

# The Odour of Things: Smell and the Cultural Elaboration of Disgust in Eastern Indonesia

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*ABSTRACT* Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of calls for anthropology to devote more attention to non-visual modes of perception. Frequently, the implicit suggestion of these calls has been that the acknowledgement of different ways of organising the senses could help us escape the supposed malaise of modern 'ocular-centrism'. This paper explores the sense and symbolism of smell in Buli, a village in eastern Indonesia, to argue that smell is part of an ontology that catches Buli people in a malaise of their own. 'Bad' smell attests to an ambiguous moral order that can be traced across myth, ritual and everyday life. Ambiguity is ever-present because 'bad' or disgusting smells destabilise the very conceptual order they also help support. The analysis of smells as they relate to local notions of disgust is therefore suggested as an alternative way to conceptualise the contradictory nature of power.

*KEYWORDS* Eastern Indonesia, olfaction, phenomenology of perception, politics of smell

Odours 'in and of themselves make myths possible', writes Gaston Bachelard (quoted in Le Guérer 1994:128). By drawing attention to the role of smell in organising mythic narrativity Bachelard rightly recognises that smell is more than a way of sensing the world. Just as importantly, smell is a way of making sense of the world. Bachelard's early observations anticipate a recent spate of anthropological interest in non-visual types of perception (Classen 1993; Feld 1991; Helliwell 1996; Howes 1991; Sperber 1975; Stoller 1989). Amongst these 'alternative' senses, smell has been the last to be singled out as a research topic unto itself (Almagor 1987; Classen 1990; Classen, Howes & Synnott 1994; Cohen 1988; Gell 1977; Krogstad 1989; Roseman 1990; Seeger 1981; Synnott 1991).

One reviewer even enthusiastically announces smell to be the 'post-modern sense' *par excellence* (Tyler 1996:619, see also Classen, Howes & Synnott 1994). This pro-clamation is not surprising given the long-standing 'focus' within critical philosophy on the intimate relationship between vision and modernity (Blumenberg 1993; Jay 1986; Levin 1988, 1993). Criticism of the 'scopic regimes' at play in modern Western culture has primarily come from Nietzschean philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (Levin 1993:7), and the 'post-modern' appropriation of their critique of visualism only naturally leads to a search for another, more benign 'perceptual' grounding for knowledge. I believe such a search to be highly dubious. Attempts to topple the taken-for-granted primacy of vision by descriptions of 'exotic' uses of smell have thus tended to present us with a radical alterity free from the 'vices of vision' rather than with a detailed political ontology of a culturally specific mode of olfaction. The net result is that a modern dualism is perpetuated rather than superseded. Vision and smell remain radically opposed in the work of both modernists and self-avowed post-modernists.

Bachelard is no exception in this regard. However commendable it may be for him to highlight the social and cultural productivity of odour, Bachelard also sustains 'Western ocular-centrism' when he argues that the sense of smell is not admissible as a tool in scientific inquiry. The sense of smell is important in mythical thought but should not, he believes, be allowed in scientific thought (Le Gu er 1994:197). In mapping sight onto science and scent on to myth, Bachelard replicates the idea of a radical opposition between logos and mythos in terms of a specific hierarchy of the senses which favours sight over other forms of perception (Corbin 1986:6).

While this dichotomy is inherently problematic, Bachelard's acknowledgement of the symbolic efficacy of smell merits further attention. The aim of this paper is to explore this efficacy with case material from Buli, a village cluster on the central coast of Halmahera, an island in the east Indonesian province of Maluku. I propose that smells in Buli are both more productive and more ambiguous than Bachelard suggests. I argue that smells, in particular disgusting smells, function as double-edged facilitators of a deeply ambivalent ontology in Buli society. Foul smells are simultaneously the cloud-like stuff of myths and a fog-like menace to social life itself. This moral duality of bad smells represents a challenge to a sociology of knowledge and order. I approach this challenge by focusing my analysis of the symbolism of foul smells on the ambivalent ontology of disgust. Although it

is generally considered to be one of the basic emotions, disgust has to my knowledge never been explicitly investigated anthropologically, despite the recent interest in the cultural construction of the emotions.<sup>1</sup> Useful points of departure may nevertheless be found in the works of Julia Kristeva (1982) and Mary Douglas (1966), even though they do not explicitly treat disgust, as well as in the excellent phenomenological analysis of disgust by William Miller (1997). All three analyses point to the moral ambivalence of disgust, an ambivalence I find is prominent in Buli. The Buli relation to foul smells is thus characterised by a seeming paradox: bad odours are the object of strong rejection as well as the focus of abject preoccupation. I argue that this paradoxical disavowal of and fascination with smell is necessitated by a culturally specific elaboration of disgust. Disgusting as they are, foul smells are nevertheless indexical of fundamental categories of Buli existence without which life would be impossible.

I wish to pursue a twofold goal in this paper. Firstly, I explore the meaning of bad smell and secondly I suggest that attention to bad smell and disgust reveals a number of basic points about the ambivalence of morality and power. The Buli notion that bad smells are both constitutive of and destructive to social order is somewhat at odds with the relation between smell and power in the West. In his brilliant analysis of the social history of smell in France, Alain Corbin points out that:

[a]bhorrence of smells produces its own form of social power. Foul-smelling rubbish appears to threaten the social order, whereas the reassuring victory of the hygienic and the fragrant promises to buttress its stability (1986:5).

Thus in the modern West, the resemblance between sweet fragrances and social hygiene bolsters social order, while bad smells terrorise order. Much social reform and scientific concern in Europe has therefore been directed at the threat of stench since the eighteenth century (Corbin 1986; Howes & La-londe 1991). In Buli, on the contrary, foul smells emanate from the origins of social order at the same time as foul odours introduce a profound anxiety into the very workings of this order. Dis-odour is, in other words, constitutive of both order and dis-order. The knowledge and perception of foul odour entail a social form of life which always teeters on the brink of symbolic anxiety because of the make-up of life itself. If cultural logic and social power can be said to form a system, it is, as Michael Taussig (1992a) aptly phrases it, 'a nervous system'.

### The Odorous Origins of the Landscape

The population in the half dozen Buli villages totals some 4,500 people. They are one of five Austronesian-speaking groups on south and central Hal-mahera in North Maluku. Buli people compose a relatively marginal group compared to their numerically stronger and politically more dominant Tobelo, Maba and Bicoli neighbours. Like their neighbours, however, they are pre-dominantly subsistence horticulturalists and fishermen whose basic staples are sago and fish. Simultaneously they are well integrated into a monetary economy, and the sale of copra and dried anchovies is their main sources of cash income. This integration with an outside world is not a recent development. The Muslim sultanates of Ternate and Tidore controlled much of the trade and political interaction in the area from around the thirteenth century until their abolition by the Dutch colonial government in 1912. The clove trees of the North Malukan islands were the source of this control. The precious spices to be derived from clove trees attracted merchants for many centuries and are the main reason that the islands have known European colonial rule for over 400 years, albeit in varying degrees of intensity. Smell, as I shall show, functions within a specific Buli ontology but it also plays a role as part of Buli localising strategies in negotiating their marginality *vis-à-vis* the outside world.

The Buli concept I want to take as my point of departure is the word *pupūi*. The term refers to the stench emanating from raw or putrescent meat. In addition, it is employed to describe the smell of corpses as well as that of infected wounds (see Maan 1940:90). In a derogatory fashion, it is also used in insulting reference to the female genitals and to refer to someone who has had sexual intercourse, especially of an incestuous or adulterous kind. The lexeme *pupūi* has close cognates in other Austronesian languages in the area. In Gimán on south Halmahera, *puiik* refers to 'the stink of corpses' (Teljeur 1990:109), while James Collins translates the term *pūik* in the East Makian language to the west of Halmahera as 'malodorous' (1982:108). Strikingly similar terms are found in the Pacific. *Bubu* is the lexeme for 'bad smell' in Raluana (on the island of New Britain in Papua New Guinea) while the equivalent Fijian term is *boi* (Blust 1978:213). Robert Blust argues that these cognates can be traced to a common proto-Austronesian root that diffused into the closely related languages of south Halmahera and Oceania (*ibid.*). The cultural meanings attached to these cognates may not be exactly the same, but malodour clearly has a semantic presence of a related kind in a number of societies throughout the Western Pacific.

A number of other olfactory terms in the Buli language refer to both pleasant and unpleasant smells. However, none of them have the symbolic significance or semantic range of the term *pupúi*.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore the discourse of and practices surrounding *pupúi* that are the empirical subject of this paper. My interest in *pupúi* relates to the perception and moral symbolism of the smell, but also to the 'olfactory practices' motivated by a concern with this particular smell. Although Buli people might well prefer never to smell *pupúi*, it is a stench from which they, try as they may, cannot isolate themselves. In Buli, odours make myths possible because bad smell clings to the symbolic fabric of social life.

According to a myth which Buli people share with their Maba and Tobelo neighbours, the island of Halmahera was once flat.<sup>3</sup> It was home to a small group of giants, one of whom was Watowato. He lived with his slave and two wives, a Buli woman called Watileo and another woman who is unimportant to the Buli version but who is known as Ungurúngihi in the Tobelo version. The size and strength of Watowato were legendary and the landscape is today littered with manifestations of his activities. A whale that he caught during a fishing expedition is now a large limestone hill. Another example is a small island off the coast of Halmahera. Watowato had returned from his sago grove with a large packet of sago starch strapped to his back, when he encountered a group of young girls who began taunting him for his nudity.<sup>4</sup> In shame and confusion Watowato accidentally dropped the sago starch into the sea where it formed the island of Bobale.

Despite his great (if somewhat clumsy) strength, Watowato was killed by another giant called Papudou, a skilled blacksmith. Watowato had asked Papudou to make new iron arrow points and a new knife blade for him. While he forged the arrow points, Papudou enticed Watowato into drinking large amounts of palm wine. Eventually Watowato got drunk and fell asleep unaware that Papudou was also a witch (*gua*). As he slept, Papudou tore open his stomach and devoured his liver. Then he took the red-hot blade from the fire and plunged it into Watowato's breast. Watowato awoke in shock and frantically sought to cool his burning chest and stomach by drinking water from a river. He quickly emptied the river completely of water. He then proceeded to another river and drank until that, too, was dry. In this way, he emptied every major river in the area, traversing a large part of the forest behind Buli and establishing the main points in the Buli mythical topography. No amount of water, however, could cure Watowato. Before he finally died he managed to grab his bow and shoot off two arrows at

Papudou. In this way, the two primordial giants died simultaneously.

Papudou's dead body became a mountain to the north of Buli. Meanwhile, Watowato expired with his head resting in the lap of his slave to become the highest mountain on the north-east peninsula of Halmahera, some 1,440 metres high. The two dead bodies gradually began to smell (*pupūi*), and after three days the stench became so unbearable that Watowato's slave and two wives succumbed to it and died too. They turned into named mountains as well. The petrified body of Watowato's wife, Watileo, is especially significant because the Buli villages still nest at its foot. The bodily characteristics of Wa-tileo, her pregnant stomach, her legs, breasts, vagina and head are still re-cognisable in the landscape today.

It is this anthropomorphic topography of the area created from primordial giants that makes life on the peninsula possible, because the mountains now provide shelter against intrusion by the sea. An initial act of witchcraft set in motion a chain of events in which the smell of decomposition figures prominently. Human life and settlement on the island would not have been possible without the deadly smell of decaying corpses. Smell is, in other words, at the basis of human existence in myth – at the same time indispensable and deadly.

The fact that the smell of two dead bodies should be so overwhelming as to cause the death of the surviving giants indicates the dangerous potency of the smell of decay. This danger is emphasised repeatedly in Buli mythology. Another myth tells of the founding of the present village. It relates how the old village of Buli was attacked by more than a thousand enemy warriors from Tobelo. Despite the numerical inferiority of the Buli people, their magical medicines and fighting prowess gained them the upper hand and all Tobelo attackers were vanquished. Their dead bodies, however, were left un-buried on the battlefield and soon the smell became overpowering, forcing the Buli population to move, resettling in their present village. Similar narratives of resettlement induced by the overpowering smell of decay are not uncommon among the ethnic groups of Halmahera. Among some groups smell still influences settlement practice. The nomadic Tobelo groups of the area move from their hamlet when a member of the co-resident group has died (Martodirjo 1993:236). Traditionally, the deceased is left on a platform to decay until the body has decomposed and the bones can be collected. The smell emanating from the corpse contributes to making it impossible and undesirable to remain in the area (*ibid.*:246).

Colonial history and modernisation have meant that Buli people today

are in a predicament very similar to that of their mythical giant forebears when it comes to smell. Quite at odds with their own heroic myths of re-settlement, the population was historically settled in permanent villages by the Dutch colonial government at the turn of the century, at which time Dutch missionaries from the Protestant Utrecht Mission Society also arrived. The progressive conversion to Christianity of most Buli people after 1930 encouraged the establishment of permanent settlements because village life eased Church attendance. The administrative push to settle the population in permanent villages continued after the Indonesian Independence in 1949, and today strong pressure is exerted on all groups of Halmahera for them to adopt a more sedentary lifestyle, considered more amenable to modern life in Indonesia. Ironically, the 'will to modernity' poses a problem in relation to smell. Political pressure and their own desire to become modernised and developed believers in the One God sanctioned by the Indonesian state combine to make the escape from smell through periodic resettlement impossible. Today modern administrative, economic, and religious practices fixate Buli people to one location as effectively as mythic space did their giant ancestors. Smell, though, resists being contained within the bounds of myth, and it penetrates into the daily lives of Buli people to articulate a complex ontology that exists despite and beyond their Christian convictions and modern aspirations. The smell of *pupúí* is thus the cause of disquiet at every death and funeral. Unable to escape the smell of decay, Buli people have to protect themselves against it by ameliorating its effects.

### **Deadly Emanations**

The death of a Buli person creates a number of dangers to other people in the village. The most frightening of these dangers is the presence of witch-es (*gua*), who are attracted by the smell of the corpse (*pupúí*). The dangerous attraction of this smell means that burial cannot be unduly postponed. To-day, Christian burial takes place the day after death, if at all possible. Con-forming to an all-Malukan fashion, the plank coffin is clad in black cloth and flower designs of white cotton thread decorate the coffin. The cultural concern with smell, however, weaves through the more visible aspects of Christian liturgy. While the burial itself is strictly Christian, the practices surrounding the preceding wake and the funerary celebrations after the interment reveal the symbolic concern with bad smell and witchcraft. Children are told to remain close to the house and people do not go off to their gardens alone for fear of witch attack. On the night before burial, the immediate relatives

of the deceased are not allowed to sleep lest they too will die. This prohibition is ritually enforced by in-laws of the deceased who devise pranks and various punishments for those who nod off during the wake.

Ideally, the deceased cannot be buried until all the in-laws, the daughters-in-law in particular, are present. The daughters-in-law are in charge of cook-ing for the guests and have the ritual status of 'rulers' or 'kings' (*kolano*) during the mortuary rites, which last from three to six days depending on the capability of the family to provide food for the guests. The elevated status of the daughters-in-law during the mortuary rites is expressed in their sanctioned ability to threaten to postpone burial until their demands for food, palm wine, money or tobacco have been met by consanguines of the deceased. Then, the threat of postponement of the burial is clearly serious. As was evident from the myth of Watowato, smell is dangerous not only because it attracts witches but in and of itself. It is probably not coincidental that Watileo and her co-wife should succumb to the smell of decay after three days, because three days was the longest time that a corpse formerly could be held before burial.

The smells associated with death are particularly strong when death is caused by cannibalistic witchcraft. The witch kills its victim by devouring its liver. To do so, it has to remove the victim's shadow or reflection (*gurumin*). The shadow is the consciousness of a human being; it is what makes a person aware and sentient. Its removal instantly causes unconsciousness. When the witch has satisfied its cannibalistic desires, it returns the shadow to its victim, who remains unaware of the attack and only falls ill several days later. It is said that the victim in many cases only appears to be alive after the attack and the consequent period of illness. In reality, however, the victim is without its shadow, without 'content' (*i ni bakkako i*), because the witch has failed to re-turn it. Instead the body of the victim is animated by the shadow of the witch and despite appearances the victim is in effect already dead. Cultural death in this sense precedes biological death (cf. Mimica 1996). Death due to witch-craft is a painfully drawn-out affair which in many ways reverses the normal process of death. The witchcraft victim has died before he or she stops moving, while normal death is only recognised some time after animations stop. During the wake the deceased is thus treated as if merely asleep and repeatedly enticed 'to wake up'. Under normal circumstances therefore, the smell of decomposition only becomes a problem after burial. In the case of death due to witchcraft, however, smell is a problem even before death because the process of decomposition is already advanced.

Witchcraft victims are accordingly said to smell strongly immediately after death, and com-plain-ing over the smell of a corpse is a covert but highly charged way for relatives to voice their suspicion of witchcraft.

Burial ensures that the smell of decomposition is contained and that the deceased is turned into an ancestral spirit (*smengit*). This transformation is processual rather than instantaneous, and until it is complete, the smell of putrescence constitutes a problem for the whole village. During the period from the moment of death (or late stage of sickness) until the third night after burial, witches roam with particular intensity (*amngai*). The strong smell of an interred corpse of a witchcraft victim drives the witches into frenzy. Convention has it that the bodies of such victims are disinterred from their graves on the third night after burial by witches who then proceed to feast on their liver and grotesquely molest the corpse. 'Dancing the dead' (*faowowa matmat ca*) is the term used for this molestation. The corpse performs a macabre dance as it is propelled around by pushes and punches from a circle of witches. The dance of death provides a dramatic climax to the witches' attraction to the corpse. After the third night, witch attention to the dead stops as emanations from the grave conventionally cease.<sup>5</sup>

The nexus between the smell of putrefaction, death and witches is also evident in descriptions of the pre-Christian mortuary rites from Tobelo (Baretta 1917; Hueting 1922; Platenkamp 1988). At death, the spirit or shadow of the deceased had to be guided by a shaman to his guardian spirits (*jin*). The spirits 'cleansed' the dead person's shadow and banished its smell of decomposition with incense, so that it could return to the ancestral shrine. Through-out this period the 'smelly' spirit was under siege by witches (*o tokata*) whose presence threatened both this transformation and the living people in the hamlet. Hueting, the Dutch missionary to Tobelo, reports how, when the corpse was taken from the house after three to ten days to be placed in a shrine on stilts on the edge of the village, young people of the hamlet would throw mud, ashes and faeces at each other to make each other 'stink' (1922: 150). This practice, called 'to make oneself very smelly/bad' (*hoodorou*) was aimed at confusing the witches into believing that everyone in the village had died and that no living people remained for them to kill. After the corpse had been removed from the house and its smell ceased to be a threat to the village, the young people would similarly wash off the foul smell of dirt (*dorou*).

As seen in the Buli mortuary prohibition against sleep, death is contagious in the time between death and burial. In this period, the death of all villagers

is a real possibility.<sup>6</sup> Accidental imitation is in other words dangerous. The controlled mimicry attained in ritual has the opposite effect. As Michael Tausig (1992b) has pointed out, mimicry is sometimes the best form of magical defence: one protects oneself from something by mimicking it. The contagion of death is thus ritually obviated when Tobelo villagers made one another stink in order to emulate or mimic the smell of death. A similar form of ritual emulation involving bad smell was employed in pre-Christian Buli. As the corpse was carried from the house to the grave, relatives scattered fire-wood ashes after the coffin (*aslako gigiáp*).<sup>7</sup> The ash provided an olfactory as well as visual trail for the shadow of the dead to the grave. The trail ensured that corpse and shadow were buried together. Without the interment of both, a proper transformation of the deceased into an ancestor spirit would not occur. In Buli, smell provided a trail that eased the passage of the shadow and enticed it to join the decaying body. In Tobelo, smell was used to create a ritual congruence between the living and the dead, thereby confusing the preying witches at a vulnerable moment. Both practices, however, created a ritual context of 'bad' smell in order to emulate the smell of decay. The ritual regulation of smell attempted to ensure the successful transformation of the deceased into an ancestor without causing harm to the living.

Smells feature in rites of passage throughout the world (Classen, Howes & Synnott 1994; Howes 1987). The near universal use of smell in rites of transformation may, in part, be due to the close metaphorical similarity between wafting smells and the 'out-of-placeness' of transition (Classen, Howes & Synnott 1994:140; Howes & Lalonde 1991). The border-transcending potential of smells thus give them a symbolic proximity with transformation. Like the wafting odour of bad smell, the transformation that occurs at death is difficult to contain within the bounds of the safe and tolerable. The Tobelo use of faeces and the Buli use of ashes sought to draw an advantage from the relationship between smell and symbolic change. In Tobelo 'bad smell' conferred a death-like status on the young and vulnerable. In Buli smell enticed death into proceeding according to custom. Smell is turned into a weapon against its own dangerous symbolic potential, when bad smell is used to control the otherwise unbound and smelly character of death.

Buli people employ another way of exercising olfactory control over the witches at the time of a death which resembles the use of faeces in Tobelo. However, instead of using foul smells that please the witches, Buli use the opposite tactic and employ sweet smells that disgust witches. In the time after a death has occurred, people frequently keep their fires kindled with a type

of wood known as *taputing*. This wood is said to be repugnant to witches but to have a penetrating yet sweet smell to normal humans. At night after a burial, the sweet smell of *taputing* often wafts across the streets from many houses, enveloping the village in a protective blanket of smoke.

Taking advantage of its inherent capacity to attract or repel, people in Halmahera employ smell in a variety of ways as a risk control measure to prevent the death of one person from repeating itself in others. In Buli, such measures are predicated upon the close link between *pupúi* and death. This association between death and smell, in which olfaction is a moral gauge that separates domains of chaos and danger from order and safety, is straight-forward enough. The semantic range of the term *pupúi* is, however, far wider. If we follow the moral trail that smell leaves in Buli, it leads us into other domains of social life and suggests a conceptual link between domains we might otherwise regard as separate or even opposed. Thus, it is not only after death that the smell of decay (*pupúi*) is a lurking danger. The same smell accompanies birth as well.<sup>8</sup>

### The Odorous Beginning of Life

The association between bad smell and birth is linked to Buli notions about conception and the role of blood in the constitution of the human body. From the observation that menstruation does not occur during pregnancy, Buli lore has reached the obvious conclusion that menstrual blood is the source of children – a deduction common enough throughout the world. For conception to occur, the blood of the mother must be contained and enveloped by semen. Pregnancy is unstable until the process of enfolding has occurred over a period of several months. Sexual intercourse must therefore be continued well into pregnancy, for only in this way is the menstrual blood contained. The growth of the foetus in the womb is a result of the monthly accumulations of blood in the body of the mother during pregnancy, blood which would normally be discharged in menstruation. Although paternal semen enfolds and forms the child, the baby is entirely made from blood.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, semen and blood are associated with different senses. While blood is an olfactory concern, semen is etymologically associated with the sense of taste. Apart from referring to semen, the term *mna* also means ‘animal fat’ and is used to describe a greasy rich taste – a highly valued characteristic of wild game or sea turtles. In this way, gender differences are mapped by the different perceptual evaluation of basic male and female fluids.

As a result of its 'bloody' constitution the baby is born 'soft' (*gagalúm*) and 'raw' (*ululif*). The mother of the child is characterised by the same softness and rawness that stems from the accumulation 'raw blood' (*lafláf ululif*) inside their bodies. The smell that emanates from this 'raw' (or 'white') blood attracts both witches and *putiana* spirits – female spirits who spitefully and enviously stalk pregnant women to kill their babies.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore imperative that the raw blood and its dangerous odour be banished as soon as possible after delivery and a variety of post-parturitional practices seek to do so. For up to three months after the birth of a child both mother and child spend their nights and most of their days next to a small fire. This heats them (*tarke si*) and transforms their raw constituents into hardened, 'cooked' (*masa*) ones. The fire in other words 'cooks' the child into a hard, durable, social form.<sup>11</sup> The baby is bathed several times daily in herbal extracts said to drive out the 'raw blood', and both mother and child ingest herbal potions said to have the same effect (see Bubandt, n.d.).<sup>12</sup> In addition to attracting witches by its smell, rawness is a danger in itself, for it forebodes decomposition. Unless the raw blood is banished through a combination of heating by fire and numerous herbal-medicinal practices, mother and child are in danger of dying from the process of decay in their bodies. Like the rotting flesh of a corpse, the raw and decaying blood of mother and child is said to give off the stench of *pupúí*.

The herbal treatments, the concerns about attracting witches and the attempts to banish the 'raw blood' that all characterise reactions to child-birth are thus tied to the same complex of decomposition and smell that characterises the concerns surrounding death.

As Lévi-Strauss (1970) has stressed, cooking socialises. In Buli it does so in a world where raw things, by their smell, dangerously attract cannibal spirits that dwell among the living. 'Cooking' attempts to deny the fact, attested to by frequent witch attacks, that human beings are 'raw'. It is this rawness, socially denied, which gives off a stench. Unless rawness and its accompanying smell is socialised out of the child by heat and herbal potions, newborn babies are likely to die just as the deceased are likely to turn into rotting spirits after death unless the threat of decomposition is contained in the ritual of burial.<sup>13</sup>

The parallel between birth and death is not accidental. Rather, it hinges on the fact that birth and death are parallel types of transition in Buli. The idea that death in many societies is a process rather than a momentary event

stems, of course, from Robert Hertz's well-known essay (1960). Interestingly, some of the data for this interpretation Hertz derived from the secondary burial practices of north Halmaheran societies like Tobelo (see Platenkamp 1988:152). To Hertz the presence of secondary burial meant that death was a process, not a momentary event:

death is not a mere destruction but a transition: as it progresses so does the re-birth; while the old body falls away, a new body takes shape, with which the soul – provided the necessary rites have been performed – will enter another existence (1960:48).

Although secondary burial was probably never practised in Buli, death has the same processual character as it does among the northern groups of Halmahera. Moreover, I suggest, death shares its processual character with birth. Death and parturition are symbolically linked, in part through their olfactive properties. They are processes that are similarly concerned with the dangerous olfactory properties of raw and decaying flesh, united in the Buli anxiety about blood (see Bubandt, n.d.). While burial seeks to contain the dangerous properties of decay, the practices surrounding birth (heating, her-bal bathing and herbal potions) attempt to transform the danger of decay me-dicinally. It would be a gross exaggeration to say that babies are like corpses, but their corporeal make-up is somehow similar. In establishing this similarity, smell plays an important role. The smell of *pupúí* is the primary index of decay and is therefore the main danger to be guarded after birth as well as after death. *Pupúí* is what attracts witches to the newborn and to the dead, for both carry, to put it bluntly, the smell of raw meat. The olfactive similarity between death and birth makes it apparent that they are not opposed as beginning and end, but are similar occurrences with similar risks.<sup>14</sup>

### **Odorous and Odourless Spirits**

The common risks involved in dying and in coming into being may be related to an opposition between the mainly olfactive properties of the human body and the mainly visual properties of the human spirit, conceptualised throughout Halmahera as a shadow, reflection or image (cf. Platenkamp 1988:17). Birth and death are processes of realignment that redress the relationship between the body, in constant danger of smelly decay, and the shadow-image, for it is the latter that confers human consciousness on the baby and which at death is transformed into an ancestor spirit.

Burial is an attempt to prevent the decay of the corpse from affecting the

shadow (*gurumin*) of the deceased.<sup>15</sup> If the separation of smell and shadow is successful, the decomposition of the corpse is contained and the shadow transformed into an odourless ancestor spirit (*smengit*). If for some reason the separation does not take place, the shadow of the deceased turns into an odorous and dangerous spirit, known as *muming*. Conventionally, this happens when someone is killed by enemies and the body hidden in the forest. Through a combination of spilt blood and unconfined smell, the *muming* re-mains a wailing, wandering spirit likely to cause trouble for lone hunters or solitary gardeners. The Tobelo expression 'putrescent (or bad) shadow' (*gur-umin ma dorou*) is used synonymously with *muming* in Buli and reveals the correlation between this spirit and repugnant smell. Without burial – and Buli people, remember, say they always buried their dead – the spirit/shadow (*gurumin*) of the deceased cannot cast off its putrid smell and be transformed into an ancestor spirit (*smengit*). Instead it is destined to remain a stinking, obnoxious presence (*muming*) in the world.

A child is not born with a spirit-shadow (*gurumin*) in Buli. Rather, the child acquires a shadow as it grows up, gains experience and becomes aware. The association between child and spirit-shadow is initially tenuous. Scaring small children is therefore frowned upon, because fright causes the shadow to jump away from the child, leaving it vulnerable to illness. While most children thus acquire a shadow of their own gradually, some children acquire a shadow immediately after birth from an ancestor spirit (*smengit*).<sup>16</sup> The ancestor 'enters' (*teming*) the baby shortly after birth and confers its shadow on the newborn child. The way the 'reincarnation' usually happens is, paradoxically, through sickness. The ancestor replicates, so to speak, the cause of its own death in the child. In one case, the baby's wheezing resembled the cough that killed a grandfather. In another case, the location of a rash on the new-born corresponded to the lethal wounds of a deceased uncle. If divination confirms that the child's sickness was provoked by an ancestor spirit, the family makes a small offering of food, tobacco and betelnut to the ancestor. The reincarnation is successful if illness disappears immediately thereafter. The child then receives the name of the (usually paternal) ancestor and will be addressed by the name or teknonym appropriate for the ancestor.<sup>17</sup> Despite the initial illness that it provokes, the reincarnation is said to be an act of 'caring' (*senga*) by the ancestor toward its descendant.

The 'caring' ancestral incarnation in a descendant closes the cycle between the dangers of birth and death. The ancestral spirit-turned-shadow which only came into being through the banishment and containment of the

smell of decay returns to ensure the safety of the descendant still affected by the dangers of decay. Although Buli people are Christian, death is not a re-turn to a pre-conceptual Nothingness for the body and an existence in an-other world for the soul, as Christianity otherwise has it (see Hertz 1960:45). Instead, death is a process of separation that detaches the visual shadow from the odoriferous body. Only by keeping vision and smell separate can the shadow become spirit. If this separation is not achieved, the shadow is contaminated by the decay of the body. It becomes odorous and dangerous. If the separation is accomplished, the shadow becomes an odourless ancestor. Once the shadow has been turned into an ancestor, the ancestral spirit may decide to return to a newborn descendant to add its protective shadow/image to the newborn whose body is still caught in the odorous dangers of corporeal existence.

In Buli, therefore, the living and the ancestors partake in the same bodily reality, a reality where corporeal danger is indexed by the bad smell of *pupúí*. Decay and the smell of *pupúí* are ritually expelled from the child with the help of fire and herbs while the shadow is socialised into its body as it learns to behave responsibly. Initially in an unstable relationship, the body and the shadow eventually assume a composite body-shadow constitution. The 'caring' incarnation by an ancestral spirit may help to achieve this constitution faster because it provides a ready-made shadow or image to the newborn. In either case, however, the close link between shadow and body is broken asunder again at death. After death, as after birth, the main concern is to keep the visual shadow and the bodily smell of decay apart – to ritually separate image and odour (see also Platenkamp 1988; Siegel 1983).

### **The Meaning of Odour**

In an interesting article in which he compares the notion of smell in Malu-kan and Melanesian societies, David Howes (1988) has argued that the need to separate image from odour at death is characteristic of a certain type of societies. Inspired by Maurice Leenhardt (1979), Howes suggests that the relation a society maintains to the smell of its dead may be one of two types, either 'odour-accepting' and 'odour-denying' (1988:94). In so-called odour-accepting societies there is a high tolerance towards smell, and smell is a basic 'arbiter of existence' (*ibid.*:96). These societies draw a basic distinction between the smell of death and the smell of life and put a positive value on the smell of the corpse because this smell is the foremost aspect of ancestral beings. Examples of such societies are Tanimbar in south

Maluku and New Caledonia in southern Melanesia. Odour-denying societies, on the other hand, regard the smell of the corpse as repugnant and seek to avoid exposure to it. These societies have a low tolerance to smell and, on the whole, place more value on sight than on smell (*ibid.*:100). The smell of decay is in these societies not considered an essential aspect of the human soul nor is it a characteristic part of the ancestors. The ancestors either smell sweetly or do not smell at all in these societies, and the smell of death is absent as a symbolic category. The general reaction to most kinds of smell is disgust. Apart from the modern West, Howes finds 'odour-denying' societies on the Solomon Islands in Melanesia, on Java, and on Kei island in Maluku (*ibid.*:110).

Apparently, Buli would slot in nicely as an 'odour-denying' society: odour and image are distinct and only the latter characterises the ancestors; the smell of decay is considered repugnant, and no distinction is made between the smell of death and the smell of life. However, the categorisation of Buli society as 'odour-denying' poses several problems, the first of which concerns the notion of 'denial'. As I have tried to show, Buli people neither deny nor accept foul smells; rather they are painfully aware of smells and try to avoid them. Their low tolerance for foul smell, combined with its symbolic importance, makes it impossible for Buli people to deny it. This leads into the second problem, which concerns the relation between symbolism and disgust. On Kei island in south Maluku, as in all other 'odour-denying' societies, Howes asserts that 'the odour of decomposition would appear to be a sensation lacking any codified symbolic significance. Such whiffs of cadaverous odour...provoke only disgust' (*ibid.*:104). In other words, the whiffs do not seem to 'mean' anything by themselves – other than being disgusting. Disgusted in this way, the Keiese appear unable to attach symbolic meaning to bad smell. Howes' distinction between 'odour-accepting' and 'odour-denying' thus seems to oppose meaning and disgust. I think this ignores the rich symbolic potential of disgust. As my analysis of *pupúi* has attempted to illustrate, perceptual disgust harbours an abundance of meaning. The absence of a distinct smell of death does not mean that the smell of decay lacks significance. On the contrary, the smell of death and the smell of life are fused in the problematic smell of *pupúi*. This combination heightens the symbolic significance and ambiguity of foul smell rather than curbing it. Disgust or intolerance of smell is meaningful because it reacts to a perceived environment by spontaneously pointing towards a moral ideal (cf. Corbin 1986; Kekes 1992).

### Morality and Disgust, Order and Dis-odour

Alfred Gell argues that smells are symbolic not in themselves but by their association with a context from which they acquire a typical value (1977:27). Smells set up an olfactive 'tone' for particular contexts by modifying and recreating our experience of the world (see Krogstad 1989). This 'tone' is of a moral kind, as indicated by Gell's reference to 'value'. The moral tone of smells arises, I suggest, from the aesthetics of smell. Evidence from experimental psychology suggests that smells – perhaps more so than other sense stimuli – are experienced primarily in terms of liking or disliking (Bartley 1972:158; Ehrlichman & Bastone 1992), a tendency which one scholar refers to as 'odour hedonics' (Engen 1988). While my account of the smell of *pupúi* explores the cultural semantics of olfactory dislike, Gell's analysis of perfume investigates the symbolism of olfactive pleasure. As both approaches show, smell bridges the gap between aesthetics and morality.

Gell argues that perfume is used in magic because it sets up the conditions for propitious communication with contingent, unknown forces. Perfume in magic acts to provide a context of seduction in which the magician attempts to control and normalise contingency. An example of this from Buli may be the use of sweet-smelling weeds to call upon and appease protective spirits and ancestors. Aptly, these rituals are called 'to make fine smells' (*pei paú mañá*). Here the aesthetically pleasing is used to create moral order and certitude. Bad smells, in contrast, create the spectre of a world very different from the order sought by magic through the seduction of contingency. Instead of standardising or normalising a situation, bad smells in Buli terrorise the two life crises, birth and death, by implying the normality and possible contagion of death. Numerous practices enshrined in 'tradition' (*adat*) seek to combat the threat of untransformed death, witches and raw decay by burying and 'cooking' bodies, by masking bad smells and producing 'fine' odours, and by constantly being on guard against foul smells. Society, one might argue, wages an olfactory war on the chaotic potential of bad smell (*pupúi*). The terms of this war, however, are unequal, because *pupúi* has the double character of being at the outer margins of social order and a fundamental condition of human existence. The smell of putrefaction threatens society not only from the outside but, more disconcertingly, also from the inside. Social order is in this sense not primordial. Order is rather a continuously negotiated outcome of controlling and transforming stench.

The repulsion that Buli have towards the smell of *pupúi* is a morally

ambi-valent kind of disgust. Bad smell thus articulates an ambivalent moral order. I believe this to be connected to the nature of disgust, although I can only sketch an outline of the notion of disgust here. Disgust is probably central to moral discourse in any society (Miller 1997:179). It is an immediate, visceral repulsion that simultaneously expresses moral condemnation. This condemnation is partly an expression of a concern with maintaining purity (Douglas 1966). The bodily force of the feeling of disgust is however also an acknowledgement that the state of purity is already compromised. Even as it asserts superiority, disgust leaves a lingering admission of contamination – a con-tamination that remains a moral problem to the borders of the self (Miller 1997:204). Disgust is in this sense a manifestation of moral distinction at the same time as it recognises that the distinct borders of the self have already been transgressed (Kristeva 1982). Herein lies the inherent moral ambivalence of disgust.

Of all the basic emotions, disgust is arguably the most sensory (Miller 1997:9). In its direct reference to the senses, the emotion of disgust or abhorrence, as Miller phrases it, puts 'our body behind our words, pledges it as security to make our words more than mere words' (*ibid.*:181). However, the sensory attachments of this emotion may take a variety of cultural forms. The English term 'disgust' provides but one variant of the possible sensory moorings of abhorrence. 'Dis-gust' derives from a gustatory metaphor as does its synonym 'dis-taste'. Moral repulsion in Buli, however, is mainly a matter of smell rather than taste, a dis-odour rather than a dis-taste. *Pupúi* is in Buli the fundamental dis-odour of life. It expresses in olfactive terms an irreconcilable tension between dis-order and order, being at the heart of both. Dis-odour is simultaneously order and dis-order. This moral ambivalence may also be related to an inherent ambiguity in smell. This ambiguity is related to the transcendent character of smell. Smells emanate from an object but are not part of it; they are 'of the world' but not truly partaking in it (Gell 1977:31). As Zygmunt Bauman argues, the fact that smells transcend borders, waft across spaces where they do not belong and elude clear-cut description makes them not only powerful but also unsettling, especially to a society obsessed with order (1993:24). The denigration of smell and the supremacy of vision in Western society after the eighteenth century may thus be linked to the obsession with clarity and order that characterises modernity (Bauman 1993; Classen 1993:36; Corbin 1986). Although the 'hegemony of vision' has never been monolithic nor complete in the West (Jay 1993; Crary 1990; Levin 1988; Le Guérer 1994; Warnke 1993), sight

is much more amenable than smell to precise description, classification, predictable recursiveness and control. Because vision combines synoptic perception with distance from and neutrality to the thing observed, sight has been the most trusted and functional sense in science, philosophy and social administration (Fabian 1983; Foucault 1979; Jonas 1954; Levin 1993). The same may be said of taste. Although to a lesser degree than sight, taste is still relatively amenable to de-scription and has in the modern West become a powerful metaphor in the production of social forms of classification and distinction (Bourdieu 1984).

One should not, however, exaggerate the 'inherent', hegemonic potential of any particular sense (cf. van Toller 1988). No sense is 'by nature' more geared to power than any other. Sight has not just promoted a particular kind of social power in the West, it has also furnished the metaphors for 'counter-visions' that challenge this order (Levin 1993:7). Equally, the field of 'good' and 'bad' taste is complex and produces the tools for both hegemonic power and resistance (Bourdieu 1984; Miller 1997). The ambivalence of smell has also not prevented it from being harnessed to underwrite the moral condemnation of a racial, social or ethnic other in societies throughout the world (Classen 1993:80; Le Gu  rer 1994:27; Miller 1997:245; Simmel 1958:489). As we shall see, this is the case in Buli, too. I want to suggest, however, that in Buli the semantic potential for ambivalence that smell possesses clings to morality and ontology by dint of the olfactive metaphors used to describe and understand the fundamental processes of life and death. So while the senses do not have a universal political phenomenology, how the senses are used in language and metaphor makes a difference in terms of power. Being odorous rather than 'palatable', morality has assumed the equivocality of odour. 'Disgust' is in Buli particularly ambivalent because it is talked about and understood in terms of a smell that is disturbing, yet essential to life. One might say that moral rejection is forced to contend with what it abhors. When the 'bad' aspects of life can be relegated to the margins and rejected as the antithesis of the good, the ideal and the necessary, social order can be maintained. The perceptual metaphors and language of Buli ontology are such, however, that social and moral order cannot be tranquillised in this fashion. In displaying a disquiet ontology, smell fuses not only aesthetics and morality but also politics, as we shall see.

### **The Smell of Incest and Adultery**

So far I have only discussed bad smell within the contexts of birth and

death. There is, however, one last conventional context for the smell of *pupúi* – that of sexual relations, in particular adulterous and incestuous relations. Adultery and incest are said to be impossible to keep secret because of their bad smell. Confident of the collective moral sensitivity to such odours, one friend claimed: ‘If someone has a body that smells (of incest or adultery) everyone will smell it and know’. Sexual relations that contravene the prohibitions of ‘tradition’ transform the body of the perpetrator into an olfactive broadcaster that endangers both the person in question and the community as a whole. The livelihood of the perpetrator is threatened and all sorts of disasters (floods, rain and illness) are likely to befall the village. The odour of adultery and incest are offensive not just to humans but to the ancestors, the spirits and the whole natural universe (forest, sea and sky) on which human life depends.

While the derogatory tone is explicit in the smell of incest and adultery, the morality of sexual odours is highly ambivalent. Sexuality does not seem to smell in general but only in certain contexts. One such context is ritual. The other context is when the ‘odour of sex’ is connected with what one might call ‘ethnic odour’. I will describe the two contexts in turn in order to show how the odour of sexuality expresses engendered notions about cultural and political differentiation.

The connection between sexual acts and smell achieves its most outspoken moral tone in the possession ritual performed to appease *Íantoa*, the mythical Buli culture hero. The ritual is performed contingently whenever illness or misfortune make it necessary. It focuses on the possession of a medium by *Íantoa* so that he may alleviate the problems that beset the village. By calling the spirit of *Íantoa* into the body of a medium and feeding him, the ritual seeks to renew the protective contract between the village and *Íantoa*, there-by redressing the imbalances that disturb life. The ritual, which is prohibited to women, is both a celebration of the fierceness bestowed on Buli men by *Íantoa* and a possession rite the purpose of which is to seek his protection against current sickness or disaster. As befits the problems that make the ritual necessary, the ‘plot’ of the ritual centres on a mythical battle between *Íantoa* and a fierce warrior of the Bicoli, a neighbouring group. The re-enactment of *Íantoa*’s victory sets the propitious scene for his alleviation of the current problems of the village. Because of *Íantoa*’s intervention in mythic times, Buli men learnt to kill, and ever since then, belligerence has been the defining feature of their cultural self-identity.

Conventionally, *Íantoa*’s first utterance after he has manifested himself

in the body of the medium is as follows:

It stinks (*pupúi*), this village stinks. You men don't follow my ways any more. All you do is this, all you do is this.

Accompanied by an obscene gesture, the meaning is clear: sexual intercourse and contact with women are repulsive to Íantoa. This repulsion is explained in the myth about Íantoa as the result of an argument between him and his adopted mother. Along with other Buli women, his mother had prohibited Íantoa from killing the women and children of the vanquished Bicoli group. In resentment over this female injunction, Íantoa disappeared in the sweet-smelling smoke of burning incense.<sup>18</sup>

The prohibition against further killing combined with his lack of sexual experience ('he never married and therefore hates women', as one man put it) explains the prohibition against women attending the ritual. The interesting detail in this context is, of course, that the behaviour of the village men is offensive by its odour. The bad smell normally associated only with in-cestuous and adulterous intercourse is, to Íantoa's sensitive nose, indicative of all contact with women, in a context where the bellicose nature of men is opposed to the feeble character of women.

Íantoa is the supreme symbol of the warrior identity of Buli men, which in its pure form is antithetical to contact with women. To Íantoa, therefore, all sexual contact is a negation of this identity and is odoriferous by nature. However, the purist olfactory sensibilities of Íantoa directed at the men against all sexual activity is one which, by necessity, must be disobeyed for society to reproduce itself. Buli society is thus caught in an existential double-bind that may be paraphrased like this: humans are raw and therefore in constant danger of smelly decay as well as of attracting cannibal witches. Nevertheless, being raw is inherent in the very act of conception and ontogenesis. It is therefore unavoidable. Íantoa's ritual pronouncement about the foul odour of contact between the sexes sets this unavoidability in dramatic relief by portraying it as a female phenomenon from which men should isolate themselves. This demand is however, so all agree, undesirable as well as impossible. The smell of raw existence is a basic ontological condition of all of Buli life, not the problem of women alone, as Íantoa, in his ritual and ancestral purity, can afford to think.

### **Engendered Smells and Ethnic Odours**

Aside from its entanglement with sexuality in ritual, smell is bound up

with notions of gender in a second context, namely that of cultural differentiation. Ethnic difference is thus in central Halmahera expressed by using metaphors that speak of age, sex and siblingship. In particular, the symbolic pairs 'female' and 'male' and 'older brother' and 'younger brother' are important as markers of cultural difference. The pairs are parallel in that 'older brother' is frequently associated with femaleness. The result is that the groups of the area perceive themselves and each other as distinctly gendered. The precise ascription of gender, however, is contested, and I present only the Buli perspective on engendered cultural difference to claim that it, too, is related to smell.

The engendered nature of ethnic identity derives from a myth that explains how the main groups of south and central Halmahera descended from a set of brothers. They became distinct groups when the Sultan of Tidore during a tour of the island named each brother/group, taking their distinctive character as his inspiration. The older brothers who assumed political authority were effeminate and in need of protection from their younger, more bellicose brothers. Maba people were so named from the word for 'older brother', *aban*. They were appointed the political rulers over Buli, whose name in turn was derived from the word *fabulis*, 'to stalk and assault', a reference to their violent past as pirates.<sup>19</sup> Though politically superior, Maba were thus effeminate and in need of the protection of Buli people. The other ruling groups of South Halmahera, the Weda and Patani people, were similarly characterised by femininity, at least in the mythology of their subjected neighbours. On a higher level, the Sultan of Tidore was in the same position *vis-à-vis* his subjects on Halmahera: effeminate yet politically superior. As one might expect, this gendered relationship is frequently phrased in terms of smell.

Bad smell consistently articulates gender oppositions. In many ways, the smell of *pupúi* is distinctly feminine. Blood, the principle cause of decay and smell at birth and after death, is thus a female fluid. The articulation of engendered notions of smell, however, is less a matter of gender than a matter of the way that gender metaphors engage the contexts of cultural identity and difference. We saw how to *Íantoa* contact with women was offensive by its odour. While *Íantoa*'s ritual anger is gynophobic, its aim is not social condemnation or marginalisation of women. Instead *Íantoa*'s offended nose reacts to the engendered character of cultural ontology and political power. I have already argued that *Íantoa*'s anger is an offended response to the ontological centrality of the female component of blood

in procreation. In this sense his ritual androcentrism opposes the prevalent gynocentrism of Buli ontogeny with its preoccupation with blood. Apart from being a ritual reaction against the dependence of Buli ontology on what might – from a purist and masculinist position like Íantoa’s – be construed as an effeminate onto-geny, Íantoa’s anger with the smell of sexuality is also a rebellious reference to the effeminate nature of outside political power. Íantoa’s anger pits his own masculine identity – and by association that of Buli people as a whole – against the feminine rule of the Tidore sultanate and its effeminate Maba representatives. All customary ceremonies related to the organisation of procreation such as marriage rituals, bride service and matrimonial exchanges are said to be derived from the Tidore sultanate. Íantoa’s sensitivity to *pupúi* thus highlights a basic tension in Buli society between the effeminate outside rule of the Tidore sultanate and the indigenous ideal of belligerent masculinity epitomised by Íantoa. While the outside rule of the sultanate is emasculated, it is associated with a traditional order that governs marriage and all other rituals that ensure social reproduction. Íantoa, on the other hand, connotes masculine autochthony which is ultimately sterile and socially destructive despite being a highly valorised aspect of Buli cultural identity. In problematising the border between autochthony and outside control, smell negotiates the antithetical symbolic origins of Buli society. As it weaves through a maze of gender symbolism, bad smell ultimately emanates from a cultural politics of identity.

The entangled nature of smell, gender and cultural identity may best be illustrated by a short case story about incest. In January 1993, Sarah moved into the house of Yakub.<sup>20</sup> The couple’s hitherto hidden relationship was, thereby, made public. The move caused a public scandal since the relationship between Sarah and Yakub was considered incestuous. Sarah’s former husband, Musa, had died of sorcery a year earlier, while Yakub’s former wife, Deborah, had died giving birth to her fourth child some six months before. While Sarah and Yakub were not directly related, their former spouses were brother and sister. This particular constellation made Sarah and Yakub *mnuai*, a strongly tabooed relationship. In-laws in a *mnuai* relationship are not allowed to talk or look at each other. They may not touch each other or hand things to each other. The *de facto* marriage between Yakub and Sarah contravened these moral taboos and greatly shamed the family of their deceased spouses. Their anger was directed against Sarah in particular. Persistent rumours suggested that she had employed love magic to lure Yakub, and a variety of accusations – that she was a glutton, that she was

lazy and that she had been cruel and mean to her first husband – circulated widely in the village. The ‘marriage’ was also blamed for the unseasonable rains that were affecting the area. The outrage was accentuated by the fact that Sarah was not Buli. She was originally from Weda and had moved to Buli when she married Musa. The fact that Weda and most other groups in Halmahera would not regard a marriage between spouses of opposite-sex siblings (*mnu-ai*) as incestuous was acknowledged by few as a mitigating circumstance. To most people, Sarah’s Weda origin only served to strengthen their condemnation, and emotions continued to run high for a long time. Three months after Sarah had moved into Yakub’s house, I overheard a conversation between two women and a man who discussed how Sarah seemed to exude a foul odour. This malodour, they agreed, was the result of the incestuous relationship, but also of the fact that Weda women were known not to ‘wash’. This did not refer to ordinary hygiene, although one of the women took some pleasure from the fact that Sarah was too afraid to come to the stream to wash and had to bring water to the house from a small, muddy creek. Rather, ‘not washing’ referred to the fact that Weda people – at least according to Buli prejudice – do not have the same exhaustive regimen of herbal cleansing after child birth that the Buli people do. At this level the odour relates to the ontogenesis of all humans, with which Buli people believe themselves to deal most adequately. The asserted malodour of the Weda woman, however, also had a third level of reference. Apart from attesting to her incestuous affair and conveying the superiority of Buli birth medicines, Sarah’s odour also hinted at the effeminate nature of Weda people in general. In one accusation of ‘dis-odour’, moral condemnation of sexual behaviour thus fused with an ontology of conception and an engendered view of ethnic politics.

Buli are not the only ones to use smell to distinguish themselves from other groups. According to a Tobelo story, Buli people originate from a group of Tobelo who, due to war, had been reduced to a single pregnant woman. Because she could not hunt for herself, she had to live on the rotting food left by her family. She was therefore known as ‘buli’ which, according to my Tobelo informant, meant ‘rotten food’ (*makanan busuk*). My Buli friends and informants were shocked and outraged at this etymology because it contrasts so sharply with their own and substitutes a male belligerent identity with an odorous female and helpless one. However, the chain of metaphoric association between rottenness, smell, femininity, and cultural inferiority remains the same.

### **Conclusion: A Politics of Perception?**

Smells in general help promote and produce social orders of particular kinds. Smell is in this way closely associated with the functioning of power, because smell in conjunction with the other senses constructs our world for us and sets up the doxic limits of the self-evident. Our senses quite literally provide us with a 'sense of reality' (Bourdieu 1977:164). If we want to analyse the politics of local cosmologies we therefore also have to explore the political ontology of the senses. In the recent spate of analyses of smell, however, the multiplexity of this political dimension has remained relatively ignored. Other, 'exotic' sensual orders are presented as purely ontological hierarchies that seem to be simple, apolitical inversions of our own. While the politics and repression of smell in the modern West have been described in interesting detail, smell in other societies still appears relatively apolitical. I say this without wanting to detract from the laudable and necessary task of destabilising the self-evident reliance on vision in the West by describing cultural alternatives. The question remains, however, whether anything is gained by substituting one exaggeration for another. Instead of the brutish nose of the other that was current during 'high modernity', we are in danger of painting a picture for ourselves of the romantic and apolitical noses of non-Western people in 'post-modernity'. In approaching the politics of smell in other societies, however, the main danger is that we reproduce traditional ideas about power and understand such politics merely in terms of freedom and repression – which is pretty much how the politics of the senses in the West are described (see e.g. Seremetakis 1994). I have suggested that the ontology and politics of the senses may be best understood if we approach them instead in terms of ambiguity and contradiction.

Pleasant odours have received most attention in the ethnographic literature on Southeast Asia and elsewhere. However, the cultural phenomenology of odour and emotion will, to my mind, remain skewed until the ontology of their negative aspects is more thoroughly understood. 'Bad' smell in Bali thus brings out a double theoretical point. Firstly, 'bad' smell demonstrates the ambivalence of moral order. Recent anthropological theory has stressed that any social order is inherently as contradictory and heterogeneous as the power relations of which it is composed (Cooper & Stoler 1997; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991; Dirks, Eley & Ortner 1994; Foucault 1980; Thomas 1994). A re-analysis of smell in terms of this conception of power might help to further our understanding of the complex relation between power and

'sen-se'. Disgust is interesting in this regard because it is a tortured, visceral reaction to a moral dilemma. In the experience and cultural elaboration of disgust, our bodily sense of self meets head-on the ambivalent nature of power. An anthropology of disgust may help us understand the ambiguous nature of the constellations that self, body, morality and power relations can assume (see Jackson 1996). Secondly, 'bad' smell provides an example of how the ambiguity of power relations may rest (at least in part) on the ambivalence of the perceptual metaphors that are needed to construct our 'sense of reality'. Language is a necessary mediator of the politics of bodily experience.

It is in these terms that I have explored the poetics and politics of the Buli ontology of smell, or 'osmology' (Classen, Howes & Synnott 1994:116). The aim has been to suggest that the relation between smell and morality, between odour and order is complex and contradictory. The ambivalent properties of smells make them highly potent and multiplex symbols. The fact that smells articulate morality adds to this complexity. Repulsive smells are of particular interest, because they – in Buli at least – explicate the double-sidedness of moral disgust, characterised as much by fascination as by rejection. The symbolism and olfactory practices of 'bad smell' show this ambiguity to be omnipresent in Buli cosmology and they act as constant reminders of the fragility of social order. As Pierre Bourdieu points out, disgust is closely related to the workings of social power in the modern West. The pure taste of the refined is thus in a European aesthetics 'disgusted' by the vulgarity of surrendering to the senses, this being a plebeian attitude that characterises those without sufficient symbolic capital (1984:488). William Miller suggests that disgust became a matter of taste around the same time that the Kantian notion of taste was recognised as a general capacity of refinement and discernment (1997:169). Indeed the word 'dégoût' appeared in French in the mid-sixteenth century and was shortly thereafter imported as 'disgust' into English (*ibid*). In matters of disgust we are clearly then in the grip of a taste-centrism. On closer examination, the 'hegemony of vision' in the West will perhaps fracture into a complex arrangement of sensory centrisms. I see this as the path out of the radical alterity inherent in much re-search into the senses of other societies.

It is apparent, furthermore, that the appearance of a close relationship between the sense of taste and disgust in the modern West was integral to the formation of a bourgeois moral aesthetic. As William Miller argues: 'With the emergence of good taste disgust was called upon to police ever

more refined distinctions' (*ibid.*:170). In Buli, 'disgust' – or rather dis-odour – does not to the same extent unproblematically serve social order. Bad smells are repul-sive because they are antithetical to a social order which is only maintained by banishing them. More disturbingly, however, social order itself is founded upon 'bad odours'. As a consequence, smell provides no grounding for a stable 'world-view'.<sup>21</sup> The semantics of smell seem to illustrate aptly the am-biguity of the Buli moral universe. 'Bad' smells thus spring from what is necessary, even imperative, and yet they are highly repulsive and unwanted. 'Bad' smells catch Buli people in the fundamental double-binds of life: the dis-order of order, the impossibility of the ideal, the unwantedness of the necessary. Bachelard's contention that 'odors in and of themselves make myths possible' may thus be restated for Buli. Bad odours make myth and life possible, but they also threaten to undo both.

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#### Notes

1. Disgust has, however, received some attention from psychologists since the mid-1980s (e.g. Miller 1986, 1993; Rozin & Fallon 1987; Rozin, Lowery & Ebert 1994).
2. *Paú* is a neutral word and a cognate of the Indonesian lexeme *bau*. Both translate as 'smell' or 'scent'. Followed by the word *mafia* – good, *paú* describes a pleasant smell. *Paú mafia* is a concept used to describe rituals where pleasant odours are at a premium. Other pleasant smells include *paína* (the smell of fresh fish) and *mlan-gin* (the smell of tobacco which also refers to the strength or courage of a person) (Maan 1940:66). Apart from the central concept of *pupúú*, other unpleasant smells include: *paú mbili* (the smell of rotting fish), *paú abas* (a stuffy or musty smell), *paú sus* (the smell of burnt meat or fish), *paú mang* (literally 'dry smell' – a spicy hot smell). *Papasóng* refers to the smell of urine (*ibid.*:84), while *mlai* and *mjakam* refer to rotten or withered plant material but do not in themselves imply a smell.
3. I obtained two very similar versions of this myth from Tangkea Guslaw, a ritual elder in Buli, and from Aihe Penes, a Tobelo man from Dodaga. According to Aihe Penes, the myth is in fact of Tobelo origin, while Tangkea Guslaw thought it came to Buli from Maba.

4. The term *watowato* in fact means 'naked'.
5. Hueting reports how in Tobelo a fire was maintained on top of the grave for four days or more to prevent witches from gaining access to the corpse (1922:154). Another explanation for the fire was, however, that it would keep the corpse warm. This appears to be a curious statement, but I shall return to it later.
6. Hertz (1960:38) points out how the contagious nature of death makes the mourn-ers among the Olo Ngaju Dayaks impure. This feature he calls 'funerary conta-gion'.
7. My informants claim that pre-Christian Buli did not place the dead on platforms or in elevated shrines in the manner of their Tobelo neighbours. Buli people, they claim, always buried their dead. The fact that Tobelo mortuary practices scandalise Buli people could be taken as evidence of a greater preoccupation with smell in Buli. However, Christian morals may influence contemporary Buli perception of their past and cause them to see a greater continuity between traditional and Christian practices and recast traditional burial as somehow already Christian. This is plausible given that mortuary practices have been at the heart of conversion struggles in Halmahera since the turn of the century (Platenkamp 1988:165). Given the lack of reliable historical information on pre-Christian burial practices in Buli, I will stick to the contemporary Buli explanation, influenced though it may be by retrospective rationalisation.
8. This olfactive equivalence between birth and death has also been pointed out by Howes (1987:411).
9. I was told that the right of the father to his children – they will belong to his lineage rather than that of the mother – derives from this formative act. That ideas about ontogenesis serve to legitimate kinship is, of course, not a new observation. See Scheper-Hughes & Lock (1987:19) for a short comparative summary of this relationship.
10. In a variety of cognate forms the spirit is found in many societies of the Indonesian archipelago.
11. A similar conception exists on Tanimbar in the southern part of the province of Maluku (Howes 1987:400). In Buli the child is carefully treated by heat at least twice a day in addition to its constant proximity to the bedside fire. A woman from the household does this by holding her own hand close to the hot flames of burn-ing coconut shells and methodically pressing all parts of the baby's body to squeeze it into an appropriate – and some say harder – shape.
12. The mother must also heat her body by the fire, and a similar regime of herbal potions is available to her as to the child. The process of restoring the mother to her normal 'hard' and 'strong' condition concludes with the application of a medi-cine referred to as *tigo i*: 'to throw at her'. This consists of boiled and still hot *kikóit* leaves which are thrown at the body of the mother for a final hardening (see Bubandt 1995).
13. In accordance with the association between the 'social' and the cooked, 'domesticated' spirits such as ancestors or village spirits are served cooked foods at rituals, while ceremonial foods presented to 'wild' spirits outside the village are raw.
14. Victor Turner has noted how death and birth are often symbolically linked in rites of passage: 'It is interesting to note how, by the principle of the economy

(or *parsi-mony*) of symbolic reference, logically antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens' (1967:99).

Turner seems to take the symbolic linkage birth and death to be in opposition to the dictates of logic. I would suggest instead that logical dictates are structured by ways of perceiving. We might tend to think of birth and death as opposed in the West. Smell in Buli, however, suggests another sort of perceptual logic. Smell shows birth and death to be logically related. It is therefore not a matter of con-trasting logic and symbolic tokens as Turner does, but of analysing how perception orders different forms of symbolic logic.

15. In Buli the human being consists of three main components. Aside from the body (*badan* or *lapo*) and the shadow (*gurumin*), there is another spirit aspect to embodied life. This third aspect is known as *nyawa*, which refers to the breath. Both the breath and the shadow are embodied aspects of life (cf. Roseman 1990). *Nyawa* or breath refers also to the genitals, while the shadow (*gurumin*) is a visual reflection of the body in its entirety. The three components form a mutually depend-ent but not exclusive living whole. While there are other significant embodied aspects to life as well, it is the relationship between body and shadow that is rele-vant to this discussion.
16. Platenkamp shows how in the pre-Christian Tobelo tradition the child instead received its shadow (*gurumini*) from an animal which had been killed by its father. The meat from the game was then eaten by the mother of the child. The child acquired its shadow from the animal via its mother's milk (1988:14).
17. Name prohibitions between people of different generations, especially between in-laws, make this naming practice awkward. Most children are entered by a paternal grand-parent. If the child receives the name of the paternal grandparent, its mother would be prohibited from speaking its name, an impractical situation in everyday life. As a consequence, the child is frequently given an alternative name that is merely reminiscent of the name of the ancestor. A young man I knew had been 'entered' by his paternal uncle, Laonco, but was given the name Lazarus. This name was considered reminiscent of the ancestral name without being identical and it was therefore not covered by any prohibitions. In addition, it had the advantage of being a name from the Bible. Lazarus' name thus satisfied his parents' desire to express their Christianity but still maintained the necessary links to the ancestor.
18. The same incense is used in the ritual to summon *Íantoa*. As I mentioned above, incense was also used by the spirits of the shaman to clean the shadow of the deceased from its bad smell in Tobelo. This cleansing process took place in the heavenly realm of the ancestors (Platenkamp 1988:155). In disappearing into the smoke of incense, *Íantoa* also disappears into an ancestral realm carried by sweet smell. He leaves this realm when summoned by sweet smell during the ritual and immediately complains about the stench in the village. The sweet fragrance of the spirits is thus contrasted with the stench of social life. The living are forced to accept this stench as a basic condition for being.
19. Although this etymological self-conception does not sit comfortably with their espoused Christianity, there is a certain pride among Buli people in their bellicose self-identity. The pride in their bellicose past is accompanied by a simultaneous rejection of their ancestors for being wild, pagan and unenlightened.

20. The names in this account are, of course, pseudonyms.
21. It is important to point out that odours do not create Buli cosmology any more than the other senses and that one might just as well have chartered vision or hearing as ambiguous modes of sense (see Bubandt 1995). This means that no simple 'hierarchy of the senses' can be constructed for Buli.

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