Beds and culture: Introduction

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Le lit c'est l'homme. Guy de Maupassant

This introduction to a collection of essays on beds delineates the field of an anthropology of the bed and focuses on three themes: the bed as a locus of both security and insecurity, the bed's relation to health, and its multifunctional character. The essays in the collection discuss both 'ordinary' beds and beds in public places, such as hospitals. The introduction concludes with a plea for an anthropology of sleeping.

[bed, culture, sleeping, security, insecurity, health, hospital, multifunctional]

In most parts of the world people start the day by getting out of bed and end it by returning to that same bed. It is not surprising, therefore, that in one of the first handbooks of cultural anthropology, the bed is used as a didactic example of diffusionism:

Our solid American citizen awakens in a bed built on a pattern which originated in the Near East but which was modified in Northern Europe before it was transmitted to America. He throws back covers made from cotton, domesticated in India, or linen, domesticated in the Near East, or silk, the use of which was discovered in China (Linton 1936: 326).

The diversity of cultural origins of the history of beds and bedding is indeed striking, but this collection of essays on the bed as a cultural phenomenon goes far beyond a discussion of diffusionism. The authors here are most of all fascinated by the cultural variety of meanings and usage of beds.

There is no need to defend the prominence of the bed in the life of people. It is a cliché to say that we spend one third of our lives in bed, such that "one third of history is covered by darkness" (Wright 1962: vii). Beds are intrinsic to being human; Jesus's use of beds is the exception that proves the rule. Jesus never goes to bed (Wright 1962: 8); the only sleeping Jesus does is while lying in a fishing boat, not in a bed. This is an observation also made by the French writer Guy de Maupassant:

Le lit, c'est l'homme. Notre Seigneur Jésus, pour prouver qu'il avait rien d'humain, ne semble pas avoir jamais eu besoin d'un lit. Il est né sur la paille et mort sur la croix, laissant aux créatures comme nous leur couche de mollesse et de repos (De Maupassant 1882).

De Maupassant made a splendid observation: the bed stands for being human. It is not only the amount of time spent in bed that justifies increased attention for it; the bed accommodates the most crucial moments of our life. It is not only the beginning and end of the day, it also is the place where most people begin and end their life (with some famous exceptions). The bed is the preferred location for sex, it provides a respite for the sick, weak and tired, and it hosts numerous other activities. "The history of the bed", Wright (1962: viii) writes, "is interwoven with the histories of social, sexual and sanitary attitudes, of architecture and building, on interior decoration and furniture." Yet, the bed has received almost no attention from social scientists. Why?

First of all, the bed is associated with sleeping, which is generally regarded as a time away from conscious living and social activity. During sleep, it seems, nothing 'happens', the sleeper is 'away from the world', and thus there is nothing to write about. While asleep, the person is irrelevant to the social scientist; once he or she wakes up, the researcher's interest also awakens. The social scientist suffers from night-blindness, or diecentrism, as Steger and Brunt (2003: 6) remark. Lévi-Strauss (1974: 375) showed some awareness of the anthropological significance of sleeping when he complained about the strains of fieldwork in his *Tristes Tropiques*: "You have to be up at daybreak, and then remain awake until the last native has gone to sleep, and even sometimes watch over him as he sleeps...".

Sleeping *is* indeed significant from an anthropological and sociological perspective because it is a cultural phenomenon. Williams (2002: 178) lists the following cultural characteristics of sleeping:

... the body techniques associated with the 'doing' of sleep; the temporal dimensions of sleep; the 'civilising' of sleep across the public/private divide; the social 'patterning' of sleep and the role of the sleeper, and finally; the rapidly burgeoning 'sleep industry' spanning both commercial and scientific interests alike.

A second likely explanation for the absence of the bed from sociological and anthropological literature is the intimacy of the bed. In most cultures, the bed is found in a room to which visitors have no access, and being in bed is usually an activity that is excluded from participant observation. Goffman's remark (quoted in Hermanowicz 2002) that researchers "do not know the people they study until they have slept with them" has not been widely taken to heart, it seems. Ethnographies hardly discuss beds. The personal diaries of social scientists may reveal more information about beds, but they are seldom published.

Secure and insecure

A popular Ghanaian song some decades ago, *Yedabea mu* ('Our sleeping place'), takes the bed as the ultimate symbol of security and motherly care. It is a mourning song about a mother who has died and left her children in disarray. The singer expresses the sadness and anxiety of the children by pointing out that insecurity has entered even their sleeping place:

God, where shall we sleep, oo?
Where shall we sleep?
How is the next day going to meet us?
...
Mother Antwiwaa, ee,
You left your children with whom?
So that we go to her when we wake up?
Ko Boye is miserable
He has no helper.
His sleeping place.
Fellow citizens, how is the next day going to meet us?
(source and translation: Brempong 1986: 514-18)

The song captures the ambiguity of the bed: Its safety may turn into a nightmare. Everyone considers his bed his 'home', his resting place, a unique place to withdraw and be alone (De Visscher 1999: 59). A bed *should* be a safe place, because sleep makes people vulnerable.

Because sleep occurs during the dark hours when man is least able to cope with his environment and because man asleep is not alert to the dangers of the outer world, sleep is a state of vulnerability (Dement, in Ellis 1991: 213).

The bed is a hiding place for moments of weakness and danger, but also in sickness, during birth and while dying. Seeking privacy is the human response to danger and vulnerability. A bed can provide that privacy, but it does not always do so.

For Norbert Elias (2000 [1939]) and Gleichmann (1980) the sleeping place is a clear example of 'intimisation', the growing concern about privacy that takes place within the 'civilizing process'. In Erasmus' time, Elias writes, it was normal for strangers to sleep together in one bed, for example when they were travelling. Nowadays, this has become unthinkable. Having one's own bed in one's own territory, a place to be one's self, is widely regarded a 'basic human right'. The essence of being homeless is being bed-less (cf. Rensen 2002, Deben & Rensen 2006). The bed epitomizes the home, as De Visscher (1999) rightly pointed out.

There are several articles in this volume that discuss the importance of beds as personal domestic sanctuaries. In his contribution to this issue De Visscher focuses on the sheets and other covers of the bed. It is indeed the 'dressing' of the bed more than the bed itself that provides the sleeper with a sense of *Heimlichkeit* and with personal comfort. Someone else's sheets cause discomfort (unless that person is a close relation).

Such bedding is 'dirty'. It disturbs the intimacy of the bed and prevents one from sleeping. The author regards the provision of clean sheets as a core activity in making the home a home. The sleeping houses of young men in a Malinese fishing community, described and photographed by Mommersteeg are another example of beds as symbols of personal identity. Although privacy may be limited in European eyes, the young men create their own little space with the help of posters, curtains and scarce personal belongings, even if they have to share a small room with others. In Jerbi's article, the 'angarêb' (the traditional Sudanese bed) is the heart of the home and also a token of cultural identity. Cieraad, in her contribution, stresses the privacy of the bedroom in Dutch houses around the turn of the 19th century.

A bed fails to provide that security and intimacy if an enemy can intrude into its privacy or if it is located in a public area (see below). There are countless stories of people who were murdered in their sleep. In the Bible, the heroine Judith kills her enemy Holophernes who lies intoxicated on his bed (Judith 13: 1-11). Two sons of Jacob murder all the men of the town of Sechem while they are sick in bed, three days after they have been circumcised (Genesis 34: 25). Shakespeare also regards the bedroom as an ideal place for killing (e.g. Macbeth and Othello), and witches in African families prefer to operate in the night when their victims are asleep.

The long-time concern about cot death (sudden infant death syndrome) is yet another example of the fear of dangers hiding in the seemingly safe environment of the bed (Engelberts 1991). Ghanaian mothers are conscious of the perils that lurk in the night and will never let their newborn babies sleep alone. They are surprised that European mothers do. Conversely, Europeans are cautious of crushing a small baby to death in their sleep. As early as 1684, a Dutch text warns:

Men moet de kinderen ook in een Wieg leggen en niet bij de ouders in het bed, want dan werden de kinderen meenigmaals doodgelegen, daarom moet men haar zoo lange in een Wieg laten slapen, totse zig zelven als een mensch in het bed kunnen helpen (in Meulenberg & Everdingen 1996: 155).

Several contributions to this special issue discuss the ambiguity of the bed, which can be both a haven of security and a place full of danger. Gibson and Olarte Sierra show how hospital patients try to hide objects in their beds as an act of resistance. They conceal pills, cigarettes, alcohol, and other forbidden objects under sheets and pillows in an attempt to escape clinical surveillance. At the same time, however, the bed is their prison that facilitates continuous inspection and discipline by medical staff. The bed, designed for 'homeliness' becomes an instrument of *Unheimlichkeit* – 'unhomeliness', inhospitality.

That prison-like character of the bed also appears in the articles by Zaman (about a hospital in Bangladesh) and Geertje van der Geest (about a children's ward in the Philippines). It is no coincidence that both write about beds in the public arena of a hospital ward. A bed in a public place is a contradiction and bound to produce confusion and distress.

Why should patients today have to lose themselves in a hospital dormitory when we do not do this or want to in any other aspects of public lives? When we go to a hotel we do

not expect to have to sleep in a room with several other people (Thomson & Golding, in Zaman 2005: 92).

When the sickbed is located in the private sphere, however, the bed regains its quality of security and 'centre of the world', as Nijhof calls it in his autobiographic contribution. After moving from a hospital bed to a bed in his own house, he needed some time until his bed at home again became a safe domain, a place where he could recapture most of his autonomy.

In the article in this issue by Oomen and Heule, the bed assumes even a malicious character as it is accused of bringing about bodily pain and injury. Although it is meant to provide rest and to promote convalescence, it turns against the patient and causes harm. Paradoxically, the bed is blamed but the real culprits are the caregivers. Decubitus is generally recognized as the result of lack of good care. With the new types of beds that are now available decubitus should no longer occur.

Kafka's literary work is full of bizarre and disconcerting bed scenes, as Hacopian discusses in this collection. In *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis) Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning in the body of a huge insect. By choosing the familiar and comfortable bed as the origin (cradle) of *Unheimlichkeit* and alienation, Kafka succeeds in establishing the existential confusion in the lives of his protagonists. The Kafkaesque world is characterized by ultimate insecurity: The bed is a danger zone.

Beds and health

The importance of the bed for health is obvious. Coenen (this issue) summarises the current views in biology and psychology about which qualities of a healthy bed provide the best conditions for physical and psychic recuperation during sleep. In addition, the environment in which the bed is located should also contribute to these conditions: absence of noise and (too much) light, proper ventilation and humidity, pleasant temperature, and protection from disturbing insects.

Providing healthy and comfortable beds and related equipment has become what Williams (2002) called a "rapidly burgeoning sleep industry". Consumers in the industrialised world of Europe and America spend large sums of money on their beds and bedrooms. Van Veggel draws attention to this commercial aspect of the modern bed and discusses his role as an anthropologist in design development and marketing at a bed manufacturer in his contribution to the collection.

Cieraad (this issue) describes policy measures taken by authorities to improve hygiene in poor Dutch households in the early 1900's. Housing corporations engaged female supervisors for weekly checks on sanitary conditions of beds and bedrooms. The fact that inspectors could enter the most private space of the house underlines the power of the sanitary regime at the time. Interestingly, the Spartanic bedroom conditions that the authorities imposed on poor families were largely ignored by the higher classes. The influence of hygienic policy on sleeping conditions in the Netherlands is also the topic of the contribution by Montijn who describes the rise and fall of the

alcove, a small room (or part of a room) without windows, in which a bed was placed. Its social status decreased under the pressure of changing sanitary views.

Sleep hygiene is now a technical term used mainly in psychology (cf. Spielman & Glovinsky 1993). This concept includes all factors that are conducive to a sound sleep. As with the usual meaning of the term 'hygiene', sleep hygiene is associated with an orderly life of high moral standard. Conversely, irregular and bad sleep is likely to be blamed on a reprehensible life style. But the Western concept of sleep hygiene is not universally valid. Sleep hygiene is a cultural construct, as Sjaak van der Geest (this issue) shows. Sleeping in the Ghanaian community where he did his research may 'fall short' of Western 'hygiene' criteria, but people have 'sound' sleeps.

Beds in hospitals and other medical settings have a special relation to health. They are tools to organise and realise health recovery. As Gibson and Olarte Sierra (this issue) remark, hospital beds are not meant to provide privacy but rather to allow for optimal access to the patient by clinical staff. Hospital beds are surrounded by medical care providers and medical equipment, facilitating permanent surveillance and the possibility of intervention.

Nijhof (this issue), however, felt safe and well taken care of in his bed in an intensive care unit, connected to countless medical devices. He described that bed (and himself in it) as well-regulated and under control. The close observation he was undergoing reassured him and he became upset when he had to leave that bed and return to an 'ordinary' hospital bed with less observation and medical technology (see also Nijhof 2001).

For others, however, the permanent surveillance and lack of privacy in the hospital bed have an opposite effect. Gibson and Olarte Sierra (this issue) write that patients in a South African hospital

... were sick of "having everybody come and look at you", of being treated like a "piece of meat" and being "prodded". At times patients cried under the blankets, which acted as a thin veil for them to conceal themselves, their sorrow, or pain.

Zaman, writing about a Bangladeshi hospital, makes similar remarks. Patients kept their eyes shut while doctors assembled around their bed to examine them. Women in particular felt embarrassed when medical staff gathered around them and touched their bodies. They sometimes covered their face with a *shari* (cloth) to secure some 'privacy' at this moment of extreme exposure.

Hospital beds are also places where medical research is conducted and medical knowledge is generated. The beds are not very different from tubes and slides in the laboratory; for the production of medical knowledge it is not relevant *who* is in the bed, but *what*, what disease. The term 'bed' has indeed became a depersonalising metonym for patients in hospitals.

Multifunctional

Apart from sleeping, resting and making love, the bed lends itself to countless other activities, such as reading (Manguel 1996), writing, composing, having breakfast, re-

ceiving visitors, crying, smoking, and watching television. Beds are used for dowry and for laying dead people in.

For the French author Marcel Proust, his bed became his workplace. Mark Twain and Woody Allen also wrote in bed. There are many anecdotes about Rossini enjoying the comfort of his bed while composing music.

One day an impresario went visiting him and found him writing music in his bed. Rossini, without even looking at him, begged him to collect a sheet that had fallen from the bed to the floor. When the impresario picked it up, Rossini gave him the other sheet he was writing and asked him: "Which one do you think is the better?" "But... they are completely alike..." said the embarrassed impresario. "Well... you know... it was easier for me to write another one than to get off the bed and search and pick the first one and then come back to bed...²

In an article about the acquisition of beds by young women in Niger, Masquelier (2004) emphasises the significance of the bed as a symbol. She describes the case of a woman who insists on receiving a Formica bed from her mother as part of her 'dowry'.

... ensuring one's daughter's well-being now means acquiring household furnishings whose comfort and characteristics owe more to Western ideas of bourgeois lifestyle than to an Islamist vision of frugal domesticity. Aside from the fact that beds and armoires remain items of prestige in households where, up until a few decades ago, mats – and women's stools – provided the essential furnishings, their value further resides in their exchangeability: during hard times, a woman may opt to sell some of her furnishings to obtain the cash necessary for vital goods such as food or medicine (Masquelier 2004: 244).

In Southern Ghana, as in several other African societies, the bed becomes a central object during funerals. The body of the deceased is dressed up and laid in state on a decorated iron bed, preferably one that is gilded. Such a state bed is often hired for the purpose. A funeral entrepreneur in Ghana told De Witte (2001: 107):

Normal people I usually lay in state like a bride or a bridegroom, in a big white wedding dress or a suit.... There are so many types of beds and every time people want a new a new type. It's fashion.

Several authors in this issue also mention that beds can be used for numerous purposes. Jerbi (this issue) makes multifunctionality the focus of her article about the traditional Sudanese bed. She suggests that multiple usages of objects is typical of low income societies whereas people in high income societies tend to use each object for a different purpose. That conclusion does not seen to tally with observations of the use of beds in European societies, however. As we mentioned before, beds, mainly because of the privacy they provide, are used for many different purposes, also in Europe.

Geertje van der Geest (this issue) spent almost every minute of her research in a room with six beds in a hospital in The Philippines. The patients and their relatives lived in and on those beds; there was no alternative. The bed became the location for every imaginable activity, eating, playing games, receiving visitors and doing anthro-

pological research. In Zaman's description (this issue) of a hospital in Bangladesh, the bed becomes a shelter for relatives who sleep and hide under it.

A bed can even be an entirely decorative object and as such not serve its function as a sleeping or sitting place whatsoever. Callaway (quoted in Masquelier 2004: 221) observed in Nigeria: "If her family can afford it, [a Hausa woman] will have a four-posted bed piled high with mattresses, covered with a satin spread adorned with many pillows. This bed is the central decorative piece in the room and she neither sleeps nor sits on it."

Beds and culture

As we have seen, beds and all that takes place in them have been largely overlooked by anthropologists. Firstly, because they remain out of the researcher's sight and secondly, because they are widely regarded as irrelevant from a social and cultural point of view. This collection of articles shows that beds and the way they are used are profoundly cultural and social and deserve our attention.

Beds are enmeshed in rules, meanings and rituals, which vary from culture to culture. Beds are places to be alone in one culture or situation but may be favourite locations for companionship elsewhere. Who sleeps with whom is a question that will produce answers, which reveal contrasting cultural traditions and social perspectives. The following memory of an Indian woman about sleeping in her parents' bed beautifully illustrates this kaleidoscope of bed usage:

I was born and brought up in Mumbai Metropolis where cost of living is very high and housing is the most expensive commodity. We lived in a joint family in a Mumbai suburb in a small house, which was owned by my grandfather. Our family had a small room and a separate small kitchen. Our family consisted of my mom, dad, and two children. It was a routine for us the children to sleep at night with mom on a bed and my dad used to sleep on a mattress on the floor in the same room. We perceived it as our 'right' to sleep with our mom and I had serious reasons to believe that we were correct and dad was always forced to sleep separately. It is funny we never slept with our dad. Once my dad asked me when he would get a chance to sleep with mom, I was six years old then and I remember replying him that he didn't need to sleep with mom because he was a grown up man and not scared of the darkness (Priya Satalkar 2006 personal communication).

Even the most natural, and seemingly least cultural, of all activities that occur in a bed, sleeping, has significant cultural features. Mauss (1973) launched the concept of 'body techniques', one of which is sleeping. Sleeping is a technique one acquires as a member of a group. It is a *habitus* to use another term from Mauss, later revitalised by Bourdieu. It is not something that is learnt consciously. The significance of a body technique like sleeping is that it appears to be totally natural. Its power lies in its thoughtlessness. In the case of sleeping that thoughtlessness is double; both the acquisition and the practice of the technique depend on the absence of thinking. As long as we think, we cannot sleep.

This thoughtlessness of sleeping also makes it a fascinating topic for anthropological research. Sleeping provides one of the most direct entries to the study of the body as a cultural construct. Anthropologists, however, hesitate to grasp that opportunity. They do not get any further than the study of dreams (Tedlock 1987), that mysterious link between sleep and thought. Absence of thought is assumed by them to indicate the absence of culture (cf. Williams 2002). We hope that this collection of essays will change these current attitudes and stimulate the study of sleeping.

Various topics in the anthropology of the bed are missing from this collection, e.g. sex, delivery and dying. We want to draw attention here to three limitations in the contributions in this collection. First of all, nearly all anthropological contributions deal with beds in which people are awake. Sleeping, the most common thing to do in a bed is either overlooked, regarded as irrelevant, or considered too private. The second type of missing information is the ordinary bed in the ordinary bedroom. Most beds that are discussed are beds in public or semi-public places, in historical documents, in showrooms and in literary work. Hardly anyone wrote about 'real' people caught in the 'act' of sleeping. And, finally, only two authors included their own bed behaviour.

These three gaps point to a new and challenging direction for anthropological exploration in which privacy turns out to be social and biology becomes culture.

Notes

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This introduction draws partly on a Dutch text (Van der Geest 2005) that served as a background paper for a symposium, where most of the contributions in this special issue were presented and discussed. We thank the bed manufacturer Auping for making this special issue possible.

- 1 The full text from which this quote has been taken, is included in this special issue in English translation.
- 2 Source: http://www.ptloma.edu/music/MUH/musiclinks/Amusing_Stories_files/Amusing_Stories.htm Another 'famous' bed user is Oblomov, the classic protagonist from Gontsjarov's novel of the same name. Oblomov spends most of his days in bed, planning important decisions and dreaming of heroic deeds, but nothing happens. His name has become proverbial for laziness and indecisiveness (Goncharov 1978 [1859]).

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