Paideuma 51:193 – 207 (2005)

DREAMS, DARKNESS AND HIDDEN SPHERES
Exploring the anthropology of the night in Icelandic society*

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Introduction

The present article seeks to illustrate what a focus on 'the night' and on 'darkness' can contribute to an analysis of an anthropological case study, and, simultaneously, the research questions that an anthropology of the night might address. I take my point of departure in a particular night-time activity, namely dreaming. Between 1996 and 2001, I carried out fieldwork on dream-sharing on several occasions – covering a total of two years – in Reykjavík and Hrunamannahreppur, an area in southern Iceland. Through participant observation and studies of ethnological collections at the National Museum of Iceland and the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík, I investigated the manner in which dreams were and are narrated and interpreted in Iceland.

Although dreaming is commonly seen as a night-time activity, my aim in this article is to investigate the nature of the relationship between dreaming and darkness in Icelandic society. Such an investigation is especially relevant for a society of high latitude like Iceland, where light and darkness not only reflect a diurnal-nocturnal distinction, but also a seasonal one. Through a short discussion of the Icelandic tradition of dream-sharing, I demonstrate that in Iceland darkness and dreams are related differently than in the idea of dreaming taking place during sleep and people falling asleep when the sun has set. Darkness in Iceland is conceptually associated with parts of the world that are hidden from the waking mind, while light is linked to the living human world. Dreaming is ascribed the ability to render the hidden parts of the world transparent.

The anthropology of the night highlights the significance of approaching night and day, light and darkness, not as natural, but as cultural categories. I suggest that an anthropology of the night should focus on the interface of light and darkness, day and night, in order to see how the boundaries between these categories are constantly made subject to negotiation and thus always to change. In Icelandic society, this perspective is expressed as an interaction, sometimes even a struggle, between the human sphere and the sphere of spiritual beings.

* The material for this article derives from my doctoral research, which was financed by the Icelandic Research Council (RANNÍS), the Andreassen & Hougaards Almene Fond, the Danish-Icelandic Foundation, and the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík.

Dreaming and waking

In Icelandic society opinions vary regarding not only the significance of dreams, but also the question of what dreams are. Some Icelanders qualify dreams as personal fantasies not worth much pondering upon, but others consider dream interpretation in Freudian terms as 'die via regia zur Kenntnis des Unbewußten im Seelenleben' (Freud 1961:494). Others again value the activity of dreaming as a means of revealing hidden spatial and temporal dimensions of the world 'out there'. This last perspective towards dreaming is relatively widespread in Iceland and can be traced throughout the history of the country, from the written earliest sources dating from the twelfth century up to the present day.[1] My article deals with Icelanders who interpret the activity of dreaming in terms of its ability to reveal hidden spheres, but I ask the reader to keep in mind that other perspectives on dreaming exist in Iceland.[2]

One of the typical standard sentences that Icelanders use when telling a dream is 'Mig dreymdi eitthvað fyrir einhverju', which can be literally translated as 'Me dreamt something for something (or someone)' and illustrates two points. First, the use of the passive construction 'me dreamt', instead of 'I dreamt', suggests that dreams are not thought of as being the creations of the dreamer. They are considered to originate from external powers, although these powers are often not well defined.[3] Secondly, while 'me dreamt something' refers to the dreaming world, 'for someone or for something' indicates the person or phenomenon in the waking world to which the dream is supposed to be related. In practice, the construction may be filled in as follows: 'Mig dreymdi hvít fé fyrir snjókomu'. A literally translation of this sentence is 'Me dreamt white sheep for snow coming'. In this case a person recalls having had a dream about white sheep, which he or she interprets as a sign of coming snow in the waking world. The sentence 'mig dreymdi eitthvað fyrir einhverju' reflects the idea that a relation exists between the world experienced while dreaming and the world experienced while awake.

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1 Iceland was settled around 870 BC. A few settlers were Gaelic-speakers from the Viking colonies in the British Isles, but most people came to Iceland from western Norway. Although the earliest sources written in Icelandic originate from the twelfth century, some of them definitely have an older oral origin.

2 In recent anthropological studies on dreams, the quest is made for an acceptance that several dream theories may co-exist in a single society (e.g. Kruger 1992, Crapanzano 2001). In Iceland, even more perspectives exist on dreaming than those mentioned here, but a discussion of them is outside the scope of this article.

3 Of course, it is necessary to be cautious in assuming a direct link between a linguistic construction and social meaning. Icelanders who interpret dreams as creations of the dreaming mind also use the phrase 'mig dreymdi' (without adding 'fyrir einhverju'). To prove whether indeed a link between this linguistic construction and the idea that dreams have an external origin exists, a careful analysis is needed of other passive forms in the Icelandic language and their linked connotations. The parallel is, however, too obvious to be ignored.

Dreaming is thus a way of gaining knowledge about (coming) events in waking life, and Icelanders can choose whether or not to act upon this knowledge. Some Icelandic farmers told me that when they dream about white sheep, they may decide that more hay is needed for their animals in order to get them through the winter better, or they simply chose to move machinery or tools inside that will be affected by heavy snowfall. The world experienced while dreaming can thus lead to action in the waking world, but the opposite is also possible. Actions undertaken while awake can influence the spheres that are encountered while dreaming. To give an example, dreaming is, for many Icelanders, an important means of determining the intentions and well-being of the dead. When the living do not respect the memory of the dead, the dead may have problems establishing themselves 'on the other side' (*á hinum megin*), the place where the dead are thought to remain.

The above assumes that social life continues while dreaming. This does not mean that Icelanders do not distinguish between the waking and dreaming condition, but that the worlds experienced while awake and while dreaming are thought to be integrated. The following part of a folk tale, collected in the nineteenth century, illustrates this:

> Once a lad and a girl lived on the same farm; they were engaged, and loved each other very much. He had to go to sea that year, but before he left they talked together and he promised the girl that he would write her regularly and at length. Then he went. [...]. Around Christmas time, the girl began to dream frequently of her lover, and the dreaming grew so insistent that she could hardly get a few hours' quiet rest. He would start telling her all sorts of things, about himself and about other people too.
>
> On that farm there was an old woman who was rather wise about such matters; the girl went to her and told her about her dreams, and that she could not sleep in peace.
>
> The old woman did not seem much perturbed, but said to the girl: 'This evening you shall sleep, but I will see to the door of the building you sleep in'.
>
> That evening the girl went to sleep; she dreamed that her lover came to the window and said: 'It was wrong of you to lock the door against me. As things are, I will never be able to come to you again; but had they been otherwise, I would have wanted to be your Dream Guide'.[4]

The frequent appearance of the girl's boyfriend in her dreams is an indication that he has drowned at sea. This is confirmed by a short poem, that the boy recites. The poem begins with the words, 'Our bodies sleep beneath the sea'.[5] The boy troubles the girl so often in her dreams that she does not get enough rest. The idea that external powers can exert control over sleep and dreaming is found in both the Old Norse sources and in modern and contemporary Iceland. In Sturlungasaga (1970) and þórðar saga

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4 Simpson (1972:107–108). For the original see Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri (1954–61:224). A 'Dream Guide' or dream man (*draummaður*) is a (deceased) person who appears regularly in a dream to guide the dreamer or to give information on the future.

5 Simpson (1972:108). For the original see Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri (1954–61:224).

hreðu (1959), for example, a feeling of sudden drowsiness is interpreted as the presence of fetches (*fylgjur*)[6] announcing the imminent attack of enemies. The feeling of drowsiness might be so strong that the individual has problems defending himself.[7] *Fylgjur*, the inherent counterparts of living persons, are often presented in animal form in Old Norse literature. Nowadays, *fylgjur* are commonly thought to be the dead. During my fieldwork, I was told several times that a sudden feeling of drowsiness was interpreted as the imminent arrival of a guest. This quest is then thought to be accompanied by a *fylgja*. Nightmares or a fitful sleep are also interpreted in Old Norse sources, Icelandic folk tales collected in the nineteenth century and contemporary Iceland as the dreamer being in contact with spiritual beings at that moment. In these cases the passiveness of the dreamer or of an individual who feels sleepy is stressed in relation to a powerful hidden agent.

The folk tale above quoted clearly expresses the idea that the waking sphere of the living and the sphere encountered while dreaming are integrated entities and that their relationships can be laid bare through the activity of dreaming. After the door is locked in waking life, the dead boy can only speak to the girl in a dream from behind a window. When the girl wakes up the boy might be still there, but when she does not dream she is unable to see him. The worlds of dreaming and of waking are two sides of the same reality, which together constitute one world.[8] This assumption and the idea that social life continues while dreaming contrast with Freud's influential theory, that views dreaming as a private experience. Freud (1970:167) described the dream as 'ein völlig asoziales seelisches Produkt' that 'einem anderen nichts mitzuteilen hat'.

The idea that dreaming life is continuous with waking life is not unique to Icelandic society. Tim Ingold (2000:102), for example, describes a similar dream theory among the Ojibwa, which he opposes to a perspective that he typifies as western:

> People in the West [...] consider the dream world to be the very opposite of the solid, physical world 'out-there' just as illusion is opposed to reality, fantasy to fact. For the Ojibwa, by contrast, the world of dreams, like that of myth, is continuous with waking life. [...] What dreams do is to penetrate beneath the surface of the world, to render it transparent, so that one can see into it with a clarity and vision that is not possible in ordinary life. In dreams, for the Ojibwa, the world is opened up to the dreamer, it is revealed. This is why they attach such a tremendous importance to dreaming as a source of knowledge, for the knowledge revealed through dreams is also a source of power.

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6 Georgia D. Kelchner (1935:17) describes the concept of *fylgja* as it appears in Old Norse literature in the following way: 'The fetch is the inherent soul, the accompanying counterpart or representation, of a living person. Usually invisible, it may, nevertheless, be seen in dreams and visions, almost always in the form of an animal. The possession of a fetch is universal, and its character coincides, in some salient feature or features, with the qualities and characteristics of the person to whom it belongs, or, especially in cases of hostility, with the attitude of its owner toward the dreamer'.

7 See Sturlungasaga (1946:287), þórðar saga hreðu (1959: Chapter 7).

8 See Willerslev (2004:410), Willis (1992:178).

Both perspectives described by Ingold exist in Icelandic society, and as the article by Brigitte Steger (this collection) points out, the idea that sleep is a period of social inertness exists in Japan too. The value of Ingold's suggestion is therefore not his division between 'the west and the rest', but the fact that he relates the activity of dreaming to a theory of knowledge. In this respect his argument is similar to that of the Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger. In his work "Dream and existence", published in 1930, Binswanger (1993) suggested that the problem of dreaming should be posed in epistemological terms. "Dream and existence", together with Michel Foucault's introduction to this work, written in 1954, critically assess Freud's theory of dreaming. Foucault argues that the dream is an imaginary experience, and that because the dream experience relates to a theory of knowledge, it cannot be reconstituted by psychological analysis (Foucault 1993:43).

I have illustrated the Icelandic notion that the activity of dreaming is seen as a means of gaining knowledge about parts of the world that are hidden from the waking mind.[9] These hidden parts are either arranged spatially, as in the above-mentioned folktale, or temporally, such as in the example where dreaming about white sheep is thought to reveal a future event, the coming of snow. I shall now demonstrate that often the hidden parts or spheres are associated with darkness.

Darkness and hidden spheres

During my fieldwork in Reykjavík, I had a discussion with an Icelandic friend about fear of the dark. I told him that my fear of the dark comes from the idea that an ill-intentioned person might have sneaked into my house and was hiding somewhere in the darkness. My friend told me that when he was inside his house he was not afraid of people with bad intentions: they could be locked out. On the other hand, he feared the possible presence of the dead, because they are able to move through walls, and locks on doors do not keep them out. A difference may be noted between the idea expressed here about the dead not being restricted by a physical body on the one hand and the dead, who appear as a unit of a physical body and a mind as presented in the previous discussed folktale on the other.[10] Significant here, however, is that my friend associates darkness with the presence of the dead.

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9 It should be mentioned that whether a dream is interpreted as revealing a waking event is dependent on the dream images and the social context in which the dream is shared. Not all dreams are ascribed a revealing character, but those that are are often thought to be significant to share.

10 The conceptualisation of the dead as beings with bodily features, as in the folk tale resembles the way the dead are represented in Old Norse literature. See, e.g., Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar (1933), Eyrbyggjasaga (1935) and Grettis Saga (1936). Nowadays, the idea that the dead return to the living as an image or a smell is more common.

There are other indications of a parallel existing between darkness and hidden spheres. A well-known example is the folk tale "Nátt-tröllið" (the night-troll), also collected in the nineteenth century. It deals with the inhabitants of a farm who attend the evening service every Christmas Eve. The next morning when they come home, they always find the person who had stayed behind to look after the farm, either dead or insane. Many therefore refuse to stay home on Christmas Eve, but once a girl offers to watch the farm. At night someone comes at the window where the girl is sitting and a voice starts to recite poetry about the girl's beauty. The girl answers every verse and keeps the being at the window busy until the sun rises. The last verse, which the voice at the window recites, goes as follows:

Dagur er í austri,
snör mín en snarpa, og dillidó.
Day in the East, I see
Hard and rough mine must be
Dilly-dilly-do.

The girl answers:

Stattu og vertu að steini
en engum pó að meini
ári minn, Kári, korriró.
Stand there and turn to stone
So you'll do harm to none,
Lully-lully-lo.[11]

When the people come home in the morning, they find a huge stone in the path between the farm buildings. The girl tells them what she had heard, but not seen. It had been a night troll who had come at the window, and the rays of the sun had turned the troll into a rock (Tröllasögur 1905:114–115).

Another indication of a relationship between hidden spheres and darkness is the Icelandic concept of *skyggn*, which formerly meant the ability to see in the dark (Íslensk orðabók 1994). During my fieldwork, Icelanders referred to *skyggn* people as those 'sem sáu meira en aðrir' (who see more than others). The concept of *skyggn* refers nowadays to people who do not need to depend on dreaming to see hidden spheres, but to whom these spheres are revealed while they are awake. The distinction between people who are *skyggn* and those who are not is only rooted in the sense of sight. 'Ordinary' people can perceive hidden spheres with their other senses in waking life. For example, it is thought to be possible to hear the dead knocking on doors or to smell their presence. The same seems to apply to people's dealings with darkness. In the dark, 'ordinary' people can only use their sense of sight to a limited degree, while their other senses function properly. The Icelandic ethnologist Jónas Jónasson also

11 Simpson (1972:82). For the original see Tröllasögur (1905:114–115).

associates the lack of fear of the dark with being *skyggn*. He notes that it is remarkable that *skyggn* people are never afraid of the dark (Jónasson frá Hrafnagili 1934:414). We can assume that this is because what is hidden in the darkness, for example the dead, is revealed to them.

Yet another example derives from my fieldwork in Hrunamannahreppur. This area, situated in southern Iceland, is characterised by geothermal activity that is used to heat greenhouses in which a variety of vegetables, fruits and flowers are cultivated for the national market. An inhabitant of the area told me that he thought that because the greenhouses light the area when it is dark, there are not many people left who are afraid of so-called *draugar*, the dead that return to the living. The idea that light chases spiritual beings away returns in the work of Kirsten Hastrup, who also carried out fieldwork in Iceland. She considered the question of why her Icelandic hosts told her that *huldufólk*, invisible beings similar to humans living in the rocks and hills in the immediate surroundings of human settlements, had disappeared some ten to twenty years before her arrival at their farm. She suggests:

> What I, much later and long since back behind my desk, came to think of as perhaps a main correlate, if not the actual cause, of the disappearance of the *huldufólk*, was the introduction of electricity. This had certainly been a major event on the farm, and one which had taken place about ten years before. Would it be unreasonable to suggest that the light cast by the enormous outdoor lamps would chase off a people who wanted to retain the most distinctive feature of their identity, that is, to remain a 'hidden' folk?[12]

These examples indicate that a conceptual link exists between darkness, spheres that are hidden from the waking mind, the beings that inhabit these spheres and the activity of dreaming, which renders hidden spheres transparent. At the same time, the human world seems to be associated with light. I shall now explore the relations between light and the human world on the one hand and darkness and hidden spheres on the other through a discussion of how humans and spiritual beings change and invade each others' spheres. Darkness and light can be manipulated to expand intentionally either human or spiritual spheres, but the hidden spheres are also reduced indirectly due to what Melbin (1987) calls the 'human colonization of the night'.

Light and darkness

I suggest that an anthropology of the night should address light and darkness, day and night, as cultural categories, whose relationships are subject to negotiation and thus always changing. Spiritual beings associated with hidden spheres are thought to be

[12] Hastrup (1990a:263). For a discussion of artificial light in relation to cultural conceptions of night and day, see de Graaf and Maier (2002:21–43).

able to go beyond darkness by appearing during the day to people who are awake. This might indicate an interaction, perhaps even a struggle, between the human world, symbolically expressed by light and day, and hidden spheres associated with night and darkness. An example of this is the contemporary concept of *fylgja*, discussed earlier. An Icelandic woman I met during my fieldwork in Hrunamannahreppur is considered to be *skyggn* and able to see *fylgjur* who are accompanying people. She told me:

> One evening, [...] we were cutting up and preparing slaughtered lambs in the kitchen. Then we noticed someone walking. I saw a man with a coat and a hat. I looked at him only briefly and then I didn't think any more about it. Then after ten minutes a man came to the barn. We weren't expecting anyone. I described to him the man I had seen. It proved to be his [deceased] father (translation A.H.).

She told me that she herself has a so-called *hrekkjadraugur* as *fylgja*, a deceased person unknown to her who breaks things or does harm. People have told her several times that shortly before she arrives at their place, something falls or breaks down. They consider her *fylgja* to be responsible for this.

The dead, who are often associated with darkness, can easily invade the waking diurnal sphere of living humans, but humans can also alter the relationship between light and darkness, between the human sphere and that of hidden beings. Candle-light is often used when spiritual beings are contacted. It is thought to influence communication between the dead and the living positively, for example at spiritual meetings, where a medium passes on messages from the dead to the living. The Icelandic ethnologist Árni Björnsson mentions the significance of lights to smooth contact between humans and the *huldufólk* mentioned earlier, especially at times when the *huldufólk* are moving, as on Christmas' Eve or New Year's Eve. Björnsson (1980:99) writes:

> It was an old custom [...] to invite the elves [*huldufólk*] on these evenings, for it was thought that those of them who were moving might want to drop in and rest on their way. So the lady of the house would sweep out the farm from one end to the other and put lights in every nook and cranny, driving out all shadows. Then she would go out and circle the house three times saying: 'Come whoever wants to come, stay whoever wants to stay, go whoever wants to go, without harm to me and mine'.

Icelanders still put lights outside their front door and light bon-fires on New Years' Eve. This custom is often explained as lighting the way for hidden beings who are considered to move on this evening. I suggest that the custom has another dimension, one that draws attention to the interface between light and darkness as cultural categories. For this I am relying on the work of Merleau-Ponty (1964:166), who notes that 'to see is to have at a distance'.

Rane Willerslev (n.d.) elaborates on this remark in the following way: 'We cannot open our eyes to things without distancing ourselves from them. However, this distance is not an obstacle to seeing, but rather its precondition. When our eyes come too near to a thing, we experience blurring, then blindness'.

Willerslev (n.d.) adds that, without distance, which seeing necessarily implies, we would collapse into the Other. Light, which is the very precondition for seeing, can thus be manipulated by humans in order not to be drawn into hidden spheres. It is this that happens in the above examples. This need to keep the human and the hidden spheres separate returns clearly in Icelandic accounts of dreams concerning visits to the world of the dead or the *huldufólk*. For example, if dreamers visit the world of the dead and become too involved with the dead, the dream would be interpreted as a sign of the dreamer's imminent death.

The above accounts deal with strategic lighting that enables humans to deal safely with hidden spheres. There is another side to humans invading darkness, which has a different kind of conceptualisation at its basis, related to the 'colonization of the night' mentioned earlier (Melbin 1987). Many Icelanders think that the modernisation of society, to which the introduction of artificial light belongs, has altered and will continue to alter the relationship between hidden spheres and the world that is experienced while awake. Iceland's modernisation has its roots in the nineteenth century, but the society changed most profoundly at the end of and shortly after the Second World War. My argument is that the integration of a modernist cosmology did not just invade and thus oust the hidden spheres, as I pointed out with the example of greenhouse lighting chasing the dead away. The reduction in darkness and the invasion by culture of wild nature through the expansion of the country's infrastructure have rather changed how hidden spheres and the beings inhabiting them are conceptualised. Hidden spiritual spheres are still considered to exist, but they are submitted to human control and a scientific epistemology.[13]

Changes in the Icelandic conception of the above-mentioned *huldufólk* can serve as an example. According to folk tales collected in the nineteenth century, the *huldufólk* dwell in rocks and hills, at the boundaries of human settlements. To paraphrase Hastrup (1990b:264), who took her point of departure in the folk tales, 'they [the *huldufólk*] lived in the knolls and rocks in the immediate neighbourhood of the farmsteads, that is, in those small points where the wild broke through the cultivated surface'. In a similar way as Ingold (2000:102) described for the Ojibwa, dreaming made it possible to penetrate beneath the surface of these natural features and revealed that the knolls and the rocks were actually settlements of the *huldufólk*. In these settlements, *huldufólk* lived their lives similar to how Icelandic farmers did before the modernisation of society. Being quite similar to humans, the distinction between *huldufólk* and humans is essentially rooted in a distinction between invisibility and visibility. It is most common to see *huldufólk* while dreaming, but in waking life they turn up when they want to show themselves and can be perceived with the senses of hearing and smell.

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13 Studies on Icelandic spiritualism are highly relevant for the discussion of spiritual spheres that are submitted to a scientific epistemology (see, e.g., Swatos and Gissurarson 1997).

During early spring 2000, I visited an Icelandic woman who sometimes feels the presence of *huldufólk* in her living room and in small stones and rocks in and close to her garden. She showed me stones on which she had painted red hats and little faces. These stones, she said, represent *huldufólk*. Several inhabitants in the area have bought them from her and placed them in their garden as a kind of garden gnome. This woman is not the only person to change the *huldufólk* from hidden into visible beings: *huldufólk* are increasingly visualised in contemporary society.

Another interesting and related change I noticed was that many people in the countryside talked about the *huldufólk* as beings of the past. Only a few informants were able to tell me about recent encounters with these beings, and the children living on the Icelandic farm where I was staying during the summer of 2001 did not mention having had any dealings with the *huldufólk*. For them, *huldufólk* are part of the past and of Iceland's literary heritage, as taught at school. The Icelanders who told me about their encounters with *huldufólk* and *álfar*[14] also often showed an interest in 'New Age philosophy'.

The general disappearance of *huldufólk* from daily narratives in the countryside does not mean that they have vanished. Some six years ago, I was told that *huldufólk* were making their way to the Vestfjörður, a sparsely populated area in the north-west of Iceland. They were seen as refugees who had been chased away by human interference in Icelandic nature. On the other hand, and this development seems to be more persistent, the *huldufólk* are moving in the opposite direction, into human-populated areas.[15] Nowadays one can still meet *huldufólk* in the neighbourhood of farms, but especially in parks, gardens and houses, and in and around the capital. One of the best-known hidden populations is said to reside in Hafnafjörður, a town near Reykjavík. Erla Stefánsdóttir, a nationally well-known *skyggn* woman, has made drawings and descriptions of these populations, which are used to construct a map that shows the exact location of their dwellings. This map is used in promoting Hafnafjörður to tourists (Stefánsdóttir 1993). Visiting Hafnafjörður's official homepage,[16] pictures pop up of children wearing masks and standing in a landscape of lava rocks, where all kinds of hidden beings are supposed to live. The children represent these hidden beings. A woman who has lived near these rocks for many years was invited in a dream to visit a hidden dwelling in one of these rocks. On the homepage this dream is used as 'proof' that hidden beings really live at this particular location.

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14 This is another name for *huldufólk*.

15 The idea of the *huldufólk* moving into human space is my own: it is not recognised in the modern *huldufólk* tradition, which states that the *huldufólk* have been close to the urban area for a long time. Their habitat in urban space can be subject to negotiation with humans, sometimes resulting in the movement of the hidden people from the urban area back into wild nature again, thus moving in the opposite direction.

16 http://www2.hafnarfj.is/hafnarfj.nsf/pages/alfar

Magnús Skarphéðinsson, chairman of the Spiritual Society of Iceland (Sálarrannsóknarfélag Íslands) founded an *álfaskóli* (a school that teaches about *álfar*) in Reykjavík. Some people connected with this society had initiated the collection of tales concerning *huldufólk* and *álfar* with the aim of rescuing them from disappearance. The *álfa*-school teaches students, mostly foreigners, about the history of the *álfar* and their way of life, and spiritual beings in Iceland are compared with those existing in other countries (Námvísir 1997:35–38). The knowledge imparted by the school is quite detailed. In the folk tales, *huldufólk* were also called *álfar*, and no clear distinction was made between them. This has changed: in an interview with one of Iceland's national newspapers, Magnús Skarphéðinsson said that *huldufólk* are quite similar to humans and they number approximately 7 000 to 20 000. *Álfar*, on the other hand, are small creatures ranging from 5 to 17 centimetres in height and are much more numerous than *huldufólk* (Porkell 1997).

For centuries, the central feature of the *huldufólk* was their invisibility. Today they are drawn, measured, counted, described in detail and placed on a map. This contemporary act of drawing hidden beings into the light, of visualising them, storing information on their lives and traditions in a computer, and mediating this information in the context of a school is an unintended consequence of a colonization of the night and of wild nature, more broadly, of the integration of a modernist cosmology. As Darryl Wieland (1989:20–21) notes, this cosmology supposes 'the exclusive existence of known or knowable (i.e., rule-governed) things and processes in the world; forces may be hidden but are part of a complex system of causation subject to human discovery and control'.

The idea of Hastrup's mentioned earlier, that the disappearance of the *huldufólk* from the surroundings of the Icelandic farm where she carried out her fieldwork was due to their exposure to electric light, should be understood in this context. Although *huldufólk* often appear during the night in dreams, as the folk tales and a few contemporary accounts that I collected demonstrate, *huldufólk* also appear to humans during day time. They are not beings of darkness as the night trolls were,[17] but their essence has long been their invisibility, their being hidden from human sight. The lives of *huldufólk*, who share the same space as humans although not the same sphere, became revealed when Icelanders started to explore and penetrate the landscape. Formerly unknown places in the landscape that had been conceptual hidden spheres became known, because what was formerly unknown in the world 'out there' is in contemporary Iceland made subject to investigation. This process of investigation was not simply the outcome of the physical penetration of the Icelandic landscape, but arose more from an interaction between this penetration and the idea that hidden and unknown parts of the waking world could be explored and submitted to human control.

17 While nowadays trolls are only subjects of children books and folk tales that represent Iceland's past, encounters with *huldufólk* are still reported in contemporary Iceland.

Through these developments, the tradition of the *huldufólk* could move in two directions. Accounts of encounters with the *huldufólk* could disappear, because their very essence, their invisibility, had been taken away from them. Alternatively they could acquire the right to exist when they adapted to the ontological demands of modernist ideology. This adaptation consisted of giving them an image and submitting them to (semi-)scientific investigations and activities, such as the mapping of their residences, their measurement, and detailed studies of their way of life in comparison to spiritual beings in other countries.

Conclusion

It seems that darkness is neither black nothingness nor the simple withdrawal of light from a well-known environment. In the Icelandic concept I have discussed here, it is not only that light withdraws. Darkness is also thought to enter and invade the environment as soon as the sun has set and the lights have been switched off. Darkness is supposed to represent a hidden sphere that reveals itself in dreams, through senses other than sight, and to those who are said being *skyggn*. Darkness also represents the fear of humans of their being unable to keep a distance when they cannot see, the fear of being drawn into hidden spheres, of collapsing into them and becoming like the dead or like *huldufólk*.

A parallel can be detected in Icelandic society not only between the concepts of night, darkness and hidden spheres, but also between those of day, light and the world of living humans. These two groups of concepts interact, their relationship constantly being subject to change: the representatives of darkness are thought to be able to invade the human world of daylight, while humans can be actively engaged in reducing the dark. Human initiatives to illuminate the night are not always aimed at reducing or facing safely hidden spiritual spheres, but can also be attempts to increase social or economic activity. This is partly the case with the Icelandic colonization of the night. This colonization has resulted in a reduction of the number of accounts of encounters with hidden beings and, simultaneously, in an increase in the visualisation of hidden beings such as the *huldufólk*. The visualisation has the consequence that these beings become more and more subject to human control.

This Icelandic case study illustrates the potential of an anthropology of the night. It draws attention to the fact that the switch from night to day, from darkness to light, and back again is not only a natural process, but related to cultural conceptions. People are actively engaged in changing the relations between these categories. I suggest that it is this interaction that an anthropology of the night should address. Such a focus would shed light on significant themes such as the meaning of the senses for anthropological analysis. It would also offer alternative understandings of processes of

social change and highlight the social activities of the night, which influence or motivate daytime activities, but have remained hidden due to the diurnal bias of anthropology.

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