Ear Folklore:
A Folkloric Basis for Bodily Senses
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This paper looks at various examples of folklore related to ears, and goes on to consider the ways in which bodily senses are expressed in folklore.

I first consider the earplug charm, which is a magic practice by which people would insert something in their ears when a person of the same age died, so as “not to hear of it.” This custom was previously interpreted as representing a sense of identity with people of the same age, but when you think about it, this is a folkloric custom whereby people put items of food in their ears to signify out of the ordinary circumstances. This practice suggests that ears were regarded as a receptacle for spells.

I next look at two tales related to ears, “Kikimimi” (聾耳) and “Osuke the Salmon” (鰤の大助け). “Kikimimi” is based on the belief that the voices of creatures other than people can be heard as intelligible sounds. It appears in Japanese folklore from the Middle Ages onwards, and is also linked with yin and yang beliefs. Osuke the Salmon is a tale for explaining the custom of avoiding hearing the voice of salmon climbing the river on specific dates. The emphasis in this tale is on knowing about the voice of the salmon but not listening to it. Analysis of these tales leads to the conclusion that the ear was seen as a symbol of the interface between man and the sounds of nature.

I also analyze regular annual events and beliefs regarding ears, including folktales about ear bells, the lids of the pots in Hell in relation to the summer Bon festival, Kan Kan roadside deities, the ear piercing of Daikoku the God of Wealth, the earless Biwa priest, and ear mounds. Analysis shows that under certain conditions, ears or sounds are thought to be able to serve as links to spirits or the supernatural world.

It goes without saying that ears are organs for hearing, but the image of ears that emerges from Japanese folklore is concerned not only with hearing, but also with the shape and changes in shape of ears. Looking ahead, I want to consider ears not only as symbols of hearing, but also pay attention to visual aspects, and attempt an integrated approach to bodily senses.

Keywords: ear plug, “Kikimimi(聾耳)”, “Osuke the Salmon(鰤の大助け)”, annual events, ear bell, eye