

Sleeping in Kwahu, Ghana

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This is a brief impression of sleeping as a cultural act, based on sleeping experiences in a rural town in Ghana and on conversations with approximately ten people about their sleeping habits. Some pictures were taken to illustrate this essay.

[sleep, culture, bed, Kwahu, Ghana]

It is by now a cliché to say that the bed is one of the most important places of life. We spend one third of our lives in bed and our most decisive moments happen exactly there. Moviemakers and novelists are aware of this: An estimated third of their productions show people in beds (although not usually asleep!). Anthropologists trail behind film producers and novelists. In this research note I play back some parts of the film of my anthropological life and of that of some of my friends with and in beds in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town in the Kwahu area of Southern Ghana.

One night I met with two Ghanaian friends in the room of one of them. The room was a storehouse of papers, books, magazines, files, discs, eating and other utensils, toilet articles, trunks, boxes, old printers, a copying machine, a desktop computer and a lot of dust. 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. In the jargon of modern sleep psychology, their sleep hygiene seemed very low. 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 for this paper had posed itself: How did they manage to sleep? Or more generally: How, when, where, and with whom do people in Kwahu sleep?

Ethnographic darkness

Sleeping is one of those activities that have been largely neglected by anthropologists. The privacy of the bed and the bedroom is one obvious explanation for the absence of beds in ethnographic accounts. Activities in bed do not easily lend themselves to participant observation and if anthropologists *were* able to observe other people's sleep, it was likely to involve themselves to such an extent that they preferred to keep it outside their published work. Private diaries are more likely to contain information about beds, sleeping and not-sleeping.

A second reason for neglecting the sleep is probably that it is considered irrelevant for anthropology. Sleeping is often believed to be a non-cultural phenomenon. During the sleep one is 'away from the world', unconscious, except for dreams which may be forgotten within a few hours. The darkness of the night coincides with the darkness of sleep ethnography.

I have spent many nights in Kwahu. In 1971, my friend and co-researcher Asante-Darko and I rented a room in the house of a family in Kwahu-Tafo to carry out our research about conflicts within Kwahu families. We bought a grass mattress (*kyakya*) and slept together on it for about three months. One and a half years later I returned to the same room and the same bed for research on sexual relationships and birth control. Obviously, my interest in bed behaviour had increased, given this new topic.

One goal of the research was to find out who slept where and with whom. A young boy in the house who became my helper in some domestic activities such as bringing water and buying food also proved an excellent research assistant. In the evening he went around to several houses belonging to the (extended) family and recorded people's sleeping locations. The next day we had breakfast together in my room during which he reported his findings from the past night.¹ My own bed experiences, in addition, helped me to make sense out of his reports and to fill some unspoken parts in his information.

There is one – innocent – bed experience that I remember vividly even 35 years later. It happened during my first research period. Asante-Darko and I travelled to Aburaso, a village about 40 km away where many people from Kwahu-Tafo spent a few months of the year to farm. We were well received, and put up in the house/hut of one person who offered us his bed. We soon discovered that the bed was infested with bugs that attacked every part of our bodies and kept us awake until we managed to spray the bed with insecticide. We wondered how anybody could sleep in the company of so many bugs. Apparently, our host could. Sleeping, I realized again, was a technique, an art, a learned behaviour, in short: culture.

Sharing the bed with a friend of the same sex, as I did with Asante-Darko, was a normal thing in Kwahu-Tafo in 1971 and still is today. However, there are now exceptions. In 1990 I travelled with a Dutch (male) friend through Ghana and wanted to spend the night in a hotel in a certain town. The receptionist made it clear to us that it was not allowed for two (white?) men to sleep in one room. AIDS and homosexuality had become issues of public debate. Subsequently, our sleeping together was considered immoral. We suspected additional commercial intentions: forcing us to pay for two rooms. We

ignored the receptionist's warning and took one room. The next morning, the hotel manager and a policeman came to check on us. Fortunately, I had already left the room.

Getting into the beds

This exploratory essay on sleeping derives its insights mainly from conversations with a few friends who had no problems with telling me about their beds and sleeping habits. I will quote extensively from one discussion I had with two friends, A. and B. Conversations with others and my own experiences will be added. I also tried to make some pictures of people in bed. Obviously, that could only be done with some close friends whose private territory was open to me. I must add that all my pictures were 'staged': some friends willingly went to lie on their bed to enable me to photograph them. My friend Isaac Oppong also took a few pictures. He visited his own sleeping friends and relatives, some of whom did *not* notice his intrusion into their bedroom.

Reactions to my photography were significant and added to my understanding of sleeping. When I went to visit an old lady who was also a close friend, she received me in her room that had a beautiful traditional iron bed. After our conversation I asked her if I could take a picture of her while lying on the bed. She willingly agreed and inquired: "You want me to lie as a dead person?" She took for granted that I wanted her dead on the bed because it is only dead people who are photographed in beds, while lying in state during funerals. The idea that I wanted her to 'sleep' for my picture did not occur to her. But when I explained the purpose of my photograph she did not object and 'slept' (photograph 1).



Photograph 1

Types of bed

In the olden days, people constructed beds by staking four fork-shaped sticks in the ground and connecting them with other sticks and covering them with branches, the bark of a tree or an old door. Palm leaves were used as a mattress. This was then covered with a blanket or bed sheets and pillows. This type of bed may still be found in farming villages. Another old type of bed consisted of a raised platform made of mud, covered by palm fronds or any kind of mattress, then dressed with blankets and pillows. This type of bed is called *ese*. Children slept on the (uncemented) floor, on a mat called *sibiri kete*, made of a certain type of cane. Children still often sleep on a mat on the floor, but the *sibiri kete* has been replaced by a new type of mat that is called *kete pa* (literally 'good mat'). When they grow older they may sleep together with two or three on a wooden bed (photographs 2 and 7).

Nowadays, most people in Kwahu-Tafo sleep in a wooden double-sized bed with a foam mattress, blanket, bed sheet, sleeping cloth and pillow. The blanket is usually put under the bed sheet. Before the wooden bed became popular, the iron bed (*dadeɛ mpa*) was the most prestigious type of bed (photograph 1). It had a high frame both at the head and the foot and had rails on top that could be used for a curtain or to hang clothes on. The iron bed – sometimes gilded – is still the type that is used during funerals to lay the body in state. Poor people who never during their life slept in such a bed are laid on an iron bed after they have died to make them appear important and well-to-do, as one of my friends pointed out.



Photograph 2

Sleeping places

The extended character of the family (*abusua*) is reflected in the places where people sleep. Half a century ago, a husband and wife often stayed in different places, each with his/her own – matrilineal – relatives. The woman would visit her husband, sleep with him in his family house and leave again early in the morning (Van der Geest 1972).

Small children usually sleep with their mother in the same bed (photograph 3). Until the age of about ten, they sleep in their mother's room on a mat and after that age they would go and sleep with elder brothers and/or sisters in another room (see also Kaye 1962: 108-13). That new sleeping place could be in their mother's or parents' house but also in that of another relative who had a room to spare. Allocating rooms is a complex process.

My friend A. remembers that he slept in different houses after he finished school around the age of fifteen. There were only three rooms in his mother's house, and these were already used by his mother and older brothers. At one moment his mother asked her 'brother' (distant cousin) to allow her sons to occupy one of the rooms in his house. The sons were staying outside Kwahu-Tafo but used the room whenever they returned to the town for vacation. Later on a paternal 'sister' of his mother gave him and his brothers a room in her house and told them they could use it until they built their own house. "It was a kind of gesture that I will never forget and for which my mother kept thanking her throughout her life."

B. stayed with his parents in Kumasi during his childhood. His parents had a 'chamber and hall', a sitting room that gives access to a bedroom. His parents slept in the 'chamber' (bedroom), the children in the 'hall'. Later on his father requested a room for him in his stepfather's house. He was then sent from Kumasi to Kwahu-Tafo to start his elementary education and went to stay with a teacher (not a relative) of the primary school.

Co-sleeping

A. told me:

As children we were sleeping with our mother in the same room. I was the youngest and had the privilege to sleep with her in the same bed till I reached the age of about ten. My brothers and sister envied me. Only when my father (who was staying elsewhere) came to sleep did I have to leave the bed and join my brothers and sister on the floor. Most of the time I was already asleep when my mother came to bed. After eating there was nothing to do anymore and my mother would say: "If you feel sleepy, go and sleep." Then I went and slept.

Talking about the present time (he now has his own family):

We have only two rooms in the house so when my three daughters are in (they have all grown up), my wife will share the bed with two of them and I will sleep with the other



Photograph 3

daughter. There is no problem with that (a father sleeping with his grown-up daughter). A lot of people do it. You can also share the bed with your sister. Anyway, it is not done permanently but occasionally when there are many visitors or when you are traveling. A parent will never tell his/her son that he should not sleep with his sister because she is now sixteen. It is usually the children themselves who will initiate changes as soon as they start new relationships. The normal thing is that brothers share the bed with brothers and sisters with sisters.

In B.'s family, however, the parents did not allow their daughter to sleep together with her brothers in one room: "Our sister always slept in our parents' room."

One of the most striking differences between my own culture and Kwahu was indeed that sleeping in Kwahu was almost always co-sleeping. Few people slept alone. The importance that Dutch parents attach to giving each child his/her own room, from a very young age (in order to make the child independent) surprised my Kwahu friends. Clearly, the basic values of a culture – put slightly stereotypically – becoming an independent person or becoming a member of the group, are born in bed.

Stealthy sex

If parents and children share the same room, sex becomes more delicate. Parents do not want to be observed by their children while engaged in sex,² so they develop various

techniques to prevent this. When the room is not a 'chamber and hall', they may create some kind of division by hanging a curtain in front of their bed.

Where such privacy is lacking, they have to wait until all children are fast asleep, as indicated by their breathing. Children are usually tired, such that they fall fast asleep quickly. If there is a light, they will dim it. A woman with a child who receives her lover may send the child on an errand and have sex while the child is away. In contrast to what I had expected, none of the people I interviewed on this topic could remember ever seeing his or her parents having sex, although stories and jokes about it abound. Someone told me about a friend who was caught in the act by his child who shouted: "Papa, stop fighting with Mama!" Another story/joke is about a child who always pretended to sleep but closely followed his parents' activities in the bed. A Highlife song, Abeeku, tells the story of a man who visited his girlfriend and tried everything to make her child fall asleep. When they finally had succeeded and started making love, the child woke up and began to scratch his mother's back asking for porridge because he was hungry.

There is another reason besides the presence of children to practice sex stealthily: secret love affairs. 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 tiptoes to the main gate and let her in. The gate provides secure protection against (non-existing?) thieves but not against (omnipresent) 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 room. In that case the girl has to hurry because her mother is usually also returning home before morning.

Positions

There do not seem to be particular positions that are generally preferred for sleeping. Kwahu, according to my friends, sleep in every position. Thus the proverb "No one knows which part of the hip he will be lying on when he wakes up" (*Obi nnim dwonku-ko a adee bekye so*; literally: No one knows which hip bone will see the light of day).³ Outside the bed, during daytime, one can see people sitting and lying asleep in any position (photographs 4 and 5).

Ideas about the right position of the bed and of husband and wife sleeping together are, however, firm. The bed should stand with its right side against the wall and the wife should sleep behind the husband, near the wall. "It is many years ago that I slept behind a man" (*Medaa barima akyi*), an older woman said to me (Atuobi et al. 2005). The pop-



Photograph 4

ular explanation for that position is that the man must defend his wife in case of danger. One older man had yet another explanation: when he turned to hold or touch his wife, he would automatically use his left hand, which, according to him, would be the correct one for making love.



Photograph 5

Sleeping time and bed rituals

Children play outside in the evening or go to study somewhere. When they get tired, they return home and fall asleep. Small children just fall asleep on someone's lap and stay there until that person goes to bed (photograph 6). It may also happen that the mother or another relative will take the child to bed and leave it there with the light on. Bed rituals to entice children to go and sleep do not exist. Children largely decide for themselves when it is time to sleep. Kaye (1962: 110) quotes a saying from Asante that "eating and sleeping are never forced on a child." In Kwahu-Tafo one could see children playing or out on the street until 10 pm. The loud music of bars and cinema shows (a video on a television in an enclosed compound) often attract children to stay up late. Some parents complained about this development but they took little action to get their children into bed any earlier.

For the adults, the usual pattern is that they sleep somewhere between 10 pm and 6 am. Some may rise even earlier, at 5 am or before that time. A. said about his own sleeping pattern:

I usually go to sleep between 10.00 and 11.00 o'clock at night. If I went to bed around 8.00 o'clock, I would wake up around midnight and would find it difficult to fall asleep again. I normally spend some time watching a game of draughts or watching television or do some reading to delay my going to bed.



Photograph 6

During the day I may sleep any time I feel tired. When I am farming, for example, and feel tired, I sit down in the shade and doze off for about 15 minutes. After that I feel refreshed and resume the work. I sleep then in a sitting position.

And B.:

When I was working, I used to take a little rest of about 30 minutes after I had closed from office. After waking up I ate and stayed awake till about 10.30 pm. I am now retired and all day in the house doing nothing. I can now sleep any time I want.

I usually take a bath in the morning. In the evening I just clean my armpits before going to bed. When it is very hot I at times also wash down in the evening before sleeping. It does not make a difference if I sleep with my wife... Most women bathe twice a day. They have been taught to do so from infancy, because of menstruation.

Sleeping dress

The people with whom I discussed sleeping agreed that it is not always necessary to undress or change into another type of dress for the night, as is an almost universal custom in “the West”. A 55-old woman said that until the age of about 15 she slept with her clothes on and covered herself with a sleeping cloth. She would wear the same clothes the next day, unless she had to go to school and wear her school uniform. She never slept in her school uniform. From the age of 16 approximately she undressed, except

for her 'draws' (underwear), put on a nightgown and covered herself with a cloth. She was still sleeping this way today but removed the nightgown altogether when it was very hot.

When I asked two other women (66 and 78 years old) to demonstrate how they slept they both kept their headgear (*aduku*) on (photograph 1). This practice led to long discussions as to why a woman would keep her head covered while sleeping. The practice was so common that they found it difficult to give explicit reasons. One was the 'cold', which could hardly convince me. Another was to preserve their coiffure, but that too was not convincing. The majority of women, who wear their headgear during the night, wear it always and have no particular hair dress to protect. Only those who do not wear headgear during the day and have their hair plaid have a reason to protect their coiffure during the night by tying a gear around it. For most women who keep their head covered during the night, the headgear has become part of their bodily self. They even take their bath with their headgear on (except when they wash their hair). As one of them said, she would feel 'naked' without headgear.

When a woman sleeps with her husband she uses his cloth to cover both of them. A man's cloth is large (about 2.50 by 2.30 meter). When she sleeps alone she uses her own cloth (about 1.65 by 1 meter).

Men in Kwahu-Tafo rarely use pyjamas. One man said he got a pair but felt uncomfortable in them. He thought 'educated' men might use pyjamas nowadays. He himself had no particular dress for sleeping:

Normally we have a sleeping cloth to cover ourselves. That is it. I put on anything I like, for example my pants and shirt. Recently, however, I feel hot, so I sleep completely naked, although they taught me that this is not good. If something happens during the night, for example a fire or a snake, you may be forced to run out of the house naked (laughter).

As I wrote before, children sleep in the clothes they have been wearing during the day (photograph 7). When they wake up they undress, bathe and put on other clothes or their school uniform.

Sleeping as culture

"Sleeping is a gift of God and man cannot do without it," a boy of sixteen told me. "It is something by nature," he added. To me, however, sleeping 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, just as a place deemed unhygienic by one person may be clean enough for another.

One of the most striking things I found about sleeping in Kwahu-Tafo was the thin line between sleeping and being awake. People do not pass through elaborate rituals nor do they change their environment in order to acquire a sound sleep. The transition to sleeping is in many respects a continuation of the day: little to no change in dress, noise from music or conversation does not stop and the light is often left on. In the olden days people would lower, but never extinguish, the light of the kerosene lantern.⁴



Photograph 7

Children, as we have seen, 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 in Kwahu-Tafo was 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 AM on Sunday mornings I often heard a man loudly urging people to come to church.

No one complained. One night I was awoken by a strange noise; it sounded like howling dogs. Curious, I decided to find out what it was. I put on my trousers and walked into the direction of the sound. I found that the noise was coming from the Presbyterian church where a handful of young people were holding a prayer meeting. When I arrived, they were busy casting out a demon from a girl lying on the floor. Their loud shouts were meant to chase the devil away. Again, I seemed the only person in the town who could not sleep.

Conversely, my Ghanaian friends were surprised by some of my sleeping habits. One of the things they found particularly strange was that I slept with open windows. "Dangerous because of thieves", according to them. I was indeed the only person who left his windows open in the night. My 'sleeping hygiene' (fresh air!) would keep them awake (fear, uncomfortable).

Sleeping is not a cultural no-man's period, an irrelevant non-act for anthropologists who are interested in acting, thinking and feeling people. Sleeping is a cultural achievement and the bed is the birthplace of culture itself.

Culture never 'sleeps'.

Notes

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- 1 Several colleagues have questioned the ethical correctness of my method but it was the only way I could get a glimpse of the 'bed scene'.
- 2 Nor do children want to see their parents engaged in sex, according to several authors. Freud (1908) believed that witnessing one's parents making love could be traumatic for a child. Hoyt (quoted in Traupmann 1984) tested – and confirmed – Freud's claim among North American adolescents.
- 3 People enjoy using proverbs in their literal meanings. The real meaning of this proverb is that no one knows his future or destiny.
- 4 This is not possible with electric light unless one has a special gadget to dim the light or shift to a coloured, less bright, bulb.

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