greet him from outside. Each of them tries to gain admittance to the house, but the young man asks each in turn if they know his name. Of course they all fail to gain admittance because they don't know his name.

When at last Daudawar Batso arrives she tries her luck at the door, and she indeed knows the name of the young man for it is just as the old woman had said. She knows his name, he marries her, and Salt and Pepper and Onion Leaves end up being her servants. The story records the following moral: "if you see a man is poor don't despise him; you do not know but that some day he may be better than you." (Rattray 1913:272).

The idea of a story in which all the actors are *tastes* is one so foreign to westerners that they find it difficult to connect with. There is no visual imagery in the story, only tastes and smells. This is why it has a peculiar and alien ring to western ears. And the alterity of the idiom is compounded by the alterity of the medium (i.e. the oral-aural), as we shall see in the next part.

Hearing

Social skills are taught partly through example, but another important means of teaching correct behaviour is through proverbs and folk tales. This emphasis on the oral transmission of wisdom is expressed in the Hausa proverb *Kunne ya tsere wa kaka*, which means "The ear goes back beyond your grandfather" (Kirk-Greene 1966:14). Thus character is shaped *verbally* among the Hausa, and the models for that character are contained in oral literature, rather than being encountered in movies or other visual media (such as television cartoons or *People* Magazine), as would seem to be more often the case for westerners.

Kirk-Greene (1974) reports that good manners are of greater importance to the traditional Hausa man than good appearance, though appearance is also considered worth taking care about. He elaborates upon the concept *mutumin kirki* in Hausa: the "man of good character," which incorporates the notion of wisdom and upright conduct, good sense and human compassion. The concept "*kirki*" can be understood to suggest the superiority of the unseen to the seen (good manners over good looks) and that good character comes through internalizing what is *heard*, i.e. oral wisdom passed down from the ancestors.

Kirk-Greene's exegesis of the concept of *mutumin kirki* helps us to grasp the deeper meaning of the tale of Daudawar Batso, introduced in the last section. It is the knowledge of the *name* of the "beautiful young man" (Daskandarini) that is the key which unlocks the door to his house and to happiness. At the beginning of the story, the young girls know nothing about the young man except that he is "beautiful." Their attraction to him, therefore, is based entirely upon the visual realm. While the story teller does not explicitly condemn this dependence upon the visual, we can see that the *exclusive* reliance upon visual appearance as the basis of attraction is what

later ruins the fortunes of the girls. By contrast, Daudawar Batso, while she is also attracted by the visual, is not so controlled by it that she allows it to dominate her actions. When she meets the old woman, it is she alone who has the patience required to take the time to stop and rub the hag's back. The others, full of haste, had rushed on to find their "beautiful young man." Patience, *hakuri* in Hausa, is an essential component of *kirki* (Kirk-Greene 1974:7). It is therefore fitting that Daudawar Batso should be given the key to intimacy with the young man, which is his character-revealing *name*. As a result, she is enabled to connect with the inner *character* or *kirki* of the young man, for in Hausa, one's name reveals one's inner character.

Smell

In the tale of Daudawar Batso, the main character was rejected by the others because of her offensive smell. While this sort of reaction may be no more prominent in Hausa than in other cultures, nevertheless the moral of the story directs one to override the common reaction to this sense and give honour to the one who seemed worse than the others.

Smell also plays key roles in many of the other stories. One notes the role of smell in sniffing out enemies as in Rattray's Number 12 (Rattray 1913:218), reminding one of the "Fee fi fo fum" story in English. Furthermore, smell emanates from food, which plays a pivotal role in so many Hausa folk tales. In this role, smell has a tantalizing, and even a tempting function.

Smell has in common with sound the property of being able to travel around corners, and thus it has an especially revelatory role in Hausa culture, where the built environment occludes the sense of sight on account of its high walls, narrow crooked streets and cloistered courtyards. Extraordinary powers of olfactory discernment are frequently attributed to animals in Hausa folk tales, and this quality is connected with the quality of skill in living life, such as the skill which Spider demonstrates in the many clever ruses he employs to satisfy his seemingly insatiable appetite for meat (Skinner 1969).

Sight

In Whitting's collection of Hausa and Fulani proverbs there is some highly revealing information concerning the sense of sight. He reports the proverb *gani ya fi ji* or alternatively *gani ya kori ji* which he translates "seeing excels hearing" (Whitting 1940:53). The verb *kori* means literally "to chase away" or "drive out." While this proverb taken in isolation might seem to indicate the priority of sight, it is best understood in the context of its normal usage, which is limited to situations where hearsay must be proved

right or wrong through personally witnessing evidence of the rumoured event. Certainly sight in itself is not taken as ultimate in Hausa thought, as the following proverb attests: "*Ganin Dala ba shiga birni ba ne*—seeing Dala [a suburb of Kano] is not entering the city. [Kano], i.e. seeing your goal is not the same as reaching it." (ibid.:60). Another often heard proverb is *gani ba ci ba* which means "seeing is not eating" (Whitting 1940:52). In context, this phrase refers to the greater depth of knowledge gained through gustation and eating, as opposed to mere sight. It suggests that one can only become intimate with a person or thing and have true knowledge through the sense of taste.

Ample evidence indicates that making life pleasing to the eye is well worth the effort amongst the Hausa. Visual attraction is not condemned in itself: it is accepted as the normal human tendency, as we saw in the tale of Daudawar Batso. But sight as a *controlling* force, or the dependence upon sight as the *sole* means of determining character or the true (inner) nature of things is strongly discouraged in Hausa culture.

Conclusion

It would seem on the basis of the preceding analysis of Hausa proverbs and folk tales, cursory as it is, that the non-visual sense modalities play a more prominent role in Hausa culture than do they in western cultures. Certainly, when one finds entire folk tales constructed in the idiom of taste, and a tremendously rich and developed system of metaphors related to eating, then one begins to suspect that the gustatory and auditory senses exercise a wider and more developed role than they enjoy in western culture.

Acknowledgment

I am indebted to the SSHRC for its support of "The Varieties of Sensory Experience" research project (grant #410.88.0301). Thanks are also due to project co-ordinator David Howes who offered many helpful suggestions.

References Cited

Johnston, H.A.S.

1966 A Selection of Hausa Stories, translated and compiled by H.A.S. Johnston. Oxford: Clarendon.

Kirk-Greene, Anthony H.M.

1966 Hausa Ba Dabo Ba Ne: A Collection of 500 Proverbs, translated and annotated by A.H.M. Kirk-Greene. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.

1974 Mutumin Kirki: The Concept of the Good Man in Hausa. Bloomington: Indiana University African Studies Program.

Rattray, R. Sutherland
1913 Hausa Folk-Lore, Customs, Proverbs, Etc. 2 Vols. Oxford: Clarendon.
Ryan, Pauline M.
1976 Color Symbolism in Hausa Literature. Journal of Anthropological Research 32:141-160.
Skinner, Neil
1969 Hausa Tales and Traditions: An English translation of *Tatsuniyoyi Na Hausa*, compiled and edited by Frank Edgar. New York: Africana Publishing Corporation.
Turner, V.W.
1966 Colour Classification in Ndembu Ritual. *In* Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion, edited by M. Banton, pp. 47-84. London: Tavistock.
Whitting, C.E.J.
1967 Hausa and Fulani Proverbs. [1940] Lagos: Government Printer; Farnborough, Hants.: Gregg Press Ltd.