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On the odour of the soul; Spatial representation and olfactory classification in Eastern Indonesia and Western Melanesia

In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 144 (1988), no: 1, Leiden, 84-113

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ON THE ODOR OF THE SOUL:
SPATIAL REPRESENTATION AND
OLFACTORY CLASSIFICATION IN
EASTERN INDONESIA AND WESTERN
MELANESIA

'Just as time and space are not perceived by the vast majority of human societies as a
regular continuum and grid, so the [sensorium] is rarely thought of in strictly biological
terms . . . The five senses are given different emphases and different meanings in different
societies. A certain sense may be privileged as a sensory mode. It is important to analyse
how people think they perceive.'


INTRODUCTION

According to common notions, smell is 'the lowest, the most animal of the
senses', whereas sight is the highest and noblest (McKenzie 1923:21).

This ranking seems so natural to us that we find it difficult to conceive of
other people perceiving the world in any other light. Yet, as the historian
Lucien Febvre reports in a little section entitled 'Le retard de la vue' near
the end of Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle, the sensorium of
sixteenth-century Frenchmen appears to have been structured more
equitarily than our own. That is, things and situations which we would
describe in visual terms, they described in haptic (or tactile), olfactory,
and auditory language. The rarity with which the sixteenth-century
French resorted to visual epithets for descriptive purposes led Febvre to
conclude that their power of sight was less developed (in a cognitive sense)
than their touch or smell or hearing (Febvre 1982:423-32, 436-37).1

1 The research on which this essay is based was made possible by a Commonwealth
Scholarship. My ideas grew out of conversations with the following teachers and
colleagues, whom I take this opportunity to thank: R. Needham, P. E. de Josselin de

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As an example of the symbolic significance attached to olfactory as opposed to visual signs in European society prior to the ‘Siècle des Lumières’ (or Enlightenment), consider the manner in which the claim that a person had died a saint was adjudicated in the early Middle Ages: ‘Exhuming his body about a year after burial, people discovered in every case that a sweet fragrance rose from the saint’s tomb. The flesh had largely vanished from his bones; and the redolence that remained indicated the absence of putrefaction. The pleasing aroma, called the odour of sanctity, proved that the saint had miraculously exuviated his flesh. Possessed therefore of an excarnate form rendering him impervious both to the desires and to the sins of the flesh, the saint received divine power.’ (Rothkrug 1981:95, emphasis mine.)

Hence the many cults surrounding saints’ relics, the latter being regarded as a conduit of divine blessings. Obviously, in the case of a sinner, or of a saint who was really an impostor, the smell would be nauseating rather than delectable, an infernal stench as opposed to a sweet perfume (see Camporesi 1986:56-59).

Now what counts as ‘proof in any given age is always in some measure a question of bias (Douglas 1975:50-53). What is, perhaps, most striking about the above description is its olfactory as opposed to visual bias. ‘Surely’, an enlightened member of our own society would say, ‘the fact that the flesh had not completely vanished would be regarded as evidence of the presence of putrefaction!’ The medieval peasant, however, would be more inclined to follow his nose. To him, the sweet scent emanating from the saint’s tomb was proof positive of the absence of putrefaction. It is therefore important ‘to analyse how people think they perceive’ (Seeger 1981:81), since what is perceived (as significant) is largely dependent on this prior knowledge.

1. Leenhardt’s Paradigm. The idea that the soul has an odour which varies in accordance with a person’s moral status is also found in southern Melanesia. For example, the Canaque of New Caledonia distinguish between an ‘odour of life’ and an ‘odour of death’. The former is associated with the effluences of crustaceans and female genitalia, while the latter is

‘not made exclusively of the unpleasant smells of putrefaction but of those which are exuded by dry bones or anything which is irremediably deprived of life. It is the odour of the skeleton abandoned on the mountain, called “god’s bones”. It is the odour

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2 As Camporesi (1986:17-20) points out, the ‘sweet scent’ emanating from a saint’s tomb may be accounted for by reference to the embalming practices of the period, which involved literally ‘spicing’ the corpse.
of the defunct and the gods. It remains attached to them, for... at
the end of mourning, three or four years after their death, the *bao*
are still called "the people with a rancid odour".' (Leenhardt
1979:48.)

It might seem that the southern Melanesian notion of an 'odour of death'
and the medieval European idea of an 'odour of sanctity' are two quite
different concepts. But underlying their apparent incompatibility is the
fact that they perform the same classificatory function (see Lévi-Strauss
1966:12-13; 1985a:15-17). That is, just as the 'odour of sanctity' dis-
tinguishes saints from sinners, the 'odour of life and the odour of death
play a classificatory role of distinguishing human beings, who live a
positive life', 'the living ones' or *kamo*, 'from those who continue their
existence in a negative state', the defunct or *bao* (Leenhardt 1979:50).

In the Solomon Islands, which are situated some 1,000 kilometers to
the north of New Caledonia, things are different. 'There they do not
speak of the odour of death', which implies that 'the notion of the
corpse's odour attached to the world of the dead and of the gods has died
out [est effacée] in northern Melanesia' (Leenhardt 1979:49, 50). Ac-
cording to Leenhardt, this effacement is not an isolated phenomenon,
for it is related to certain other facts. These facts can most economically
be represented as follows:

*The less differentiated the notions of corpse and god, the 'less
differentiated the space in which the living and the defunct reside.*

...The less differentiated the corpse and the god, the more the god
retains the odour of his corpse. (Leenhardt 1979:45, 48.)

What is meant by the above remarks, which we shall refer to as 'Leen-
hardt's paradigm', is that, as one moves from the north of Melanesia (the
Solomon Islands) to the south (New Caledonia), 'the space in which the
living and the defunct reside appears to contract' (Leenhardt 1979:45).
In the south, the habitat of the dead; the 'corpse god' (*bao*), blends with
that of the living, whereas in the north there exist myths of an upper-
world and an underworld where the disembodied souls of the dead go to
live. Thus, whereas northern Melanesians are able to posit spaces be-
yond the immediate horizon and retain these in their collective imagina-
tion, to the southern Melanesian 'space appears as a heterogeneous
ensemble of places whose existence is felt by bodily presence; when the
sensuous reaction to the resistance of the physical milieu is absent, space
does not exist' (Leenhardt 1979:46-47).3 Similarly, while the northern
Melanesian distinguishes between 'corpse' and 'god', the southern

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3 But see Codrington 1972:122-23, 175, 264. Leenhardt also related the absence of
sculpture in the round in New Caledonia to the Canaque's 'limited' notion of space:
'His elementary vision unfolds in only two dimensions ... he is unaware of depth'
(Leenhardt 1979:11-12).
Melanesian does not. It makes sense in view of the absence of this distinction that in New Caledonia ‘the god retains the odour of his corpse’. But matters are not quite that simple, as we shall see presently.

Just as the olfactory sophistication and visual ‘retardation’ of the native of New Caledonia remind us of Febvre’s sixteenth-century Frenchman, so the reverse situation in the case of the native of the Solomon Islands reminds us of ourselves. For what most distances us from those the other side of the Enlightenment is, to borrow Leenhardt’s (1979:53) terminology, the ‘greater amplitude of [our] notion of space’. This is true both literally, in the sense that we are not only able to conceive of ‘outer space’ but travel in it, and metaphorically, in that we have created all kinds of imaginary spaces, such as the territory of the unconscious, first discovered by Freud.

It is tempting to account for these differences between ‘ourselves’ and ‘the other’ in evolutionary or developmental terms. Both Febvre and Leenhardt resort to this sort of argument. According to Febvre (1982: 437), ‘the passage from the qualitative to the quantitative’, or from the mystical to the ‘scientific’, is dependent upon sight being ‘set apart from the other senses’, i.e., the hierarchization of the sensorium. According to Leenhardt (1979:39), it is the ‘totally affective mentality’ of the Canaque, his tendency to ‘participate’ emotionally in his social and natural surroundings, that prevents him from conceiving of space as discontinuous, or of ‘corpse’ and ‘god’ as separate.

The purpose of the present essay is to continue the study of ‘the sensory underpinnings of thought in different periods’ (Febvre 1982: 436) commenced by Febvre and Leenhardt. But, whereas they derived their theoretical inspiration from the writings of Lévy-Bruhl (albeit cautiously, see Febvre 1982:438-45; Leenhardt 1979:165, 188-93), my own inclination is to follow the example of Levi-Strauss.

What the adoption of a Lévi-Straussian perspective imports is the rejection of the idea that the thought of different periods (or societies) can be plotted on an evolutionary grid (Lévi-Strauss 1978:336-44). For the task of anthropology (as of history) is: ‘To describe the diversity of customs, beliefs and institutions as the result of choice, exercised by each society in an ideal repertoire where all possibilities are set down in advance’, and for all time (Lévi-Strauss 1985b:157). It follows that an absence of differentiation, such as the lack of a distinction between ‘corpse’ and ‘god’, is not to be regarded as evidence of a ‘less advanced mentality’ (Leenhardt 1979:45). Rather, this absence itself constitutes a difference, and this difference may be seen as resulting from ‘the desire of each culture to resist the cultures surrounding it, to distinguish itself from them – in short, to be itself’ (Lévi-Strauss 1985b:xv). It also follows, given the postulate of an ‘ideal repertoire where all [possible combinations] are set down in advance’, that cultures institutionalize their differences in determinate ways, that is, that it is possible to speak
of 'the system of their differences' (Lévi-Strauss 1966:249).

If, following Lévi-Strauss, we purge Leenhardt's paradigm of its temporal dimension, and regard the two mentalities he described as simply distributed in space, it is remarkable how 'structuralist', even 'post-structuralist' (Clifford 1982:180-81), that paradigm looks. For what the paradigm points to when seen in this new light is an invariant relation between three sets of differences, or better, clines of differentiation (see Figure 1). The first cline is topological in character: the greater or smaller amplitude of the notion of space. The second, osmological: the relative significance attached to smell with respect to the classification of different states of being. And the third, eschatological: the greater or lesser differentiatedness of the notions of corpse and god. Each of these differences will be discussed in detail at a later point.

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<td>Separation of body and being</td>
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<td>(corpse/god)</td>
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Figure 1. Leenhardt's Paradigm.

2. The Leiden Version of the Comparative Method. The idea that cultures can be plotted along a given series of clines of differentiation agrees with the new orthodoxy in comparative studies: 'The comparison of cultures requires not that we reduce them to platitudinous similarity but that we situate them apart as equally significant, integrated systems of differences' (Boon 1982.ix). The emergence of this new orthodoxy is reflected in the transformation of the 'field of ethnological study' approach as applied to Indonesian society by various members of the Leiden School from 1935 to the present.

Indonesia was first constituted as a 'field of ethnological study' in 1935 (J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong 1977). Given the assumption that a 'field' must be characterized by a certain overall 'homogeneity and uniqueness', it was de rigueur during the period from 1935 to 1956 that: 'Within that field, one looked for resemblances. When there were imperfections in the resemblances (as was often the case), one had a. to explain the imperfections, and b. to find data which would outweigh them' (P. E. de Josselin de Jong 1984:4). Then, in 1956, it was discovered that in comparing two cultures one could also contrast them, and the period since 1956 has been characterized by the growing recognition that 'resemblance has no reality in itself; it is only a particular instance of difference, that in which difference tends toward zero' (Lévi-
The purpose of the present essay is to contribute to the further elaboration of the ‘field of ethnological study’ approach by demonstrating the relevance of Leenhardt’s paradigm to the interpretation of certain Indonesian facts. To be specific, my claim is that the differences between the cultures of northern and southern Melanesia correspond to the differences between the cultures of the Kei and Tanimbar archipelagos, both of which are situated in the Southeast Moluccas (eastern Indonesia). Given that one of the most enduring concerns of the Leiden School has been the problem of ‘la conception de l’espace’ (Mercier, cited in P. E. de Josselin de Jong 1977:11), it is somewhat surprising that Leenhardt’s work has not attracted more attention in the recent debate over the future of the Leiden version of the comparative method.

The societies of Kei and Tanimbar will already be familiar to Dutch Indonesian scholars from Van Wouden’s monumental *Types of Social Structure in Eastern Indonesia*. However, whereas Van Wouden tried to show the ‘structural core’ of Keiese society (consisting in asymmetric connubium, double descent, and ‘sociocosmic dualism’, among other things) to be identical to that of Tanimbarese society, my aim is to demonstrate that the two cultures are ‘mutually comparable, not because they are similar to, but because they are transformations of each other’ (P. E. de Josselin de Jong 1984:6). In other words, it is the system of their differences, not their (putative) common properties, that concerns us.

It must also be emphasized that my intention is not to create ‘a feeling of *déjà vu*’ in the reader conversant with Melanesian cultures, ‘as if the peoples under study [i.e., those of Kei and Tanimbar] did not inhabit islands to the west of New Guinea, but in the Western Pacific’ (Milner 1984:11). Even though such a feeling will be one of the effects of this essay, my own feeling is that ‘we must pass from [the search for] imperfect resemblances to [the analysis of] transformations’, i.e., clines of differentiation (P. E. de Josselin de Jong 1984:8). Hence the argument of the following pages: it is the differences between the cultures of the Kei and Tanimbar Islands on the one hand, and the cultures of the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia on the other, which resemble each other (compare Lévi-Strauss 1963:77).

Before adducing evidence in support of the above rather grand assertions, let me notice the following background information concerning the Kei and Tanimbar Islands. A single language is spoken throughout the Kei archipelago. That archipelago consists of the islands of Kei Besar, Kei Kecil and Tanebar-Evav (among others). This language is...
also spoken some 120 kilometers to the south on the three northernmost islands of the Tanimbar archipelago. The inhabitants of Yamdéna, the principal island of the Tanimbar group, speak a different language, and on Selaru, the southernmost isle, yet a third language is spoken. All three languages are closely related, though, and belong to the same ‘sub-family’ (Chlenov 1980).

That the people themselves are aware of their similarities is revealed in the fact that the southernmost island in the Kei archipelago is named ‘Tanebar-Evav’ (or ‘Tanimbar-Kei’), while the northernmost island in the Tanimbar group, Molu, is also called ‘Tnébar-Kei’ (Drabbe 1940:4; and see Barraud 1985:118). Equally significant, however, is the fact that those who do not speak the Kei language regard those who do as their superiors (Drabbe 1940:4). Thus, the subjects of the present study may be interpreted as themselves suggesting that we view their respective cultures as disposed along a graduated continuum, with Kei-speakers being of a ‘higher culture’ than the others.

I. ON TOPOLOGY
If the paradigm introduced in the previous section is relevant to the interpretation of Southeast Moluccan spatial modelling (or topology) one would expect to find a ‘progressive reduction of space’ (Leenhardt 1979:53) as one moves from Kei to Tanimbar. Some sense of how expansive the conception of space is in the Kei archipelago may be gained from the sub-title of Cécile Barraud’s book, *Tanebar-Evav: Une société de maisons tournée vers le large*. But how does the grandeur of this conception compare with the amplitude of the notion of space in Tanimbar?

As has been shown elsewhere (Howes 1987), this question may be determined objectively by examining the foundation myths of the two societies. The principal culture hero of the Kei islands, Dewa, came to Kei from Bali. The principal culture hero of the Tanimbar islands, Atuf, came to Tanimbar from Babar. Babar is situated approximately 130 kilometers to the southwest of Tanimbar, whereas Bali is located over 1800 kilometers to the west of Kei. Therefore, in terms of the distances which the two myths set up, one may speak of a weakening of geographic oppositions, or the smaller amplitude of the notion of space, in the mythology of the Tanimbar archipelago compared with the mythology of Kei.

Both Dewa and Atuf are said to have arrived at their respective destinations when the world was still in darkness. It would seem that in the Kei islands the first sunrise, or ‘illumination of the world’, is associated with the crowing of a cock (Barraud 1979:113). In the Tanimbar archipelago, this moment is accounted for somewhat differently. It is said that at the time of Atuf’s arrival, ‘the sky was still low, so low that the sun could not rise. Sometimes it would appear on the horizon in the East,
but it was much larger than it is now and... the sky being so low, it had to remain there on the horizon... there was still no moon, nor were there any stars then' (Drabbe 1940:317). This situation was intolerable, for it was only during those times when the sun appeared on the horizon that the people could go about laying in a store of food, water and firewood. Atuf, however, conceived of a plan that would cause the heavens to expand and the moon and stars to be born. That plan involved running the sun through with his spear, splitting it in two. This operation enabled the remaining half of the sun to ascend, pushing back the heavens as it went, while the other half fell into the sea and became the moon (the splinters became the stars).

It is of interest to note that during his journey to the place where the sun appeared on the horizon, Atuf had to keep cutting off the top of the mast of his sailing-boat because the sky got lower the nearer he came to the sun (Drabbe 1940:318). By contrast, there is no mention of the idea of the sky being closer to the earth in ancient times in any myth of the Kei archipelago (see Geurtjens 1924). What the above facts suggest is that the space in which the heroes of Tanimbarese mythology move has always been less expansive, more 'contracted', than the space of Keiese mythology. For Atuf, space had resistance, a certain 'bodily presence'—to use Leenhardt's (1979:46) words—whereas Dewa could take space for granted.

One of the most common motifs of Tanimbarese mythology is the motif of the petrified culture hero (see Drabbe 1940:317, 324). This was Atuf's fate. It is said that one can still see his silhouette in stone on the cape where he last sat down to defecate. In this respect his end is like that of the gods of southern Melanesia:

'The gods do not depart for dwellings beyond the Canaque's reach, that is, beyond the particular space where he himself lives. The defunct are always there, the gods mingling with the living, and their spaces are poorly differentiated... the rocky point is a god's tooth and the mountain peak is the head of another or the place from which his voice comes when it thunders.' (Leenhardt 1979:48, 58.)

In the mythology of the Kei archipelago, on the contrary, the space of the dead is clearly differentiated from that of the living. According to one of the two versions of the afterlife recorded by Geurtjens (1921:392-94), the village of the dead is situated in the underworld. The underworld is approached by means of a small cave which leads into a huge cavern in the rock-wall or precipice near Ohoider on Kei Kecil. An old woman by the name of Vaharu (lit. 'two faces') lives in the cave: The souls of the dead are said to sojourn with her, and to bathe in a nearby brook, before crossing the threshold and descending into the underworld. It is thought that the gods engage in a perpetual dance within the walls of their underworld village, but it is also said that the existence they lead is 'pale
and dreary' in comparison with that of the living (Geurtjens 1924:70-73, 114-21).

Thus, in the Kei Islands as in northern Melanesia one finds myths of an underworld 'offering a pale copy of the habitat and company of the living' (Leenhardt 1979:51). It is consistent with this discontinuity, or division, in the representation of space that 'the corpse and the deified being are differentiated' as well (Leenhardt 1979:51). That is, the Keiese do not see their gods as forming part of the landscape the way the Tanimbareses do when they turn, for example, to look at Atuf's rock. Rather,

'A being is apprehended through his corporeal envelope, so that when he abandons it [i.e., his corpse] he is no longer known by his form and loses his unity. He must be given solidity so that he may again be perceived. The task is difficult; no folklore in the world has succeeded in it.' (Leenhardt 1979:51.)

Keiese mythology is no exception, although one must admire this mythology for its attempt. It is Vaharu, the cave woman, who performs the function of restoring unity to disembodied souls in most Kei myths. In these tales, reminiscent of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Vaharu is depicted as taking pity on a bereaved spouse and agreeing to bring a loved one back to life. She does so by means of a spell which effects an elaborate series of transformations. The departed soul is transformed first into a snake, then an iguana, a centipede, and various other creatures, before it finally takes the form of an egg. The egg is then seized and smuggled out of the underworld by the surviving spouse, who brings it to the inner verandah of the matrimonial residence and there cracks it. The deceased reappears, his or her unity of body and being restored (Geurtjens 1924:114-15, 74-77, 104-5). It is unclear at what point in the transformation series body and soul are reintegrated, but perhaps that is the whole trick.

It seems doubtful that the performative utterances of a Vaharu would have their desired effect were they spoken in Tanimbar, for the 'felicity' of a performative utterance always depends upon its context (cf. Austin 1962). The appropriate context is absent in Tanimbar because the dead of Tanimbar do not lose what above was called their 'form'; if anything, their 'solidity' is enhanced by virtue of their becoming rocks. This raises an important theoretical point. In Leenhardt's (1979:53) terms, the Keiese view of the afterlife is metaphysical, the product of 'conceptual fabrication', whereas the Tanimbareses view is ultraphysical, a sensual extrapolation. The former view is metaphysical in the sense that it posits a separation between body and being, or corpse and god, just as it posits discontinuity (i.e., a shift of levels) as between this world and the next. The latter is ultraphysical because, according to it, body and being preserve their unity after death.

At the risk of introducing some confusion into the preceding analysis,
it should be noted that Atuf's fate (petrification) is not representative of that of all the dead of Tanimbar. On the contrary, when ordinary mortals die, they are thought to go to the isles of Sélu and Nus'Nitu, which lie off the west coast of Yamdena (Drabbe 1940:405-6).\(^5\) An analogous tradition exists in the Kei Islands. According to this tradition, the second version of the afterlife, the soul of a person who has died a peaceful death eventually makes its way to the isles of Baer and Maas, which are situated to the north of Kei Kecil (Geurtjens 1921:392-94; Pleyte 1893:330-31). It follows that the underworld which one approaches by means of Vaharu's cave, as discussed earlier, is reserved for those who have died a violent death (the classic example being the woman who dies in childbirth).

It might seem that Tanimbar and Kei views of the afterlife are not so different after all, given the facts which have just been presented. However, this impression is false. For it remains the case that Baer and Maas are 'down below' (duvav) in relation to Kei Kecil, whereas Yamdena and Sélu and Nus'Nitu are all on the same plane. This results from the fact that according to both Tanimbar and Kei collective thought, the east-west axis is horizontal while the north-south axis is vertical.\(^6\) Thus, if one comes from the Kei archipelago, to pass from the realm of the living to that of the dead always involves a descent, a shift of levels, whereas such is not the case in Tanimbar.

To conclude, as one moves from the Kei Islands in the north to the Tanimbar Islands in the south, 'the space in which the living and the defunct reside appears to contract' — as in Leenhardt's Melanesia.

II. ON OSMOLOGY

If Leenhardt's paradigm is relevant to the analysis of Southeast Moluccan osmology (i.e., the classification and interpretation of smells), one would expect to find a more comprehensive ordination of beings according to the odour they emit in place in Tanimbar than in Kei. It is a further implication of Leenhardt's paradigm that the more comprehensive a society's olfactory vocabulary, the more odours are regarded as revealing; the less comprehensive the register, the greater the impulse to suppress smells altogether.

In illustration of the latter point, consider the example of English-speaking societies. The English language does not possess a terminology descriptive of smells. As McKenzie (1923:59) has pointed out: 'We

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\(^5\) There is one exception to this rule: the soul of a warrior killed in battle is assisted by means of a special rite to assume a place in the eastern sky next to the supreme being, Ratu (Drabbe 1940:426).

\(^6\) The two cultures are not, however, agreed as to which end of the world is 'up' and which 'down': in Tanimbar, north is 'up above' and south is 'down below', but in Kei it is the other way round (Howes 1987; Barraud 1979:50-51).
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never name an odour; we only say it has a "smell like" something or another', and what few olfactory terms we do possess are either borrow-
ed from other languages ('musk' is Persian in origin, 'aromatic' comes
from the Greek, etc.), or originate from some known odoriferous object,
such as camphor or rotten eggs (see Sperber 1975:19). By contrast, it has
been reported that 'Polynesian peoples are capable of expressing several
thousand shades of meaning through their words for "smell"' (Doty
1972:147).

It is consistent with the paltry character of our olfactory vocabulary
that, as noted in the Introduction, 'Olfaction is generally felt to be the
lowest, the most animal of the senses, so much so that in polite society it
is scarcely good manners to mention smells' (McKenzie 1923:21). This
disposition is manifested in numerous ways, the most salient being the
suppression of odour in public places for ostensibly hygienic reasons
(Kern 1974:813; Corbin 1982); the widespread use of deodorants for
purposes of 'impression management' (Largey and Watson 1972:1027);
and, especially revealing, the advertising slogan for the clothes-washing
detergent New Unscented Tide: 'Now all you smell is clean' (which is to
say: nothing at all). In short, we live under a regime of 'olfactive silence'
(Corbin 1982:270). By way of contrast, in Arabic-speaking countries,
people are not 'self-conscious about telling others when they don't like
the way they smell', and, rather than attempting to eliminate body
odours, the aim is 'to enhance them and use them in building human
relationships' (Hall 1969:160).

Thus, while 'smell is speechless' (McKenzie 1923:64) in most Eng-
lish-speaking societies, in other societies the virtues of olfaction are
extolled. We shall call these two social types 'odour-denying' and
'odour-accepting societies' respectively. As we shall see, the societies of
the Kei and Solomon archipelagos may be classified as of the former
type, while the societies of the Tanimbar Islands and New Caledonia are
of the latter, odour-accepting, kind.

1. The Odour of Death. It will be recalled that southern Melanesians,
such as the Canaque of New Caledonia, distinguish between an 'odour of
life' and an 'odour of death', and that these two odours 'play a classifi-
catory role of distinguishing human beings, who live a positive life, from
those who continue their existence in a negative state' — the 'corpse gods'
or bao (Leenhardt 1979:50). It is important in this connection to re-
cognize that death appears to the Canaque 'as a negative state of life and
a different form of existence', but there is 'no idea of nothingness in
death', as there is for us (Leenhardt 1979:35). In New Caledonia, 'on
defunte', one does not 'die' as such. So it is that for some years after their
death, their earthly existence not yet over, the bao are still called 'our
rotted men, smelling of rancid fat, who live in the holes of rocks and the
trunks of trees' (Leenhardt 1979:31).
Turning now to Tanimbar, we find that there, too, the odour of death is a recognized symbolic category, and the sign by which the defunct 'make themselves known':

'The woman who has died in childbirth searches everywhere for her child to take it along, or if it is dead, for her husband, so as to lure (ravat) him away to Sélu, the land of the dead. She only stops roaming about once her flesh has completely wasted away, so that her skull has completely separated from her trunk. Then she comes into the house for the last time; they see her, or smell her and quickly throw a couple of pieces of burning wood to meet her. From that point on everything is finished. This coming into the house and making oneself known by cadaverous odour is, for that matter, the habit of all deceased ones, once the decomposition of their bodies has reached the above mentioned stage.' (Drabbe 1940:403-4.)

We conclude that in Tanimbar as in New Caledonia there is a period during which 'the god retains the odour of his corpse', as our paradigm led us to expect. Given this correspondence, we are encouraged to look for further evidence of the notion of a corpse god in Tanimbarese collective thought. Given that in New Caledonia 'the body of a dead man, and the dead man himself, are called bao' (Leenhardt 1979:30), one such piece of evidence would be the absence of an expression meaning 'corpse'. That such is the case in Tanimbar is confirmed by the following quotation:

'Someone who has passed away is called mangmwate, literally translated: he who has died . . . They speak of mangmwate, whether with regard to the corpse that lies on the floor of the house, or with regard to the wandering soul of the deceased. There is no expression for corpse. Something else that could throw some light on the mentality of the Tanimbarese is the following: when there is a dead body in the house, the door is not shut at night, because the dead man goes out by night to call on his previously departed kinfolk. But what is it that goes on the walk? Not the body that lies there dead, that everyone can see. The soul? But this has already taken leave of the body, otherwise, also according to Tanimbarese notions, the corpse would not be a corpse. It is apparently understood that it is still present, if not in, then by the corpse.' (Drabbe 1940:420-21.)

The above passage points quite clearly to the notion of beings keeping their unity of body and soul across what we call death (compare Leenhardt 1953:45; 1979:51). It also shows how difficult it was for Drabbe (as a Christian missionary) to participate in the ultraphysical worldview of his charges. What appears to have troubled Drabbe the most was the notion that a being (the mangmwate) could be in two places at once. He could not visualize this notion, and so attributed it to some quirk of his
informants' 'mentality'. The fact that he could not 'see what they meant' is not conclusive, however; it may reflect nothing more than that Drabbe remained a prisoner of his culture with its predominantly visual mode of thought (Corbin 1982:iv; Febvre 1982:347). At issue here is the fact that Drabbe could have smelled what the Tanimbarese meant, but the smell-sign (cadaverous odour) did not register. To use a simple illustration: a colour 'always remains the prisoner of an enclosing form; by contrast, the smell of an object always escapes' (Gell 1977:27). That is, the most salient feature of a smell is precisely its diffuseness: a smell can be in two places at once. By parity of reasoning, if the defining feature of that class of being(s) the Tanimbarese call mangmwate is their cadaverous odour, nothing prevents the mangmwate from being in two places at once. Everything would depend on the breeze. If we assume that the soul of a dead man is identified with the odour of his corpse, it is also sensible that the Tanimbarese maintain that the soul remains present 'if not in, then by the corpse', since the smell of the corpse would obviously come to pervade the death chamber.

If the preceding analysis needs further confirmation, perhaps that confirmation is given in the fact that the word for 'soul' (smangat) in the language spoken on Yamdena is very close to the word for 'smell' (angat) (Drabbe 1932). This conjunction makes sense if we suppose that in Tanimbar as in New Caledonia it is the odour of one's soul that identifies one as living or dead. In New Caledonia, the living (kamo) are enveloped by 'the mustiness of the odour of life', while the dead (bao) are identified as 'the people with a rancid odour' (Leenhardt 1979:48-49). That an analogous classification prevails in Tanimbar is implied in the notion that it is by cadaverous odour that the mangmwate 'makes himself known'. The point here is that the arbiter of existence (whether 'positive' or 'negative') is as much smell as it is sight.

'As we move toward the north of Melanesia, conditions change. There they do not speak of the odour of death' (Leenhardt 1979:49, emphasis mine), or to be specific, the role of the odour of the corpse in interpreting the existence of the defunct (so prevalent in southern Melanesian mythology) is 'omitted' from northern Melanesian accounts of the afterlife. Unfortunately, Leenhardt's account becomes obscure at this point, so let us begin by considering what Codrington (1972) has to say concerning the representation of death in northern Melanesia.

Malanta is one of the Solomon Islands. In Malanta, the soul (or 'ghost') of a dead man is called 'akalo, whereas the body after a natural death is [called] ra'e, after a violent death laloma' (Codrington 1972:260). We conclude that in the Solomons the notions of corpse and god are differentiated. Codrington (1972:260) continues: 'All ghosts upon leaving the body swim first to a point of land at Saa, then to a point at Ulawa, ... and lastly to Marapa, two islands lying off Marau in Guadalcanar. While the body is rotting the ghost is weak; when the smell has
ceased the ghost is strong.’ What is meant by the word ‘strong’ is that once nothing more is left of the deceased than his skeleton, he regains the power and influence (mana) he exerted in his former life, and may be called upon by means of his relics (skull and jawbone) for help (see Codrington 1972:262, 118-20).

Leenhardt (1979:49) also records that the ‘newcomer’ to Hades becomes ‘stronger as the unpleasant smell of the corpse disappears’. How, then, can it be that in northern Melanesia ‘they do not speak of the odour of death’, as he states only a paragraph earlier? By way of formulating a response to this question, consider the following facts. The shaman of the Solomon Islands ‘who wants to descend into Hades and escape detection by the gods, who might suspect him of being a living person, does not smear himself with putrid water as in the New Hebrides, but with the juice of one of the herbs [such as citronella] the gods love’ (Leenhardt 1979:49). Now, the New Hebrides lie to the north of New Caledonia but to the south of the Solomon Islands. Therefore, in terms of Leenhardt’s paradigm, one would expect to find a more expansive, or discontinuous, conception of space than in New Caledonia (that is, a conception that includes the notion of an underworld), but notions of ‘corpse’ and ‘god’ that remain less differentiated than in the Solomon Islands.

This is precisely what one does find. In the New Hebrides, the underworld is called Panoi; ‘the ghost in Panoi . . . has a tarapei, a body, which has not only form and colour, but a certain consistency’ (Codrington 1972:278); and, the reason the shaman anoints himself with water in which some totemic animal (rat or gecko) has been left to rot is to acquire the odour of death. This enables him to ‘walk around among the gods without arousing suspicion’ (Leenhardt 1979:48-49; Codrington 1972:276-78). It follows that the practice of using scented herbs in the Solomon Islands is to be explained as resulting from the fact that in the north corpse and god are not confused, that is, that the soul loses its olfactory identity as well as its body when it departs for the underworld. The gods of northern Melanesia would undoubtedly be repulsed were someone to turn up in their midsts stinking like a rat, and a dead rat at that! In this respect, their attitude is no different from that of the living with regard to a corpse:

‘If a very great man dies, or a man much beloved by his son, the body is hung up in his son’s house, either in a canoe or enclosed in the figure of a sword-fish, ili . . . The figure of the sword-fish is cemented like a canoe and painted; no smell whatever proceeds from it . . . Sometimes the corpse is kept in this way for years . . . waiting for a great funeral feast [at which point it is buried]’ (Codrington 1972:261-62).

The above facts bespeak a very low threshold of olfactory tolerance. Significantly, as one moves toward the south of Melanesia, conditions
change. There the threshold of tolerance is much higher. In the Torres Islands, for example, ‘the practice has prevailed of laying out the bodies of the dead on stages near the houses, to putrefy and decay’, while yet further south, in the Banks’ Islands, there ‘still remains a custom in some places of keeping the body unburied and putrefying in the house as a mark of affection’ (Codrington 1972:265, 267, emphasis mine). Thus, as one moves from north to south and the amplitude of the notion of space contracts, the threshold of olfactory tolerance varies inversely: it expands. However, this pattern is not uniform. For in the deep south, i.e., New Caledonia, the dead were ‘abandoned on a mountainside until the gathering up of the skull and the dispersal of the skeleton’ (Leenhardt 1953:38). This suggests that the dead mingled less with the living in New Caledonia than in the Banks’ Islands.

To sum up, the sensibility of the northern Melanesian (whether living or dead) would appear to be more delicate, more refined than that of his southern Melanesian counterpart. The smell of a corpse is met with repugnance as opposed to recognition. It pleases the gods to be propitiated with the sweet scent of aromatic herbs, not the putrid stench of the rotten corpse of some totemic animal or other. The more refined sensibility of the northern Melanesian is consistent with the incipient ‘dualism of body and being’ which Leenhardt found to characterize their representations of the afterlife. The mythology of their Hades, with all its disembodied souls, is ‘nothing more than intellectual fantasy’, a ‘conceptual fabrication’ (Leenhardt 1979:51-52). There is nothing palpable, or sensible, about this mythology, unlike that of southern Melanesia.

There exists a significant contrast between the sensibilities of the peoples of Kei and Tanimbar as well. This contrast figures most clearly in the context of their respective mortuary practices. In Tanimbar, a person who has died a peaceful death is laid to rest in a hollowed log split in two. Conversely, the body of a person who has died a violent death is wrapped in nothing more than a bamboo mat. This practice probably accounts for the occasional whiff of cadaverous odour by which the defunct ‘make themselves known’, for neither the coffin log nor the bamboo mat are interred, and the mortuary grounds are situated only a short distance from the village (Drabbe 1940:254-61, 399).

Now, the coffin log of Tanimbar is a clumsy affair, as can be seen in the photograph in Drabbe’s Het Leven van den Tanëmbarees, which shows the legs of the corpse dangling out the sides. By contrast, the Keiese, who pride themselves on their boat-building skills (Barraud 1979:20-21), also lavish much attention on their coffins. The Keiese coffin, which is called the ‘boat of the dead’, is designed in such a way that the lid may be fastened to the casket by means of wooden pegs. As a further precaution, the protruding pieces at either end of both lid and casket may be bound together with bark cord so that the whole thing is
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'hermetically sealed' (Riedel 1886:240). Once the coffin has been sealed shut, a diviner is called in to fix a propitious date for the burial and 'feast of the dead'. This date may be put off for months, and sometimes years, if the relatives do not have sufficient means to honour their dead. 'During all this time the corpse remains stored in the house, although the seams of the coffin are then carefully sealed shut with a pitch of oil and lime so that they will not let out any foul-smelling gases' (Pleyte 1893:330). When it comes time for the feast in the dead man's honour, his body is interred and his soul is sung to the land of the dead, the isles of Baer and Maas (Pleyte 1893:331).

Whereas Keiese mortuary practices evidence a deep-set concern to suppress foul smells, Tanimbarese funerary practices bespeak a largely indifferent attitude toward the odour of decomposition. As Drabbe (1940:252) records, Tanimbarese obsequies are 'sometimes . . . postponed for a few weeks, often indefinitely. The corpse remains stored in the house for the entire period; one can easily imagine the consequences. The inhabitants are quite used to it, though, and just continue to eat and sleep there'.

It is instructive in this regard to consider the differences between Tanimbarese and Javanese attitudes towards the smell of a corpse. The Javanese, like the Keiese, feel compelled to combat this smell, but they do so by means of an incense known as menyan and speedy burial as opposed to enclosing the cadaver in an airtight container. According to Siegel (1983:9), the smell of menyan is not a pleasant one, but the Javanese still find it preferable to that of a corpse: 'One could die smelling a corpse'.

From our perspective, it is significant that Siegel could 'never elicit! any associations connected with' the smell of menyan, for it is 'an odour that, rather than evoking memory, seems to repress it' (Siegel 1983:13). It would appear that this repression or concealment of the odour of decomposition is motivated by the desire to keep the 'image' of the deceased apart from other thoughts, namely, memories of the person as he was in life. One thing that a corpse cannot do is be socially inept, or make a slip of speech, and this is the ideal, the 'image' toward which all good Javanese aspire: perfect detachment (being iklas). The dead man, 'as dead, that is, fixed', is also a source of pangèstu or 'blessings' (Siegel 1983:3). This static quality is absent from the decaying corpse, however, which is why evidence of putrefaction must be suppressed, and why the smell of a corpse is thought to be contagious of death. Decay challenges

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7 This description of a Keiese coffin is based on the model in the collection of the Leiden Volkenkundig Museum (item 'Kei 1889/13'). Incidentally, lime is also used for treating corpses in the Kei Islands, at least in myth, where it appears to be credited with the power of arresting putrefaction (Geurtjens 1924:52-55).
the image of the deceased as belonging already, firmly, to the eternal 'realm of death' (Siegel 1983:4), and therefore able to impart blessings as opposed to pestilence.

In Leenhardt's terms, what the above representations disclose is a profound separation between the notions of corpse and god, and between the intellect and the affects. It does not therefore surprise us to learn that Javanese funerals are marked by an 'absence of affect' (Siegel 1983:3), that is, the same kind of detachment (in both senses) that is admired in the dead person. As in death, so in life. The ritualized detachment of the Javanese contrasts starkly with the ritualized wailing at a funeral in the Banks' Islands (see Codrington 1972:267), or, for that matter, in Tanimbar (see Drabbe 1940:251). The Javanese revulsion with respect to the odour of a corpse also differs from the attitude underlying the practice of keeping the corpse putrefying in the house 'as a mark of affection', and even imbibing 'the drippings of the corpse' as a sign of respect, which is characteristic of both the Taninbar and Banks' Islanders (Drabbe 1940:252; Codrington 1972:268).

How are these contrasts to be explained? It is noteworthy that their distribution may be accounted for by reference to the following rule: *the greater the valorization of the 'image' of the deceased, the greater the devaluation of his odour*. It is understandable that the Javanese should represent an extreme case of this rule given their preoccupation with appearances, i.e., their concern with always seeming 'detached' (*iklas*). The distinctly Javanese obsession with appearances is also manifest in their love for the shadow puppetry of the *wayang*. In short, their society is a kind of 'civilization of shades'.

Leenhardt, however, would not be satisfied with the above explanation. Rather, he would regard the fetishization of visual imagery in the context of Javanese representations surrounding death — that is, the importance attached to the 'image' of the deceased — as symptomatic of a conception of the afterlife which is 'nothing more than intellectual fantasy', a conception that has been emptied of its 'deep content', meaning its 'solidity' and emotional attachment (Leenhardt 1979:51-52). We conclude that the duality at the core of Javanesse metaphysics has resulted in the privileging of intellect over affect, vision over olfaction, and image over reality — the reverse in all respects of the unity at the core of Tanimbarese ultraphysics.

It is consistent with the conclusions reached in Part I (On Topology) that Tanimbarese society should thus figure as a civilization of substance by way of contrast to the Javanese example. Which brings us back to the question of the differences between Tanimbarese and Keiese mortuary practices: if the Keiese coffin is deliberately sealed shut so as to prevent the noxious effluvia of the corpse from escaping, how can the deceased 'make themselves known' as is the custom in Tanimbar? The rigour with which the Keiese attempt to suppress the smell of decomposition evi-
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dences how foreign the notion of a ‘corpse god’ is to their mode of thought. It also bespeaks a deep-set concern with appearances. We may infer that, like the Javanese, they have led themselves to conceive of corpse and god as separate, and evolved the ‘hermetically sealed’ coffin in order to enforce this thought. That they should go to such lengths is understandable, for every miasma that might otherwise escape would confound the duality at the base of their metaphysics by exposing an even deeper unity.

According to McKenzie (1923:7, 9), ‘delicacy’, or that ‘refinement of feeling that accompanies high civilization’, ‘can only be acquired by avoiding habitual overstimulation. And that avoidance is only possible in a country where odours are fine, etherealised, rare.’ Given that the environment of Kei does not differ substantially from that of Tanimbar, the Keiese have therefore had to resort to artificial means, such as the use of lime, to create an environment rarefied enough to suit their sensibility. The delicacy of their sensibility is also reflected in their mythology. For example, in one myth, a Keiese princess refuses to consummate her marriage with a prince who hails from Seram on account of his ‘foul odour’; she washes him in a stream and the smell disappears (Geurtjens 1924:50-51). In another myth, a woman who died in childbirth, who is called back from the underworld to Vaharu’s cave, expresses disgust upon crossing the threshold at being able to detect the smell of a living human being. It turns out that the smell belongs to her husband, who had concealed himself in a crevice on Vaharu’s instructions (Geurtjens 1924:74-75). What this myth suggests is that the souls of the dead are accustomed to inhabiting a realm of ‘olfactive silence’, and that they are offended when this silence is ruptured by the noisome smell of a living human being.

To sum up, both the nobility and the dead of the Kei Islands are quick to distinguish between different groups of human beings on the basis of the odour they emit. Therefore, it is not as though the Keiese suffer from anosmia. But there is a major category missing from their olfactory register: the odour of death. This symbolic category is only found in Tanimbar. It is in this respect that the ‘classificatory role’ ascribed to odour is more extensive in Tanimbar, for there it extends to encompass the ancestors.

2. The Corpse/God Distinction. What the preceding analysis has shown is that between Kei and Tanimbar there is a difference in the amplitude of the notion of space, a difference in attitudes toward the smell of a corpse, and a difference in the representation of the relationship of body to being. Moreover, this system of differences would appear to correspond to the system of differences which Leenhardt found in his archeology of Melanesian collective representations. The relationship between these two systems may best be described as one of *internal*
homology' following Lévi-Strauss (1963:77-78), that is, ‘it is not the resemblances, but the differences, which resemble each other’.

Having posited this homology, it is immediately necessary to qualify it. The qualification stems from the fact that in Tanimbar a compound term, *nitu-mangmwate*, is used to designate the ancestors (Drabbe 1940:421). In Kei, on the contrary, only the term *nit* is used to refer to the dead (Barraud 1979:46, note 2). The meaning of *mangmwate* has been discussed. *Nitu* means ‘spirit’ or ‘god’ (Drabbe 1932). The question which the use of the term *nitu* raises is whether the Tanimbarese do not also differentiate between body and being, and if so, at what point this distinction comes into play. It is submitted that the distinction between ‘corpse god’ (*mangmwate*) and ‘spirit’ (*nitu*) corresponds to the point at which sensual extrapolation leaves off and conceptual fabrication begins, namely, the moment at which the skull falls away from the cervical vertebrae.

Two considerations can be advanced in support of the above submission. The first is that the isle of Sélu is not the final resting place of the dead, for the defunct must still ‘leap over’ to Nus’ Nitu, an island even further to the west (Drabbe 1940:405-6). The amount of time the ‘corpse god’ (*mangmwate*) spends on Sélu probably corresponds to the amount of time it takes for the flesh to disintegrate. Thus, the whiff of cadaverous odour detected in the house when the skull finally separates from the neck vertebrae must occur at the moment the defunct ‘leaps over’ to Nus’ Nitu, and the leap itself precipitates a transformation in being from ‘corpse god’ (*mangmwate*) to ‘spirit’ (*nitu*).

The second consideration has to do with the rite that marks the end of mourning, which involves the spouse of the deceased going to the mortuary grounds to recover the cervical vertebrae. The vertebrae are then passed on to the descendants. The latter call upon the deceased regularly by means of these relics to assist them in such things as gardening, hunting and public oratory (Drabbe 1940:146-47, 256-59). Prior to this rite, however, the deceased is a danger to the living. For example, he might attempt to ‘lure’ them away to Sélu (Drabbe 1940:403, 406). What this implies is that in order for there to be a beneficial and creative (as opposed to malignant and destructive) union between the living and the dead, the god must first be separated from his corpse (compare Hicks 1976:30, 109).

Evidently, the facts which have just been presented do not fit Leenhardt’s paradigm. They also force us to question our earlier characterization of Tanimbarese collective thought as ultraphysical, since they imply a certain degree of metaphysical abstraction, or dualism. It is tempting to explain these facts away as having originated in a more ‘advanced mentality’, diffused southwards, and never been fully integrated into the local ideology, as Leenhardt did in the case of the Canaque (see Leenhardt 1979:53-57). But this temptation must be avoided. Besides,
an alternative explanation suggests itself, for which we turn to the work of Robert Hertz (1960).

According to Hertz, death is a process rather than an event in the types of societies we have been considering. It lasts from the moment of death 'until the natural disintegration of the body is completed and only the bones remain' (Hertz 1960:41). Throughout this intermediary period one may discern 'a kind of symmetry or parallelism between the condition of the body, which has to wait a certain time before it can enter its final tomb, and the condition of the soul, which will be properly admitted into the land of the dead only when the last funeral rites are accomplished' (Hertz 1960:45).

The Tanimbarese material illustrates Hertz's thesis. There death consists of two stages or periods: (1) the period between the moment of death and the 'provisional disposal' of the body (i.e., its removal to the mortuary grounds), and (2) the period taken up with the decomposition of the body, the end of which is marked by the spouse going to recover the neck vertebrae ('secondary disposal'). During the first period the soul remains present 'if not in, then by the corpse'. During the second period, the soul bides its time, somewhat restlessly, on Sêlu. At the end of the second period it 'leaps over' to Nus' Nitu.

It is the same in the Banks' Islands. There the soul is thought to remain 'about the house' for five to ten days after death. Then it departs for Panoi, retaining all the while its cadaverous odour. 'Life in Panoi is eternal, unless indeed, as some say, there are two Panois, one below the other, and the dead die from the upper to the lower, as living men die from earth' (Codrington 1972:270, 277). We presume that death from upper Panoi occurs once the corpse has reached a skeletal condition.

The situation in New Caledonia is less clear due to Leenhardt's deliberate obfuscation of the facts. For example, we are told that 'at the end of mourning, three or four years after their death, the baos are still called "the people with a rancid odour"' (Leenhardt 1979:48), but we are not told what the dead are called five or six years after their death. However, it may be inferred from other passages (see Leenhardt 1953:38; 1979:33, 54) that, as in Tanimbar, the end of mourning coincides with a transformation in being (the transition from 'corpse god' to 'god'), and that the dead lose their olfactory identity as of this moment.

One point about the above traditions that deserves emphasis is that it is inappropriate to characterize the condition of the corpse and that of the 'god' (or soul) as 'symmetrical or parallel' during the intermediary period, since the people of Tanimbar, the Banks' Islands and New Caledonia do not themselves differentiate between the two. As will be recalled, there is but one term to designate 'corpse' and 'god', and both participate in the same odour until the last funeral rites are accomplished (compare Schwimmer 1965:153-54).
This brings us to that other class of societies — Java, Kei, and the Solomon Islands — where the odour of decomposition would appear to be a sensation lacking any codified symbolic significance. Such whiffs of cadaverous odour as might escape the ‘hermetically sealed’ coffin, or still be detected in spite of the heavy clouds of incense, provoke only disgust, as opposed to the recognition that that must be Grandfather wanting to ‘make himself known’ (as in Tanimbar). In these more ‘northerly’ traditions, where ‘corpse’ and ‘god’ are distinguished linguistically, it is appropriate to speak of ‘a kind of symmetry or parallelism’ between the condition of the corpse and that of the soul for, as we have seen, the idea of a period of waiting (more or less coinciding with the disintegration of the body) persists. In these traditions, death is associated with the departure of the soul. This departure ‘causes the body to disintegrate. However, the former solidarity persists; if the soul reaches the land of the dead at once, it nevertheless feels the effects of the body’s condition. In [the Solomon Islands] it is believed that the soul remains weak for as long as the putrefaction lasts; after its arrival in the other world it stays at first; the magical powers that it possesses are temporarily torpid. When every trace of the smell has disappeared the soul regains its strength.’ (Hertz 1960:47.)

The point here is that the reduction of the corpse to bones and the soul’s journey to the land of the ancestors are two parallel processes, which pertain to different worlds: the corporeal and the spiritual. Thus, the members of these societies must rely exclusively on their imaginations for their understanding of the fate of the soul. By contrast, the peoples of Tanimbar and New Caledonia have the evidence of their senses, and particularly the sense of smell, as a base on which to construct their representations of the afterlife.

3. The Odour of Life. Mention has already been made of the ‘mustiness of the odour of life’. Leenhardt (1979:48) explains:

‘There is an “odour of life”. This is the meaning of the expression bomu, “which smells of life”; it is manifested by all the unpleasant odours associated with fishing, fish and crustaceans, dairying, discharges of blood, the unwashed newborn baby. Things which participate in this odour are often taboo.’

The sacred kuni tree (Semecarpus atra), whose leaves remind the Canaque of female genitalia, would also seem to belong to this class of things ‘which smell of life’. A bouquet of kuni leaves is buried in the garden at planting time so that their ‘aroma or virtue’ will infiltrate the soil and ensure fecundity (Leenhardt 1980:122, 199-200; 1979:64; Codrington 1972:181). It makes sense that the ‘odour of life’ should be associated with women’s genitalia, hence with the idea of generation, for this odour is what distinguishes the living from the dead — those in a state...
There is at least one reference in the literature on the Southeast Moluccas to an odour which belongs to the same class as the ones described above. This reference occurs in a song from the Kei Islands in praise of the *tebob* or green turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*), who is addressed as ‘the friend whose odour entices Ursiwa and Urlima’ (Van den Bergh 1919:94), Ursiwa and Urlima being the two great political divisions of Keiise society. Significantly, in Kei as in Tanimbar the hunt of this turtle is surrounded by numerous taboos (Geurtjens 1924:275; Drabbe 1940:325). Other references to what a southern Melanesian might recognize as things which ‘smell of life’ do occur, but as we shall see, all of these references pertain to Tanimbar (in Kei such odours are suppressed), and they have more to do with the idea of regeneration than that of generation (as in New Caledonia).

The best place to begin is with a comparison of the Keiise ‘Myth of Boketsin’ and the ‘Tanimbarese ‘Myth of the Golden Earring with the Imperishable Odour’. The former concerns a princess who was abducted by a snake. When she finally escaped the serpent’s clutches, and was reunited with her fellow villagers, the first thing the latter did was bathe her in a mixture of water, coconut oil and lemon extract ‘in order to wash away the evil smell of the snake’ (Geurtjens 1924:62-63). The Tanimbarese myth concerns a weakling who was cured of his sickly condition by a snake that licked and blew on his limbs. The two then departed for the snake’s village, where the boy asked for and was given an earring by the snake’s father, and then returned home. ‘The odour of this-golden earring diffused itself over the whole world’, and so tantalized the people of a foreign village that they decided they must have it for their own. The foreigners went on a ‘friendship visit’ to the boy’s village, and once the initial festivities were over, requested the earring as a gift. But the request was refused, so the foreigners got the youth drunk and in that way persuaded him to relinquish the object of their desire. Their mission accomplished, they departed, and the boy became as sickly as before. However, a dog and cat resolved to recover the earring, tracking it down by its scent. Upon their return, as soon as the boy was given back the earring, he became strong again, but from that point on ‘the earring had no more odour’ (Drabbe 1940:297-99).

What the above two myths disclose is that both gold and snakes are thought to have a strong and characteristic odour. The Tanimbarese would seem to relish this smell, perceiving it as a source of vitality and strength. This perception is probably motivated by the notion that it is

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8 In a neighbouring Melanesian society a form of love magic is based on ‘the supposed similarity of vaginal odours and those of fish’ (Davenport, cited in Doty 1972:152). This magic involves the use of a red ground cherry as a fishing lure; once a fish has been caught in this way, the cherry is thought to have the power of attracting women.
the smell of an object that endows it with its potency (compare Radcliffe-Brown 1948:311; Gell 1977:26). Indeed, one of the most basic rules of Tanimbarese medicine is that after a given tree root has been chewed, and 'between spitting and smearing, one blows on the sick part between cupped hands, because the power of the medicine is also thought to hang in the breath of the chewer; i.e. the odour, as they say' (Drabbe 1940:366). This accounts for the effectiveness of the snake's ministrations (licking and blowing on the boy to make him 'strong'), and for why the earring eventually lost its odour (its aroma or virtue having been absorbed by the youth).

The Keiese, on the other hand, would seem to be repulsed by the smell of a snake, and, possibly, of gold. As the 'Myth of Boketsin' attests, they try to suppress this odour by means of aromatic substances such as coconut oil and lemon extract. Thus, their odour-denying attitude is manifested once again. In short, their reaction to things 'which smell of life' is no different from their reaction to things which smell of death — one of repugnance.

An intriguing study could be done of the parallels between the Tanimbar 'Myth of the Golden Earring with the Imperishable Odour' and the 'Quest of the Grail' in our own tradition (e.g. Fisher King = boy, cup or chalice = golden earring) (see Weston 1957). But that study must await another time, for a more immediate problem confronts us: the problem of the odour of gold. Given that gold is a metal that does not, in fact, smell (Moncrieff 1967:566), the fact that the Tanimbarese think of it as the source of a kind of vital effluvium that imparts or restores strength calls for some explanation. One possible explanation is that it is because gold is animate that it is thought to give off an odour. In other words, according to Tanimbarese ideology, everything that has a 'soul' (smangat) also has a characteristic 'odour' (angat).

The idea that gold is animate is, of course, ubiquitous in Indonesia (see Barnes 1974:105-8; 1985b). In the Tanimbar Islands, this idea finds expression in the story of a golden dish called Fangori that outgrew its original container (an earthenware jar) (Geurtjens 1944:92-93). In the Kei Islands, this idea is expressed in the tale of Reeuwbarngas, the guardian spirit of the village of Namar, who had the form of a golden chain 'a fathom long' with a snake-like head at either end. This spirit also had the power to transform itself into a pig. One night while in the form of a pig, Reeuwbarngas was shot at and wounded by a hunter. The chain was discovered the next day, spattered with blood and showing a dent in one of its links. Some years later, when Reeuwbarngas was presented for Geurtjens's inspection, it was pointed out that 'you cannot see any dent

9 It may be that the 'foul odour' of the Prince of Seram in the myth discussed earlier was due not to his ethnicity but to the fact that he wore a suit of gold. See Geurtjens 1924:48-51.
in the [chain’s] links; that is because it is not forged, it has grown just like our bodies’, i.e. the wound had healed (Geurtjens 1906:578).

If gold is thought to ‘grow just like our bodies’, it makes sense that the Tanimbarese think of gold as having an odour. The latter notion is a logical extrapolation from the first. For as Radcliffe-Brown (1948:311) observed: ‘Under the influence of muscular exertion the human body gives off a characteristic odour, of one generic kind, but differing somewhat in every individual. The odour of the body, being the immediate result of activity, may therefore well be regarded . . . as being closely connected with the virtue or energy of the person’. As with persons, so with everything else that is ‘active’, including gold, at least in Tanimbar. In short, according to Tanimbarese collective thought, ‘the soul is smell’ (Kern 1974:820), the executive power in things and persons is their odour.

A second possible explanation for the fact that the Tanimbarese think of gold as having an odour is that gold is associated with snakes, and snakes, as we saw above, are notoriously odoriferous. In fact, the association between gold and snakes runs so deep that they often embody each other, as in the case of Reeuwbarngas. Tanimbarese mythology is also full of tales of golden snakes which are said to have the power to stretch themselves out to incredible lengths (Drabbe 1940:335-38, Afb. 102). Such snakes are represented as inhabiting various holes in the ground, hence to be autochthonous (see Drabbe 1940:347-48).

This representation calls for further comment, since gold is certainly not a metal that can be obtained in a raw form in Tanimbar itself; it is known only from the jewelry introduced by foreign traders (compare Barnes 1974:60). Perhaps the explanation for this representation of gold as indwelling in the ground lies in the fact that gold is equated with water, and is therefore associated with wells. To cite but one example of this equation, when a village goes on a ‘friendship visit’ (Drabbe 1940: 216-22; Howes 1984), it is customary (before the negotiation over gifts begins) for a nobleman representing the visitors to exclaim: ‘“Show me the place where you fetch water, so that I can bathe”. Upon this an earring is given. In actual fact, the well or spring is not pointed out, the earring is the indicator’ (Drabbe 1940:219). In other words, a golden earring is a sign of water, and vice versa.

To sum up, we have seen that gold and snakes are symbolically equivalent, and that gold is also associated with water. In order to interpret this cluster of associations, it is instructive to consider R. H. Barnes’s discussion of the symbolism of gold in Kédang (Barnes 1974). For the people of Kédang, ‘gold is like a fluid which emerges from things, it crosses the boundaries of bodies’ (Barnes 1974:61). The term for ‘gold’, werén, also refers to ‘the liquid which may be gotten from any plant’, and in the dyadic pair werén-lalan to ‘the fertile fluids of men and women (semen and blood)’ (Barnes 1974:60-61). It is also recorded that
there is a 'snake-like guardian spirit' within gold, and that a snake watches over the golden pot from which a spring emerges in the old village on the mountain where the people of Kédang are said to have originated. Barnes goes on to draw an analogy between the notion of werén and the Indian concept of rasa (literally, 'sap' or 'life-giving essence'), and concludes that 'gold and the other things subsumed under the term werén are in their various aspects waters of life' (Barnes 1974:61).

There is an obvious and intriguing homology between the symbolism of gold in Kédang and in Tanimbar. All of the same elements are present: the notion of gold as animate, fluid, most often encountered in the form of a snake, and of the snake as guardian spirit. But there is also an important difference in emphasis: the Tanimbarese notion of a life-giving essence is at once less substantial and more pungent than Kédangese representations: i.e., less watery and more smelly. This observation is consistent with the idea that in Tanimbar 'the soul is smell'.

But if it is true that the Tanimbarese think of the executive power in things and persons as being their smell, then we must reverse the subject-predicate relation in our initial formulation of the problem of the odour of gold. It is not that gold 'has' a smell, but that smell has gold as but one of its many modalities. This makes sense, for it is far more characteristic of smell than it is of gold that it 'emerges from things, it crosses the boundaries of bodies' (Barnes 1974:61). As will be recalled, 'the smell of an object always escapes' (Gell 1977:27).

We are not told what gold smells like, but we suspect that, because it is associated with snakes, and the snake is often associated with the phal-lus, if pressed, the Tanimbarese would say that it emits a kind of 'aura seminalis' (compare Corbin 1982:42-43). If the above inference is correct, it helps to explain why in the Keiese 'Myth of Boketsin', with its suggestion of an unnatural sexual union between the princess and the serpent, the villagers were so anxious to rid Boketsin of the 'evil smell' of the snake. Only the Keiese, given their concern with purity and sophistication, i.e. 'distance from physiological origin' (Douglas 1973:100-1), would want to eliminate this odour. The Tanimbarese, having a much higher tolerance for all things olfactory, and conceiving of smells as a source of power, would probably revel in it.

Maybe the idea that snakes and gold 'smell of life' has 'died out', to use Leenhardt's words, in the Kei Islands. In any event, it is safe to conclude that the Keiese olfactory register is more restricted than the Tanimbarese smell repertoire, as our paradigm led us to expect. For in Kei anything that smells at all pungent or putrid must at once be treated with lemon extract or lime. In this way, the Keiese guard themselves against 'overstimulation', and succeed in propagating the illusion that they enjoy a 'higher civilization' (McKenzie 1923:9) than their neighbours to the south.
CONCLUSION

Three points emerged in the course of the preceding investigations that deserve further comment by way of summing up. They are (1) the unequal valorization of the senses in different traditions, (2) the idea that some mentalities are more ‘affective’ than others, and (3) the idea of a ‘system of differences’ that repeats itself.

1. Unequal Valorization of the Senses. The Tanimbarese and the Canaque are not unique in holding that one can tell the state a person’s soul is in by virtue of the odour he or she emits. For example, to revert to the Middle Ages once again, it is said that ‘St. Joseph of Copertino, “seeing beneath the envelope of the body”, was able to recognise the sins of the flesh by their odour. And St. Paconi . . . could even smell out heretics [whose souls, of course, were especially impure] . . . presumably in the same way as witches are now discovered in Africa’ (McKenzie 1923:74).

A related notion is the idea, common to various parts of the Middle East, that ‘smell and disposition’ are linked (Hall 1969:160). By contrast, were I to claim that I could smell that someone else felt love or anger towards me, I would be regarded as suffering from ‘olfactory delusions’, and in need of psychiatric treatment (Winter 1978:122-26). This contrast should be considered in the light of the following, related observation: were I to say of someone else that she or he is ‘blue’ or ‘green with envy’ or has ‘a rosy disposition’, my mental faculties would not be called into question. The use of these sorts of visual (or colour) epithets to describe different emotional states – when olfactory epithets would, in fact, be more fitting (see Hall 1969:160; McKenzie 1923:87-89; Winter 1978:61-64) – is but one of the many indices of how in modern English-speaking societies the valorization of vision has resulted in a near total devaluation of olfaction as a means of orienting ourselves in the world. Of course, such expressions as ‘I smell a rat!’ or ‘the sweet smell of success!’ do occasionally surface in English-speaking circles. But, if asked, one’s interlocutor would be hard pressed to explain what he or she meant by them, for they are ‘figurative’ (Lévi-Strauss 1985a:16), i.e., whatever sense they might once have had has been effaced from our collective consciousness.

The visual bias instilled in us by our civilization raises a number of deeply perplexing questions for ethnography. For example, when a Codrington writes regarding the Melanesian conception of the soul:

‘Nor is it any wonder that, believing that such a thing as what we call a soul exists in connection with the body which they see, they speak of and conceive of the soul when separate from the body as if it were in some form and shape visible to the eyes. Thinking, to Melanesian natives at any rate, is like seeing; what is thought of must have some form to be thought of in’ (Codrington 1972:247),
we do wonder whether he is describing Melanesian thought processes. Perhaps he was simply projecting his own thought processes onto theirs (compare Needham 1976). For is not 'the form' (or one of them) in which the soul is thought, at least in southern Melanesia, smell? And are not smells distinguished by their 'formlessness' (Gell 1977:28)? If this is true, to allege that the Melanesian 'lacks a perfectly clear conception' of what the soul 'is' (Codrington 1972:247) seems rather beside the point, since it is in the nature of smells to be indiscrete, always emerging from things, blurring boundaries... Of course, had Codrington restricted the scope of his remarks to the Solomon Islands, or extended them to encompass the peoples of Kei and Java, the grounds of our objection would vanish.

2. 'Totally Affective Mentalities'. Perhaps, as well, it was the kinds of questions Codrington was inclined to ask that gave rise to the contradictory responses he received; questions like, we presume: 'Can you see it?' Response: 'Well, yes, but not really'. Leenhardt, on the contrary, worked on the assumption that thinking was like feeling among the Canaque (see Leenhardt 1979:6-10, 1981:667-68). And to the question, which only works in French: 'Pouvez-vous la sentir?' the answer was equally clear: 'Bien sur' – since, as we have seen, the soul is smell in southern Melanesia as in Tanimbar.

Leenhardt proceeded on this basis to erect a theory of his informants' mentality as more primitive than that of the northern Melanesian. The presence of the notion of a corpse god, the symbolic significance attached to the odour of the corpse, and the nonexistence of a Hades (or underworld) were all to be regarded as indices of how the Canaque's 'totally affective mentality has not yet acquired sufficient strength for conceptual fabrication' (Leenhardt 1979:53).

Such a conclusion is not, however, tenable, for the simple reason that 'emotions explain nothing: they are always results', hence their causes lie elsewhere (Lévi-Strauss 1963:71; 1981:667-68). We are, accordingly, compelled to search for some other explanation for why the collective representations of the southern Melanesian appear to be more emotionally charged than those of the northern Melanesian. Perhaps the explanation lies in the fact that: 'More spacing means more solemnity' (Douglas 1975:214; 1973:100-1). In other words, the more space is differentiated, the more actors within those spaces will attempt to suppress any display of emotion.

This rule is best illustrated in the following account of how Americans differ in their demarcation of 'personal space' from Arabs:

10 The idea of 'clear and distinct' conceptions of things as superior to 'obscure and confused' (or sensual) impressions of them dates from the Enlightenment (Febvre 1982:451; Clifford 1982:178). The emergence of this valuation is related to the hierarchization of the sensorium, as discussed earlier.
‘Bathing the other person in one’s breath is a common practice in Arab countries. The American is taught not to breathe on people. He experiences difficulty when he is within the olfactory range of another person with whom he is not on close terms [such as an Arab taxi-driver] ... He finds the intensity and sensuality overwhelming and has trouble paying attention to what is being said and at the same time coping with his feelings’ (Hall 1969:49).

It is in accordance with the preceding observations that we revise Leenhardt’s paradigm one last time: the smaller the amplitude of the notion of space (including ‘personal space’), the greater the symbolic significance attached to olfactory signals, and the more acutely felt the interface between persons, and between persons and the world. Thus, ‘the separation between body and being, between the odour of the corpse and its absence, [and even the salience of ‘affectivity’ as opposed to ‘rationality’]... in each case reflect the greater or lesser amplitude of the notion of space in a given mentality’ (Leenhardt 1979:53).

3. Difference and Repetition. How is the fact that the collective representations of cultures on both sides of New Guinea can be plotted on the same series of clines of differentiation to be explained? A diffusionist explanation could be advanced since, as Kunst (1945:28) pointed out in his study of the music of the Kei Islands, Keiese melodies ‘bear all the characteristics of being the musical expression of a people with a strong Melanesoid strain’ (see also Chlenov 1980).

But the explanation we prefer is that what is music to the Keiese ear (and would be cacophony to the Javanese ear) is to be enucleated ‘as the result of choice, exercised by [Keiese] society in an ideal repertoire’ (Lévi-Strauss 1985b:157), which is larger than the repertoire of either Indonesian or Melanesian society taken on its own. That repertoire consists of other elements as well, such as odour-accepting and odour-denying attitudes or contracted and expansive notions of space. But it is not the elements so much as the relations between them, the distinctive manner in which they are combined, that makes a culture unique, and at the same time comparable to cultures belonging to other ‘fields of ethnological study’. All cultures are permutations of each other at base (Howes 1987).

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