

Life After Dark In Kwahu Tafo

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ABSTRACT The author reflects on four nocturnal topics he observed during his research in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural Ghanaian town: witchcraft, sex, human waste removal and sleeping. Yet little of his fieldwork was in fact nocturnal. He also asked school students to write about their views of life after dark in their town. From these reflections, the night in Kwahu-Tafo is revealed as both the 'enemy' of the day - a realm for activities that were not allowed or possible during the day - and as the day's indispensable companion. The night solves the moral dilemmas of the day. The night provides the coulisses of the day.

Introduction

For almost forty years I have been visiting the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo in Ghana for anthropological fieldwork. Much of my ethnographic work has dealt with activities that took place during the night, but I never paid attention to that 'dark side' of my data. In this paper I will. The night is the preferred space for lovers, witches, the town's two night-soil collectors and - of course - sleepers. I will relate my attempts to follow all of them through the night, and argue that the night has both a protective and an excluding/rejecting character for those who deal in evil, love and dirt.

My first research was about tensions and conflicts within one (extended) family (*abusua*). Many of my conversations with members of that family ended in hushed accusations of witchcraft (*bayie*) between close relatives. Witches work at night, I was told in these daytime conversations. It was the first indication that the night's evil extended into the day. I did not adjust my research approach, however. I did not conduct nocturnal fieldwork to directly observe the work of witches. I continued to listen to stories and gossip that reached me during daytime.

My second research period focused on sexual relationships. Sex, as I knew, was mainly a practice of the night, but the love affairs that interested me most were doubly nocturnal because they were secret relationships with an extra reason to seek the cover of the night. Personal involvement in 'secret love' did draw me into some night-time ethnography, but I never intended it to be ethnographic. It only became ethnography in hindsight.

More recent fieldwork, on hygiene and sanitation, led me to the work of the collection of liquid waste, which, in English is fittingly named 'night soil'. As with witchcraft and secret love, these activities are only carried out in the darkness of the night. The collection of human waste was the first topic that caused me to conscientiously conduct nocturnal fieldwork, albeit to a limited extent, as I will explain further below.

Finally, and most recently I took an interest in sleeping as a cultural activity. This again lured me to the night but, paradoxically, sleeping proved a less nocturnal affair than I had anticipated. Much sleeping goes on during the day (Van der Geest 2006),

and some people are too busy to sleep during the night, as I will show below.

Is it coincidence that the night played such a prominent role in the topics of my fieldwork or does anthropology have a 'natural' inclination towards life in darkness? Or is it my own character, if not aberration? It is probably a bit of both. Anthropologists seem to be most interested in things that are hidden: subterranean, obscure and marginal phenomena, which unavoidably lead to the night, in its literal or metaphoric appearance. (It is perhaps ironic that we claim to write about everyday life). I will argue, however, that one needs to know the night to understand the day.

This intertwining of night and day is impressively documented in the most complete ethnography of the night I know: a historical study of Paris in the 19th century by Simone Delattre (2003). 'The nocturnal city creates its own sensory space,' writes Corbin in his preface to Delattre's book (2003:12). Delattre writes about the many activities that take place in the night, from the pleasures and entertainment, to the security work done by police and other guards, to the work necessary before the new day breaks such as cleaning and the delivery of food.

In this essay, I revisit my notes and memories of fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo to enter its night. In addition, I returned to the town itself a few months ago to talk with friends about the night. I also asked 43 students at the local senior secondary school to write a composition about activities that take place at night in their town.

The night as metaphor

It is the absence of light, the darkness, which makes the night truly night. The night creates a space where things and people are not seen – or not fully seen. It is the great cover that protects secrets, private and public ones, benign and evil ones. The night, therefore, represents danger as well as for intimacy; it attracts and frightens.

In the biblical narrative, darkness falls over Jerusalem when Jesus dies. 'Darkness at noon' is the powerful anomaly that underscores the ominous character of the event. The German painter Matthias Grünewald chose that same darkness for his gruesome crucifixions. The bright landscapes and sceneries of which Grünewald's contemporaries were so fond of for their biblical images are conspicuously absent. The black sky represents the evilness that led to this death.

The night is also seen as the time when burglars and murderers are active. It is an unsafe period during which peace-loving citizens ought to stay at home in the security of their beds. Ekirch (2005) in his anthology of quotations about night-time offers numerous sayings that point at the hazards of the dark. His first chapter bears the title *Terrors of the night*. A long parade of writers and moralists compete in condemning the night as the favourite topos of evil. It is associated with violence, theft, disease, death and hell. A bush in the dark is easily taken for a thief, and nightly sounds easily scare us, as the Jacobean writer George Herbert remarked in 1657:

The night is more quiet than the day and yet we feare in it what we doe not regard by day. A mouse running, a board cracking, a dog howling, an owle scratching put us often in cold sweat (in Ekirch 2006: 9).

Of course, this is Jacobean style of rhetoric; a poetic exaggeration for the sake of the argument. The night is rarely moonless. Moreover, electric lights have chased away the darkness in most corners of the world. The boundaries between day and night are fading and in some cities the streets may be busier (and brighter) in the night than during the day. And yet, the night still carries that negative aureole of danger, doom and destruction, certainly in the language of poets and priests.

The Completes that Roman Catholic monks sing – or used to sing – before they retreat to their beds for the night also express apprehension to the dangers after dark. The prayers start with a verse from the first letter by St Peter, exhorting the monks to: ‘... be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith’.

The night is also the domain of wild beings: animals, humans and spiritual agents. News items on radio, TV and in the newspapers encourage this view of night-time as ‘crime time.’ A clipping taken arbitrarily from a Russian daily reports on a group of crime watchers who guard a street in St Petersburg. The journalist sums up those who threaten the peace of the night:

They thrive under the cover of darkness, craving anonymity. They are prostitutes and johns, dealers and addicts, burglars and thieves. They operate in neighbourhoods while fearful residents sit behind double-locked doors, some too scared to call the police (Maharrey 2007).

Wikipedia describes the dangers of the night as follows:

Night is often associated with danger and evil, because bandits and dangerous animals can be concealed by darkness. The belief in magic often includes the idea that magic and magicians are more powerful at night. Similarly, mythical and folkloric creatures such as vampires and werewolves are thought to be more active at night. Ghosts are believed to wander around almost exclusively during nighttime. In almost all cultures, there exist stories and legends warning of the dangers of nighttime.

Thus, the night becomes a symbol of immorality versus the virtuousness of the day. Terms like ‘dark side’, ‘shady’, and ‘obscure’, which literally refer to an absence of light, all carry negative connotations when applied to human activity.¹

But the night, with its candlelight and closed curtains also stands for hominess, intimacy, love and romance. Ekirch writes and cites:

... darkness generated an intimate atmosphere in which words of affection glowed more freely. Low levels of light, whether from a candle or lamp brought couples closer together, physically and emotionally... ‘How silver-sweet sound lovers’ tongues by night,’ Romeo proclaims to Juliet. Ekirch (2005: 192)

Vogler, who described nightlife in a Thai refugee camp, writes:

Darkness may impact social relations and hierarchies. The evenings and early night hours may actually bring those members of the refugee community together who are separated during the day. These can be families, friends and lovers within the community, but also refugees and security personnel. Vogler (2006: 3)

Both metaphors, evil and intimacy, appeared in my research in Kwahu-Tafo, often in a mixed form, as two sides of one coin: improper intimacy or intimate evil. *Bayie fri fie* (Witchcraft comes from the [one's own] house) says a proverb.

Bayie

The night is the territory of witches. In the 1950s, a Swiss missionary to Ghana, H. Debrunner, collected witchcraft stories from his students and wrote the first monograph of witchcraft (*bayie*) among the Akan of Southern Ghana (Debrunner 1959). In those stories, the night figures prominently. In opposition to the day, it is part of an elaborate complex of reverse qualities that are ascribed to witches. Witches are active when normal people sleep; they like the darkness where others prefer the light of the day; they fly; they walk on their heads, they eat human flesh, and '... they have their eyes at the back of the ankle joints' (ibid: 20). 'During the day [...] witches are poor - but at night they are kings, captains and elders' (ibid: 29). 'In the night, many times between midnight and one o'clock, the woman who is a witch rises, takes certain leaves [...] and puts these on her husband or children, and nobody notices her absence' (ibid: 19). There are countless reports of people who saw a suspicious light in the night and concluded it was a witch (which is akin to Herbert's remark above that in the night, simple observations assume hideous appearances).

One year after the publication of Debrunner's book, the British anthropologist and psychiatrist M. J. Field published an ethno-psychiatric study based on 146 cases of patients with mental or emotional problems, who sought help from a traditional healing centre in the Brong-Ahafo Region of Southern Ghana (Field 1960). *Bayie* is repeatedly diagnosed as the root cause of the complaints and although the stories do not describe in detail the ways of witches – they are assumed to be known – several of them do explicitly mention the night as the moment that witches carried out their destruction.

During my own research (Bleek 1975, 1978),² I lived for six months with one extended family to observe the daily routines of family life. I was particularly interested in the 'cracks' of the reputedly harmonious lineage system.³ Accusations and insinuations about evil *bayie* practices between close relatives were rampant, as I was soon to find out. The accusations took the form of malicious gossip that revealed anxiety and mistrust in the heart of the family. It seemed to the family that I was a relatively safe person to speak to about these matters. Nearly everybody I spoke to privately shared with me that destructive gossip. Only a few older family members declined to discuss the matter with me; they were precisely the ones most frequently

accused by the others of practising *bayie*. My understanding of their reticence was that *bayie* was too close for them to speak about it.

Most *bayie* gossip referred to events in the past, but during my stay a dramatic death occurred that sparked off a wide range of (hidden) accusations. I heard eight of these accusations and tried to analyse them from the point of view of gossip (Bleek 1976b). The night as the realm of witches was always mentioned directly or implicitly assumed. I quote one accusation by a young woman that I called Bridget:

Amo [the lineage head] is a witch. In the night he becomes very active and the lower part of his body changes into that of a fish. My mother, one night, went outside to urinate and saw him. She ran away for fear. Because she was in his [Amo's] power, she could not see whether he had changed into a fish or not (Bleek 1976b: 533).

By referring *bayie* to the darkness of the night, it remains both a vague and ominous phenomenon. Darkness implies not seeing – or not seeing clearly – and leaves room for imagination; an ideal opportunity for gossip. It is only in the night, with its obscurity, that one may encounter a witch.

The only time that Evans-Pritchard saw a witch during his renowned stay among the Azande was at night. He was taking his usual nocturnal stroll when he noticed a bright light. He ran to follow it, when it passed over the house of a man called Tupoi, and then he lost sight of it. He knew there was only one man in the village who had a lamp that could have produced such a light, but the man told him the next morning that he had not been out with his lamp. That same day someone in Tupoi's homestead died. Evans-Pritchard's informants were convinced the light had been a witch. The anthropologist concluded: 'I never discovered its real origin, which was possibly a handful of grass lit by some one on his way to defecate, but the coincidence of the direction along which the light moved and the subsequent death accorded well with Zande ideas' (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 34).

I never saw a witch in the night, but I became one myself when one night, shortly after my arrival in the town, I made a silly mistake to write on the outside of my room "*Ofie biara bayie wom*" (there is a witch in every house). It was meant as a joke. I had learnt the proverb during my Twi conversation the day before and liked it, not aware of people's strong belief in witchcraft and the proverb's deeply offensive meaning. I just wanted to add my own text to the many (pious) inscriptions that were already on the walls of the houses around. The next morning I woke up from agitated voices. My landlord knocked on my door and asked me if I had written the words. I immediately realised my mistake and denied it. It made the case worse. The landlord became more worried and hurried to remove the ominous words.

Love and sex

Why should love be made in the night? Because of respect, some friends explained to me. It would be shameful to have sex in broad daylight. It is not only secret or forbidden love affairs that take place at night, they said; all sex belongs to the night. The

night is the time that people sleep, so lovers can meet without being seen and disturbed by others. Married couples who sleep with their children in the same room wait until the children are asleep for privacy. Interestingly, having sex at night does not necessarily mean that it takes place in the darkness. Most people in Kwahu-Tafo sleep with the light on (Van der Geest 2006: 79), albeit dimmed, if possible. Turning off the light before having sex would rather wake the children up, someone explained.

For secret and forbidden love, the darkness of the night is crucial. Young people try to meet their lovers unseen by parents and other relatives who may disapprove of their affair. The architecture of the houses considerably facilitates nightly secret meetings between lovers. The houses are rectangular, with rooms around a courtyard. The main gate that gives access to the courtyard is bolted from the inside at night, but all the rooms have a window to the outside. A soft knock on the window suffices as a signal to a young man that his girlfriend has arrived; he can then tiptoe to the main gate to let her in. Thus, the gate provides secure protection against (rare) thieves but not against (frequent) lovers. Houses that are open and have no gate are even more amenable to secret love.

At the crack of dawn, before sunrise, the girl will sneak back home to join her brothers and sisters on their bed or mat. Her mother may have been spending her night outside the house as well, in her husband's or lover's house. In that case the girl must especially hurry, in case she returns at the same moment as her mother does.

During my research in 1973, a teacher to whom I gave the pseudonym Manu was beaten up by four men in the town where he was teaching. The men suspected him of having an affair with someone's wife. Manu's version of the story was that the woman was going to the toilet in the night (the public toilet was at the edge of the village) when the light of her kerosene lamp was blown out. She went to Manu's house only to ask for matches. He gave her some, but when she came out of the house, four men accosted her and questioned her about her purported quest for matches. They then beat up Manu (Bleek 1976a: 252). The story confirms that a nightly visit can mean only one thing in the local opinion: sex.

Research on lovers meeting in the night poses obvious problems. Participant observation would be awkward. Apart from my personal experiences, about which I do not want to write in more detail than I have done before, I had to rely on love stories of some friends (see Bleek 1975) and on a young boy in the house who helped me with various domestic activities. Every morning, during breakfast, he reported to me who had slept with whom that night, both in our house and in a few surrounding houses. But he too had not been an *observer* of the nocturnal love-making: he had only seen the supposed lover entering the house.

'Everyone likes the night!,' one student of the secondary school sighed in his essay. The night offers the occasion for romantic encounters. Moreover, as one of my friends remarked, the half-darkness makes things more exciting and people more beautiful. This certainly holds true for love-making. He said that a naked body in bright light put him off, but seeing the body in a *claire-obscur* turned him on.

Romance often begins by dating (at night) in front of bars and other places that attract people with their music. When students organize 'study evenings,' they may simply plan a cover-up for meeting friends.

I asked a friend if the many lights in the streets and the houses today had not rendered the cover of night ineffective, since a woman can now be seen slipping into the house of her friend. He agreed that the darkness is no longer 'safe', but that it did not really matter. Visiting your lover in the night indicates that you respect the norms of decency. You have shown your intention not to offend others by publicly doing what should be concealed, by darkness. If someone does see you, the person understands that you acted respectfully and he or she should in return respect you by not revealing what he saw. Flaunting your love and relationship in the daylight, however, would be a provocation. It implies that you do not care about what others think; that is where the disrespect lies. The fact that a married man has an extramarital lover (even if it is not someone else's partner, as in the case of Manu) is usually condoned, as long as the affair is carried out decently: in the night. Indeed, 'night knows no shame' (in Ekirch 2005: xxvi).

The night-soil collector

My first encounter with a night-soil collector took place in the night without the man noticing me. Once a week, I was awoken in the middle of the night by an intense stench drifting into my room. When it happened the first time, I stood up and looked out of my window. I saw a short figure emptying my neighbour's latrine bucket, just four metres from my window. His movements were steady and almost soundless. He poured the contents of the bucket in his own container and then cleaned the bucket with a cutlass and a broom. He put the bucket back in its place, closed the little door, lifted the container on his head and walked into the night.

Most houses in the town did not have their own toilet. Their inhabitants depended on public toilets or found other solutions, such as the school latrines or the bush on their way to the farm. About one third of the houses had a private toilet, most of which were so-called bucket latrines. In 1996 the sanitary inspector estimated their number at sixty.

Most 'buckets' are square wooden containers that are emptied about once a week. A bucket latrine can be inside the house but in such a way that the bucket can be removed from the outside, through a little door at the back of the house. A bucket latrine can also be built as a separate wooden shed a few metres from the house. Users of the bucket latrine are not allowed to urinate in it, or to throw paper in it, as people are supposed to urinate in the bathroom where the urine is later washed away by the bathing water. The toilet paper is deposited in a basket and someone will burn the paper when the basket is filled up.⁴

Because the bucket is emptied only once a week - or rather, once in six days -, the number of users needs to be limited. Children, for example, can be told to use the public latrine. In several houses where I stayed, access to the key of the bucket latrine was restricted to a few privileged people (including me, though I hardly used that privilege).

It was some years after my nocturnal observation that I met the night-soil collector in daylight. One of my friends, who was also a research assistant, lived close to the

man's house and introduced him to me. I felt uneasy at first, assuming that he would feel uncomfortable about his work and my interest in it, but I was mistaken. Mister Atia, as his name was, took pride in his work and had no inhibitions telling me about it.

He explained that at first, he worked during the day, but people complained about the nuisance, so he started to operate in the night. Usually he began around 11.30 p.m. and continued until 4 or 5 a.m. In that time span he is able to 'do' six or seven buckets. 'Doing' a bucket entails walking approximately one kilometre from the house to a dumping place outside the town. He does not work when the soil is wet and slippery as slipping with such a load on his head would have extremely unpleasant consequences. In fact, one night when we had agreed to accompany him during his round, he cancelled the appointment because the ground was too wet.

Mr. Atia's equipment consisted of a 15 litre bucket, a soiled white shirt, and a sack in which he carries his cutlass, broom, and a hat with a layer of foam rubber (on which the bucket is placed).

We asked him if there were particular risks in the work he was doing. There were. Apart from the heaviness of the load and the danger of falling, he mentioned the roaming of witches in the night. He recounted how he once saw a white image about ninety metres away from him. When the figure spotted him it diverted its course and disappeared in the bush.

To protect himself against both witches and the stench, he used a medicine he called *mɔtɔ*. When I asked him to show it to me, he retrieved from his house a black lump wrapped in paper; it looked like charcoal. I tasted some of it, and the taste too reminded me of charcoal. He told us that he got the *mɔtɔ* from his hometown in Northern Ghana. It did not really protect him against witches, he later explained, but it did prevent him from being afraid.

Later that evening my friend and colleague accompanied him on his nightly tour, while I went to bed. I quote from my friend's notes:

At 11.25 p.m. exactly, I knocked on his window and he came outside in his 'uniform', a stained white shirt, a sack over his shoulder and a cutlass inside the sack. We went to the first house where his bucket was waiting. He hung the sack over a nearby flower hedge. He opened the door and pulled the full bucket towards him. He then pushed his own empty bucket against the full bucket. I began to feel [smell, svdg] the stench of the *ebin* (shit). Mr. Atia dipped his left hand (without gloves) into the shit of the bucket and scooped some of it into the empty bucket. He did this four times, because the other bucket was too full to lift without spilling. Then he took the full bucket, and poured the contents into his own bucket. He wiped his hand on the grass to clean it and took his small hat with the foam layer from his sack and put it on. He lifted the full bucket from the ground, rested it a moment on his lap and then placed it on his head, with ease. He then started walking to the dumping ground.⁵

A few years later, I interviewed Mr. Atia for the second time and he told me again about the dangers of his work, about witches who disturbed him and about an evil person who tried to stop him. I decided to make a film of the night-soil collector both to capture what I suspected to be a dying profession and to bring into the daylight what was condemned to stay in the dark.

But my attempts to film him during his work at night failed. He did not turn up at the agreed time. I do not know the reason. After he missed the second appointment, we contacted his younger colleague and asked him if we could film him during his work. He agreed but did not turn up either. We then went to his house to call him. He was asleep and grudgingly came out to start the work. He dressed in his working clothes and collected the same tools: a bucket, a torch, a broom and a cutlass. There was now an intense stench of faeces about him, which I had never noticed during the day. He was conscious of this and felt uneasy about our presence. When I walked next to him he asked me to keep some distance because of the bad smell. I said I did not mind and he slowly became more at ease with us.

We accompanied and filmed him on two trips from houses where he collected the night soil from the latrine bucket to the edge of the town where he poured the contents of his bucket into the bush behind the public latrine. His operations, carried out in dead silence and very cautiously in order not to disturb anyone, resembled the work of a burglar. Neither want to be seen or heard.

For the night-soil collectors, the night was first of all a kind of exile. People in Kwahu-Tafo would not tolerate them doing this work in broad daylight. Human faeces need to remain invisible and insmellable, in fact, imperceptible to any human sense. Only the night, when people (are supposed to) sleep, meets that condition. But the night also provides them with protection against humiliation and prying eyes. As the Ghanaian anthropologist Kodjo Senah commented in a personal comment, 'the night gives them double-blind protective cover.'

Sleeping

Sleeping in Kwahu-Tafo is an activity in which I have 'participated' for many years. However, most of my sleeping was non-participatory, for it prevented me from observing how others slept.

There were also many occasions, however, on which I did witness other people's sleep. One such occasion, which I also described in an article on sleeping (Van der Geest 2006), presented itself in the night that I filmed the night-soil collector during his nocturnal labour. Before we went to see the collector, I visited with two Ghanaian friends in the room of one of them. A curtain divided the room into two. Behind the curtain was a double bed. I saw two pairs of feet, motionless, sticking out from behind the curtain. Two boys, brothers, about 14 and 16 years old, were lying flat on their stomach, fully dressed in their regular street clothes. They were not covered by any sheet or cloth. Their feet were quite dirty. Yet they seemed fast asleep and were not disturbed by our loud conversation. The environment of their sleep was hardly different from that of their activities during the day; their clothes, the noise, the room, and the light were all similar. There had been practically no transition from being awake to being asleep. Yet, the boys were sound asleep. The question posed itself: how did they manage to sleep?

Unlike the previous three 'cases' (*bayie*, sex and waste removal), sleeping does not have clear moral implications or associations. It is regarded as the normal thing to do

during the night. It is a neutral ‘activity’, one could say, but indispensable for a fruitful next day. It is one of the behind-the-scenes phenomena that makes possible that which takes place on the stage during daytime.

Sleeping is not a cultural no-man’s land, however. It is first of all an art, a body technique, to use Mauss’ felicitous term, which has to be learnt. An ‘unsleepable’ position or situation for one person may be perfectly ‘sleepable’ for another. One of the most striking things I found about sleeping in Kwahu-Tafo was the thin line between sleeping and being awake. Most people do not pass through elaborate rituals nor do they completely change their environment in order to acquire a sound sleep. Often, there is hardly a clear transition to sleeping: the sleeper remains fully dressed, music and noisy conversation continue and the light remains on. Children may just fall asleep in the midst of their activities and be brought to the bed. In that case they do not even move to another location to find sleep.

My participant observation in sleeping taught me how differently my body had been trained in the art of sleeping. One of my most remarkable experiences while sleeping was indeed the noise of radios and of people engaging in a loud conversation right under my window in the middle of the night. No one seemed disturbed by it. Noisy religious activities were particularly popular during the night. Around 4 a.m. on Sunday mornings I often heard a man loudly urging people to come to church. No one complained about his disturbance.

It is true, the night is the favourite time to sleep, but it does not have a monopoly on sleeping. People may sleep at any time during the day, in any kind of position. In that sense too, day and night seem to flow into each other. Sometimes, the nights in Kwahu-Tafo are as sleepless and busy as the nights in Amsterdam. The next section gives an impression of the busy-ness of Kwahu-Tafo nights.

School essays

In order to get a broader and less idiosyncratic picture of nocturnal culture, I asked students in two classes of the local senior secondary school to write a composition about activities in the night. I present the outcome of that exercise here to position my own experiences within those of a larger group of young inhabitants.

When I invited the students to write about their views of the night, I added that they should explain why those particular activities took place at night and not in the day. I admit, I was sceptical about this part of my research, as students in school rarely feel free to write down what they privately think or have experienced. The setting of the school makes frankness risky. Nevertheless, their observations and the type of activities they described were revealing. Below a list of nightly activities that were mentioned at least three times.

Visiting bar or disco / dancing	25
Watching TV or cinema	14
Food selling	8
Children roaming in the street	6

Stealing	6
Dating	5
Evening studies	5
Rituals in local shrine	5
Reading in library	4
Story-telling	3
Work of police/watchmen	3
Sleeping	3
Wake-keeping during funeral	3
Gambling	3
Socializing with friends	3

The thrill of visiting a bar and dancing is by far the most common association of the students with the night. Seven of these 25 essays referred to a recent dance competition organized by the chief, which was not related to a bar. The drinking bar, like the cinema, stands for relaxation and entertainment. One student wrote:

During the night people attend disco, cinema and other video centres to entertain themselves. All work and no play make Jack a dull boy, so during the night, visits to these places remove the stress and also refresh their minds for the next day's activities [with slight grammatical corrections].

But the bar or disco is also the favourite place for romantic encounters and dating (or 'chasing girls' as some students termed it). However, only five out of 44 students explicitly mentioned dating and lovemaking. I suspect that writing their essay, while a teacher was watching them (in spite of my request to leave), was not conducive to dwelling on romantic subjects. Moreover, it meant bringing to the daylight what is supposed to stay in the night. One girl wrote:

At night some guys use the chance to chase girls and others play all those things that are not done in the afternoon when there are many people in town and there is no darkness so that people can see everywhere you go. There is a saying that the night is lovely [grammar slightly corrected].⁶

Only one – male – student was brave enough to write about his own sexual activity during the night (or was he boasting?):

First thing we did was to go for a disco. We saw so many beautiful girls in the disco. They went and made a proposal on my behalf to one of the girls. In fact, everything succeeded and they asked me to take the girl to one *ghetto* [dark place]. I did enjoy with the girl, like having sex with her. We then came back. On our way back we saw so many young boys who are not in the range of eighteen but get being in darkness with the girls in [of] their own age [not corrected].

Watching TV and cinema came second in the list above. 'Cinema' usually is a video film played on a TV screen in a closed-off house compound, for which spectators, mostly children and youngsters between twelve and eighteen, pay a small entrance fee. Most students commented that TV and films are watched in the night because people have no time during the day:

People in town have to spend their time during the day at workplaces, for instance students have to go to school [...] farmers have to go to their various farms [...] teachers also have to go to school to teach [...] Because of these work opportunities they come home late in the night,⁷ and they have to relax their body in order to reserve extra energy for another day's work. So they take that opportunity to watch television, while some also watch films [with minor corrections].

These activities during the night naturally attract food sellers, as eight students remarked. Some students mentioned an additional reason for the nightly food selling: two types of food *must* be eaten during the night.

White kenkey⁸ and porridge [local name *koko*] are sold during the night because the traditional belief in Kwahu-Tafo purports that these two are supposed to be eaten in the night.... So sellers take the advantage to prepare these foods in the night [with minor corrections].⁹

The above quotes illustrate what many students believe: that certain activities take place during the night because there is no time for them during the day. At the same time, however, they depict the night as exciting and 'sweet'; it is tinged with the extra attraction that goes with 'forbidden fruits'. One of them sums up both the sweetness and danger very well. It may not be an accurate account of his own nocturnal experiences, but it probably does reflect the popular imagery of night life in a rural town like Kwahu-Tafo:

Anadwo ye de [the night is sweet], as people say, is true and for that matter during the night people take their wives, friends and relatives to entertainment centres and have fun to relieve them of boredom and also discuss challenges confronting them and also find solutions to them. To cut it short, Kwahu-Tafo township becomes very attractive, educative, entertaining and exciting during the night. Everything has its positive and negative aspects and I must say that during the night, deviant behaviour like stealing, smoking of herbs (*wee*), fornications, drinking and all sorts of unnecessary things do happen. This is because the streetlights are not functioning well and this leads to the place becoming darker and darker. This has led to some people sleeping as early as 7 pm to avoid being attacked by armed robbers and also wild animals [not corrected].

Nocturnal fieldwork

Studying things of the night does not always imply that the research took place in the night. Contrary to their claims of participant observation, most of what anthropologists write about the night they know from hearsay or circumstantial evidence. Most

of my own research is a case in point. Sociologists (like some anthropologists) usually work from 9 to 5, Nijhof (2001) writes. They spend the evening at home and the night in their bed. He (Nijhof) was no exception, till he fell seriously ill and had to stay for a long time in the hospital, days and nights. It opened his eyes to the terror of the long and sleepless night and convinced him that good research should include both day and night.¹⁰

Nijhof's illness drove him into the night of the hospital, not as a researcher but as a patient who could not help but remain in his researcher role. For researchers who are not 'insiders,' the night may remain a hard-to-access domain. In most cases the night is a period of ultimate privacy, when outsiders are kept outside. But even in places where the night has a more public character, such as institutions like hospitals or in bars or on the streets, an outsider's presence and direct observation may be difficult, because it is considered objectionable, unethical or dangerous. Vogler (2006), who did research in a refugee camp in Thailand, wrote that the aid workers discouraged her from visiting the camp at night. The night separated 'refugees from diurnal actors such as humanitarian aid workers and clerical staff' (Vogler 2006: 3).

In my case, most of my nocturnal data was also derived from hearsay and indirect evidence, i.e. writing about fire by seeing the ashes. Sometimes it did not even occur to me that I should leave my bed and go out in the night. Other times, I thought that my presence would be too obtrusive and I remained in bed. I can only agree with Steger and Brunt (2002) who remarked that the practice of social science research still has a strong die-centric bias. Anthropologists suffer night blindness.

Interesting exceptions confirm that conclusion. For Imtiaz Saikh, who carried out research into sexual practices in the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka, the night was a welcome cover. Apart from the fact that his topic was mainly observable during the night, he himself did not want to be seen by students or acquaintances visiting brothels and pornographic film shows (personal communication).

Another, rather impressive, example of a nocturnal fieldworker is Eric de Rosny (1974, 1981, 1986) who studied 'les maitres de nuit', healers in Douala, Cameroon, who treat patients suffering from the work of witches. Illnesses of the night can only be treated effectively in the night. De Rosny decided he had no other choice but to stay awake and join the healers during their nocturnal work.

Concluding

If it is darkness that makes the night, truly night, we must conclude that the eye is the sense that determines what should take place at night. To be seen or not to be seen, that is the question for the night. Moral and emotional experiences pass through seeing and being seen. What is not seen, falls outside the realm of moral judgment. But is there anything that is not seen by anybody? Most of daily life in Kwahu Tafo occurs in the open. Neighbours see and hear what happens next door. 'Everything that is done has its witness [is seen by somebody]' (*adedi mu wo adanse*), a proverb explains. The night offers an escape from that permanent visibility. Even if it does not produce complete invisibility, it provides space for the pretension of invisibility.

During the night the rule is that we do not see what we see.

When I first came to Kwahu-Tafo in 1969, the night was much darker than it is today. There was no electricity. One bar and the Catholic mission had a generator. Every night young people and a few older ones assembled in front of the bar with generator that played loud Highlife music for the enjoyment of the crowd. Some danced, everybody conversed and women and children sold snacks, tea and other items. The bar itself remained empty except for the weekend and, especially, during funerals. At ten the music stopped, the lights went off and the crowd dispersed into the dark.

That thick cover of darkness is no more there; electricity has arrived. The diminution of darkness has not diminished nightlife, however. On the contrary, the music lasts longer and more people linger at more places that are enveloped in music.¹¹

As I remarked before, the darkness of the night should not be taken in a literal sense. Its cover has first of all a symbolic and moral character. The division between day and night is a 'division of labour'; different things may or should be done in daytime and at night. Doing the things of the night in broad daylight is not only risky, it is also disrespectful.

The work of the night-soil collector is the clearest example. Carrying human faeces through the town in daytime would be outrageous, an extreme case of 'matter out of place'. The collector needs to be eclipsed into the night, together with his cargo. Those who meet him in the night have no reason to complain; the night is the collector's territory. The next day, when he goes around collecting his money from the houses he visited in the night, he is another person, a man of the day. Nothing reminds the daytime people of his nightly connections. His clothes and equipment and the smell have all been left behind, hidden in the night.

The love-makers appear into the day as if nothing has happened, dissimulating the pleasures of the night. Secret lovers sneak home before the day breaks and rise an hour later for the second time. They take their bath and wash away the sweat and excitement of the night before they start the new day.

And the witches, like the secret lovers, resume their regular position in bed before the others wake up and would notice their absence.

Nightlife stands apart from, even opposes day-life, but the two are also intricately linked to one another (cf. Schnepel 2006, Schnepel & Ben Ari 2005). Corbin (2000: 13) remarked that the history of daytime Paris would be unintelligible if we did not know Paris by night. Vogler (2006: 19) is clear and specific in her conclusions about nocturnal research in the refugee camp where she worked:

I am convinced that more explorations of refugees' nocturnal livelihood and coping strategies might reveal important information in at least three regards. First, research on refugees' social lives after dark would enhance our understanding of the social and cultural life of their communities, thus correcting simplistic imagery of refugees using the night merely for sleep and sexual intercourse. Second, an exploration of the nighttime in camps and settlements would decidedly improve assessments of security problems and help identify and improve existing coping strategies employed by refugees. Finally, this research suggests that a focus on nocturnal stress factors would deepen our comprehension of refugees' livelihood provision.

The night is what the coulisses are for the theatre. They are indispensable for the actors to perform the play. What takes place off stage – to borrow Goffman's term – makes the on-stage performance possible, either as preparation or as a reversal, a temporary release from the day's tyrannical moral hygiene.

Returning to my question about why there was so much night in my fieldwork over the past forty years, I can only conclude that my interest in what takes place behind the scenes (cf. Bleek 1978) could not but lead me into the night; the night as the coulisses of the day.

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Notes

- * I want to thank Anthony Obeng Boamah, Patrick Atuobi, Kodjo Senah, Daniel Arhinful, the editors of *Etnofoor* and Sera Young for their help and inspiring comments.
- 1 Scnepel (2006: 125-126) provides a long list of negative/positive associations with night/day, but also emphasises the existence of positive meanings of the night.
- 2 Wolf Bleek is a pseudonym I used for my first publications on witchcraft and sexual relationships to protect the identity of my informants (see Van der Geest 2003).
- 3 It was mainly functionalist descriptions of African kinship that painted the harmonious picture. Even though conflicts and witchcraft accusations received much attention in these studies, they were treated as harmony in disguise. Eventually, the authors argued, these conflicts and accusations contributed to the functioning of the family system. I was, however, rather struck by the destruction that witchcraft caused in the lives of lineage members.
- 4 The night-soil collector and the bucket latrine are the main subjects of a separate article (Van der Geest 2002) where more details can be found.
- 5 Derived from Van der Geest (2002).
- 6 I do not think the student intended 'love-ly' in its double meaning.
- 7 The student first wrote 'late in the evening' but realizing that the composition was about the night she changed 'evening' into 'night.'
- 8 Kenkey is food prepared from fermented ground white corn or maize and wrapped in corn-husks or plantain leaves and cooked.
- 9 I have looked for more information about this 'taboo' without much success. Daniel Arhinful wrote to me: 'One reason why these meals are sold in the evening may be that people consider them as light meals if there is a need for meals at night. Secondly, they are easy to package and taken away if need be and very convenient to eat when one feels hungry'.
- 10 To illustrate the importance of night time research: One quarter more babies that are born in Dutch hospitals die during the night (when most doctors and nurses are asleep) than during the day (Visser & Steegers 2008).
- 11 The increased activity at night made possible by electric light is analogous to developments that took place after the 'invention' of fire, as described by Goudsblom (1992: 55-58, 241-243). Fire, he wrote, created 'enclaves of warmth and light' and extended people's time.

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