

INTRODUCTION

‘When darkness comes...’: steps toward an anthropology of the night

Burkhard Schnepel and Eyal Ben-Ari

What is ‘night’? From one point of view, it could be described as the result of a certain constellation in which a star shines upon a rotating planet. For humans, this pattern of rotation is experienced and envisaged in temporal terms: night is a specific time. Historically and theologically speaking, for many if not most peoples, the night was always there. For many, it was there even before ‘the beginning’. Indeed, if we look at how various cultures imagine the world before it came into being, this pre-existing state is often conceptualised as a kind of night. The Judeo-Christian world view, that which is best known to many of us, is no exception. Take the very first lines of the Bible:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. [...] And God said, Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day and the darkness He called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day (Genesis 1, 1–5).

What is striking in this view is that darkness was there first and by itself – the inception of being and becoming started with the making of light – and that night was not completely erased but remained during half of a ‘day’. Light and darkness, in this view – and in many comparable ones which stress the duality of cosmos and chaos (cf. Eliade 1959) – are subject to different valuations, with the former being more positive in character. Night is ‘just there’, while light is a divine creation. Yet darkness and light, night and day, are also seen as complementary, as two necessary and interdependent parts which cannot do without each other and only form an entity together.

This depiction makes it clear that, for the human inhabitants of planet earth, the night presents more than just a cosmic concept. It is experienced as a certain kind of time that is by and large defined and judged in negative terms, for example, by the absence of light and (and more often than not) warmth, or by chaos, darkness and fear. To the actors in this interstellar, endlessly repeated drama, the night is not only subject to philosophical and religious ponderings (cf. Reimbold 1970), it also forms an important part of their everyday (and every-night) lives. In this respect, of course, the night is not a void but is filled with numerous beings and activities, both human and non-human in origin, most of them potentially obscure, evil and menacing. Thus, ever since there has been night, humans have attempted to master and colonize it, to ‘enlighten’ it (cf. Jakle 2001, Melbin 1987). At the same time, however, there have been many others who have used and cherished the night for what it is, who did not want to put up

lights, but rather needed darkness for their activities: thieves, demons, hunters, warriors, healers, or just people who wanted to celebrate or obtain relief from the structures and strictures of the day.

There was only one way to domesticate the night, maybe even to get rid of it: to kindle light. For centuries, these attempts were feeble, dangerous and costly: camp fires, torches, candles, chandeliers, oil lamps and other forms of the domestication of fire, as well as the periodic blessings of the full moon. The first attempts to master the night on a larger scale are reported from early modern times. A law passed in Poitiers in 1542 ordered anyone who wanted to move through the city at night to carry a lamp. As Seitter (1999:88–90) points out, because such people were also forbidden to carry swords, the domestication of the night was combined with attempts to pacify it. Another measure of this sort was the establishment of night watchmen. A further stepping stone came in the year 1662, when Paris introduced the first organized form of street lighting using gas lamps, followed by Berlin in 1680, London in 1694 and Leipzig in 1701. However, a decisive breakthrough in this history of ‘enlightenment’ in the strict sense of the word only occurred through the invention of electricity in the nineteenth century (cf. Schivelbusch 1983, Erenberg 1994). The result of this trend is that for most of us nowadays it is hard to imagine what life was like without electricity, how dark darkness can really be, and how this darkness restricts and influences what can be done or cannot be done. Even if we switch off the light, there is still light around us: street lamps, the lights of offices, neighbours, cars, and so on. We must remember that for most humans in most periods of the history of mankind and in most parts of the world it was pitch dark from dusk to dawn, or almost pitch dark even when there were stars and the moon or on midsummer nights. Thus night cannot fail to have been an important part of human religious and philosophical imaginations and reflections, as well as of specific activities, practices and interactions.

All this means, undoubtedly, that the night is an anthropological topic of the utmost relevance. Indeed, anthropologists have everywhere, at all times, also investigated phenomena associated with the night. As yet, however, relatively few enquiries into nightly proceedings and phenomena *per se* appear to have been conducted, no systematic studies or volumes bringing together different aspects of the investigation of the night. Although half of our lives, if not more, take place in the dark, there are hardly any distinctive anthropologies of the night. Indeed, randomly picking up volumes in anthropology, one notices that entries relating to the night or its synonyms – the dark, the hours of darkness or dusk – are absent.

Why is this so? Writing about the social sciences in general, Steger and Brunt (2003:2) claim that the social and human sciences have a *diecentric* nature, that is, a bias towards the day and towards daytime activities. As they observe:

People interested in the ‘dark side of life’, night time and the world of sleep, would probably be quite disappointed if they were to explore social scientific research traditions in

the hopes of finding imaginative ethnographic material, precise social or cultural analyses or inspiring theoretical ideas. Hardly any material exists on these topics. Issues concerning sleep and the night have nearly always been taken for granted and considered natural phenomena as solid and eternal as the weather and the wind. As is the case with many other 'ordinary', everyday topics, the most obvious phenomena escape our attention.

Their basic contention, then, is that because of the very taken-for-grantedness of the night, the social sciences, including anthropology – have often tended to ignore it. Adam (1994:503), in an essay on time and anthropology, makes a similar kind of argument in contending that there are 'virtually no time specialists in anthropology [...] [because] time is curiously invisible and constitutes one of the most taken-for-granted features of our lives'. Indeed, a key section of her essay is entitled 'The invisible times of everyday life' (Adam 1994:508).

Certainly the titles of many relevant books often reflect deep cultural assumptions about day and night. Meyerhoff's (1978) evocative ethnography of an old-people's centre calls to mind the metaphor by which time is measured: "Number our days". As it relates to anthropology, however, our argument is more complex. To begin with, the privileging of sight at the expense of other senses by practitioners of our discipline intensifies the focus on the day, when things can be seen more clearly (Stoller 1989). Metaphors of vision and sight are central to the anthropological enterprise. Bateson uses such imagery in two of her books entitled "With a daughter's eye" (1994) and "Peripheral visions" (1994). Geertz's classic essay about the "Native's point of view" (1983) suggests a very particular kind of perspective. And Herzfeld's ethnography "Anthropology through the looking-glass" (1987) or Barnard's chapter "Visions of anthropology" (2000) echo these themes. Indeed, Scott's book "Seeing like a state" (1998) and Alper's essay about "The museum as a way of seeing" (1991), in an edited book entitled "Exhibiting cultures", advance the use of these metaphors to the very objects of our study. But it was Fabian (1983:105–108) who most explicitly made the link between vision, space and the kind of knowledge produced by anthropologists:

Generations of anthropology students setting off to their first fieldwork have received, and followed, advice to learn the language, if possible before beginning with research, and to start their inquiries on the spot by mapping settlements, counting households, and drawing up genealogies of inhabitants. This is sensible advice [...] [But] anthropologists who have gone through the experience of field research [...] are likely to be put off by this account [...] [because] these recommendations not only exaggerate (the visual), they omit dimensions of experience. No provision seems to be made for the beat of the drum or the blaring of bar music that keep you awake at night; none for the strange taste and texture of food, or the smells and the stench.

In this passage one finds not only the stress on the importance of experiencing the sensual (echoed a few years later by Stoller), but also a plea to take into account the limits of an anthropology focused on things that can be seen, distinguished and witnessed.

It is against this background that the present collection of articles should be seen. Our aim is thus to suggest how to 'use' the night or darkness 'to shed light' on various social and cultural phenomena. It is in this spirit that we now turn to the articles.

THE ARTICLES

Three main cross-cutting themes form the core of this collection: sleep (Ben-Ari, Steger), dreams (Heijnen, Schnepel) and night-life (Hauser, Tinat).

Eyal Ben-Ari examines the practices related to sleep and night-time combat in the militaries of the industrial democracies. Sleep has always been an issue that soldiers and commanders have had to grapple with. Yet it is only in the past few years that aspects of sleep have begun to be regularly incorporated into military operations. While in the past knowledge about sleep was part of military 'common sense' or of the expertise of physicians, it is now becoming an integral element of operational planning. The reasons for these developments are related to technological innovations that allow military forces to be active around the clock and to be deployed several time-zones away from their base camps. In the past few years one finds the use of such military terms as 'sleep management strategies', 'sleep discipline' and 'sleep management systems'. In this article Ben-Ari examines such strategies by exploring the discursive and behavioural practices related to the military's effort to interpret and control the 'bodily' and 'mindful' states of soldiers so that they are useful to the organization. His aim is to confront the current and rather fashionable scholarly literature on turning soldiers into 'docile' bodies.

Like Ben-Ari, Brigitte Steger explores sleep or sleeping. However, her focus is less on how people fall asleep and have a good sleep or enough sleep than on how they wake up and smoothly re-emerge into waking life, with all its duties and obligations. Her article, which is based on material relating to Japan, looks at the crucial shift from night to day, at the transition from sleep to wakefulness and, connected with this, from private to social and public activities. In Japanese culture, we learn, a high value has long been placed on early rising and, concomitantly, there was a certain disdain for late-risers, going so far as not entrusting someone who does not get up early with responsible or demanding jobs, no matter how late he or she works. Steger examines various arguments that were put forward in favour of early rising, most of which are based on a sort of time calculation: those who rise early and thus shorten the idle period of the night have more time and can thus increase their 'output', enhance their knowledge, speed up their careers or pursue leisure activities and cultivate themselves. As Steger shows, this invention and quantification of a new time-period, brought about by early rising can only be understood as part of the wider project of modernization that Japan embarked upon. Within this project, by which Japan emulated other indus-

trialized societies, Japanese individuals were constantly encouraged to search for ways in which they could contribute to the nation's development.

If, as Caudill and Plath (1986:247) point out, 'a third of our life is passed in bed', then 'with whom this time is spent is not a trivial matter'. As they suggest, sleeping customs seem to be consonant with major interpersonal and emotional patterns in a culture. The articles by Ben-Ari and Steger thus raise questions such as: How do people actually sleep? When do they go to bed and get up? What are the plethora of rules related to what may be termed the sleeping role? And how are they related to the basic rules by which social life is organized (Schwartz 1973)? Moreover, ideas about the anthropology of the night are related to the very conceptions of what a 'good night' and 'sleeping well' entail. During Burkhard Schnepel's fieldwork in India, he was surprised by the fact that, generally, Indians were able to sleep in situations (for example, next to a loudspeaker blasting out devotional music) in which he himself could not even dream of getting a wink of sleep. Or, if they did not sleep, they did not mind. Thus there seem to be different ideas of what a good night is and what entails sleeping well. Ben-Ari (1996), in an essay about napping times in a Japanese kindergarten, talks about the group atmosphere created there that echoes patterns of co-sleeping found at home.

Our next theme is that of a central activity during the night, namely dreaming. Adriënné Heijnen deals with the way dreams are narrated and interpreted in Iceland. Her contention is that these processes are based on the belief that hidden spheres exist in the waking world and that dreaming is one possible way to reveal these spheres. Based on her ethnography, Heijnen shows that in Iceland darkness and dreams are related in a direct way, because dreaming is thought to reveal hidden spheres that are associated with darkness. In this respect, she argues that anthropology may benefit from exploring the interrelation between light and darkness. More concretely, her analysis centres on processes of social change involving the tradition of the Icelandic *huldufólk*, beings associated with the hidden sphere. Activities designed to illuminate the Icelandic night have had the unintended consequence that these beings have at least partly disappeared. No less importantly, it is suggested that revealing previously hidden spheres through illumination has produced a change in the Icelandic world view: today formerly hidden beings only can survive in a 'scientific' or modernist discourse in so far as they answer to 'scientific' premises a fundamental one of which is being visible.

As in Shakespeare's sonnet, cited in the title of Schnepel's contribution, it may happen that someone who has had a dream becomes more aware of his pitiful fate 'in waking'. He may then despair, or else view the dream as a message concerning his true calling and a request to make it come true, especially when a desirable alternative is sketched out in the dream, which contains an explicit demand for action. The dream is to be 'materialized' in waking life, where consequently it initiates and legitimises actions that are directed towards achieving this goal. These endeavours may be rather

private affairs, but occasionally some dreamers may also see their dreams as providing a meaning that transcends the individual and concerns the whole community. Schnepel examines different kinds of, and strategies in, the 'politics of dreaming', with examples from different cultures and historical periods. More generally, he asks: How do people envisage and bring together the dialectics of day and night, dreaming and waking, as well as nocturnal 'passiones' and diurnal actions?

The anthropology of dreaming offers a very important addition to the quite extensive literature found on it in other disciplines (primarily psychology). In terms of the release of internal forces, sleep and the period just before it are relatively open to the creation of associations, thoughts and memories, whether pleasurable or otherwise (Pope 1978). In this respect, however, anthropology offers a peculiar set of questions centred on the cultural terms by which people dream and evaluate dreams and dreaming. As Tedlock (1991) suggests, anthropology's contribution lies in investigating the natural communicative contexts of dream-sharing, representation and interpretation. This perspective allows us to take seriously into account the complex set of processes subsumed under the term 'the politics of dreaming'.

But the night, of course, is not limited to sleeping and dreaming. In her article, Beatrix Hauser deals with the gendered nature of nocturnal public life. Her focus is on a festival held for Thakurani, a popular patron goddess in southern Orissa, India. The event includes the widespread participation of women throughout the day, but especially after midnight, when they not only worship the goddess but sometimes even physically embody her. Accordingly, the effective performance of the ritual, which guarantees prosperity, is based on women who link the patron goddess with her territory as either ritual intermediaries or divine representatives. Given the 'normative laxness' found in the night, one would expect it to be open to all sorts of gender inversions. Thus Hauser notes that the primacy of the female within this nightly ritual contrasts not only with the usual absence of women during the night, but also, and more generally, in public rituals. Hauser goes on to contend that while the goddess is considered to be benevolent, she is also identified with fierce entities: although she is worshipped, the goddess is also feared for haunting people, just like any other creature of the night. Yet this duality is not reflected in the role of women in the ritual: women do not play with the night, nor do they violate social norms. Their self-presentation as women during the night remains the same or is even heightened. Theoretically, then, the case presented by Hauser seems to underscore the power of gender as a central organizing principle of the night as well as the day.

Karine Tinat's starting point in her article is that, of all European countries, Spain is the most famous for its sense of 'fiesta'. When the weekend and holidays come round, young Spaniards come to life, especially at night. They are used to going out very late, rarely before 1 a.m., and they generally go to bed at dawn, or even when the sun is already high in the sky. This festive atmosphere is noticeable in all Spanish towns, in the streets and squares as well as the bars and night clubs. 'Fiesta' is cultur-

al, a national custom. In order to explain these insights, Tinat focuses on a group of young people gathered in a famous night club in Madrid known as 'Pachá' by analysing the spatial and communication elements in these gatherings and incorporating into her discussion the theatrical aspects of interpersonal relations. Everyone knows that night is the time when people rest and relax, but night can also have a 'magic' dimension. Isn't this the perfect moment, Tinat asks, to engage in new experiences and investigate unrealised possibilities? Young Spanish people seem to think so.

This set of articles on nightly activities and festivities raises other issues for anthropology. First, there are questions about people who work at night: taxi-drivers, nurses, night watchmen. These roles involve dynamics and expectations which are different from the kinds of roles carried out during the daytime. No less important are those 'leisure' activities which take place at night that are often explicitly designed to be different from what one does during the day, ranging from dancing in a disco to Hindu festivals which must last all night without anyone falling asleep if the gods are to be satisfied. Indeed, Da Matta (1984) argues that events which take place at night, such as the Brazilian carnival, are characterized by behaviour that is at once radically different from what is experienced during the day and full of the potential for creativity and expression. Finally, of course, the night is the time when a host of beings – creatures of the night, whether dangerous animals, demons, or certain deities or 'pleasure seekers' – appear in their most forceful form. In order to raise further questions and round off the collection of articles presented here in a more general anthropological vein, Don Handelman has agreed to write an epilogue to this collection.

NEW QUESTIONS, NOVEL PERSPECTIVES

When many of these articles were first presented during a panel organized by Schnepel during the EASA conference in Copenhagen in 2002, it emerged that, no matter what the particular subject under discussion, several more widely-ranging topics that were not especially nocturnal in character came up time and again. As a consequence, it became clear to all the participants that a perspective examining phenomena of the night more directly (though not exclusively) can provide certain insights and make valuable contributions to old, much debated 'diurnal' anthropological issues, such as power, gender, theatricality, the dialectic of agency and passivity or *passiones*, and indeed the very assumptions upon which our discipline is based.

Take, for example, Ben-Ari's article, which addresses issues of power and control. It can be seen from his contribution that the colonization of the night is not just a matter of putting on lights. It can also consist in establishing control over typical nightly activities, such as sleeping and dreaming. And for this, there are technical means other than light, such as computers and drugs. Those articles that deal with the appropria-

tion of the night by young people (Tinat) or by women (Hauser) show that the night can also be conquered using a certain anti-hegemonic counter-strategy as a means to get away from power and control, as a trajectory for leading, at least temporarily, an alternative life. Here, the 'technology' is different than that used by the American or Israeli army: it involves dressing up, getting drunk, getting close to each other, singing, dancing, wearing masks, and changing personalities and identities, thus being in the realm of performance or theatricality. What is especially striking in these studies is the fact that women seem to have other ways and means of living the night, wanting to conquer and domesticate it less than play with and in it. This point is very similar to the one made by Bastide (1978) in his study of the cults and rites practised by ex-slaves in Brazil. He argues that, as a marginal group, ex-slaves – the day being for whites (pardon the pun) – appropriated the night for themselves as a time for counter-hegemonic display.

But there is yet another issue here. If, for example, we bring issues of the night to our analyses of the 'self' and of 'personhood', we may be enriched. Take the identification of sleep in many cultures with self-indulgence. In this view, 'overcoming' sleep is often seen as a test of the 'limits' of the body and as providing the potential for experiencing life in a peculiar manner. Thus, for example, overcoming sleep – and indulgence more generally – is often a test of manhood in many societies (Gilmore 1990), and high-tech industries often take sleep-related behaviours as indicators of commitment to the organization (Kunda 1993). Such perspectives raise our awareness not only of how people conceptualise and evaluate the difference between waking and sleeping life, but also of how such differences are related to the very manner by which they and others see themselves.

This brings us one step further to the philosophical-ontological dimension in the anthropology of the night. How do people evaluate the night in their religious, ethical or philosophical ponderings and in their actions? Is the night everywhere and always connected with danger and evil as the antipode of the day? This dimension centres on the question of how, in a given culture, day and night are seen as both oppositions and dialectic interdependencies. Closely related to this point is the whole question of those transitory times between day and night, namely dusk and dawn (cf. Palmer 2000, Verdon 2002). These liminal periods, one leading to night and the other to day, seem to be somehow metaphorically and qualitatively different.

Finally, we suggest the basic metaphors that underlie our work and that resonate deeply with our preoccupation with the 'Other' be further investigated. A rather neat dichotomy that has pervaded our discipline since the end of the last century still produces differing views of the current state of anthropology. This is the contrast between what may be alternatively called an 'endarkenment' or an 'enlightenment' model of anthropological work.¹ Anthropologists thus often belong to two moieties: one stress-

¹ We are borrowing here from Weiss (1986).

es the 'dark' role that anthropology has played within colonialism and neo-colonialism, while the other emphasizes the ways in which anthropology can contribute to our appreciation of human value and diversity. By actively looking at the kinds of nocturnal and daytime metaphors that underlie the way we look at our discipline, we may begin to appreciate their power and the ways in which they shape the kind of knowledge we produce.

All in all, therefore, this collection of articles attempts to direct anthropological awareness and activity more strongly to a hitherto rather neglected time-space: the night. It seeks to raise questions and gain insights concerning those human activities and in-activities that occur in or with regard to this 'chronotopos' (Bakhtin). Certainly the night offers such a vast field of relatively new or at least quite novel themes that our immediate intention here can be no more (but may also no be less) than to take a few steps in and toward the anthropology of the night, hoping that others will follow suit.

REFERENCES

- ADAM, Barbara
1984 "Perception of time", in: Tim Ingold (ed.), *Companion encyclopaedia of anthropology*, 503–526. London: Routledge
- ALPER, Svetlana
1991 "The museum as a way of seeing", in: Ivan Karp, and Steven D. Lavine (eds.), *Exhibiting culture: the poetics of museum display*, 25–32. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press
- BARNARD, Alan
2000 *History and theory in anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- BASTIDE, Gaston
1978 *The African religions of Brazil: toward a sociology of the interpenetration of civilizations*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press
- BATESON, Mary Catherine
1944 *With a daughter's eye: a memoir of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson*. New York: Washington Square Press
1994 *Peripheral visions: learning along the way*. New York: Harper Collins
- BEN-ARI, Eyal
1996 "From mothering to othering: culture, organization and nap time in a Japanese pre-school", *Ethos* 24(1):136–164

CAUDILL, William, and David W. PLATH

- 1986 "Who sleeps by whom? Parent-child involvement in urban Japanese families", in: Takie S. Lebra, and William P. Lebra (eds.), *Japanese culture and behavior: selected readings*, 247–279. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press

DA MATTA, Roberto

- 1984 "Carnival in multiple planes", in: John J. MacAloon (ed.), *Rite, drama, festival, spectacle: rehearsals toward a theory of cultural performance*, 247–268. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues

ELIADE, Mircea

- 1959 *The sacred and the profane: the nature of religion*. New York: Harvest

ERENBERG, Lewis A.

- 1994 *Steppin' out: New York nightlife and the transformation of American culture, 1890–1930*. Chicago: Chicago University Press

FABIAN, Johannes

- 1983 *Time and the other: how anthropology makes its object*. New York: Columbia University Press

GEERTZ, Clifford

- 1983 "From the native's point of view': on the nature of anthropological understanding", in: Clifford Geertz, *Local knowledge*, 55–72. New York: Basic Books

GILMORE, David

- 1990 *Manhood in the making: cultural concepts of masculinity*. New Haven: Yale University Press

HERZFIELD, Michael

- 1987 *Anthropology through the looking glass: critical ethnography in the margins of Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

JAKLE, John A.

- 2001 *City lights: illuminating the American night*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press

KUNDA, Gideon

- 1993 *Engineering culture: control and commitment in a high-tech corporation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press

MELBIN, Murray

- 1987 *Night as frontier: colonizing the world after dark*. New York: Free Press

MEYERHOFF, Barbara

- 1978 *Number our days: the triumph and continuity and culture among Jewish old people in an urban ghetto*. New York: Simon and Schuster

PALMER, Bryan D.

2000 *Cultures of darkness: night travels in the histories of transgression*. New York: Monthly Review Press

POPE, Kenneth S.

1978 "How gender, solitude, and posture influence the stream of consciousness", in: Kenneth S. Pope, and Jerome L. Singer (eds.), *The stream of consciousness*, 276–291. New York: Plenum

REIMBOLD, Ernst Thomas

1970 *Die Nacht im Mythos, Kultus, Volksglauben und in der transpersonalen Erfahrung*. Eine religionsphänomenologische Untersuchung. Köln

SCHIVELBUSCH, Wolfgang

1983 *Lichtblicke*. Zur künstlichen Helligkeit im 19. Jahrhundert. München: Beck

SCOTT, James. C.

1998 *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press

SCHWARTZ, Barry

1973 "Notes on the sociology of sleep", in: Arnold Birenbaum, and Edward Sangrin (eds.), *People in places: the sociology of the familiar*, 18–34. London: Nelson

SEITTER, Walter

1999 *Geschichte der Nacht*. Berlin: Philo Verlag

STEGER, Brigitte, and Lodewijk BRUNT (eds.)

2003 *Night-time and sleep in Asia and the West: exploring the dark side of life*. London: Routledge & Curzon

STOLLER, Paul

1989 *The taste of ethnographic things: the senses in anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

TEDLOCK, Barbara

1991 "The new anthropology of dreaming", *Dreaming*, 1(2):1–18

VERDON, Jean

2002 *Night in the middle ages*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press

WEISS, Carol

1986 "The many meanings of research utilization", in: Martin Bulmer *et al.* (eds.), *Social science and social policy*, 31–40. London: Allen and Unwin