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## **In the absence of the humanitarian gaze: refugee camps after dark**

**Pia Vogler**

Queen Elizabeth House,  
Oxford University  
United Kingdom

E-mail: [pia.vogler@qeh.ox.ac.uk](mailto:pia.vogler@qeh.ox.ac.uk)

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**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency

**Policy Development and Evaluation Service**

**Policy Development and Evaluation Service  
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
P.O. Box 2500, 1211 Geneva 2  
Switzerland**

**E-mail: [hqpd00@unhcr.org](mailto:hqpd00@unhcr.org)  
Web Site: [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)**

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## Introduction

Night-time is scarcely discussed when it comes to the analysis of life in refugee camps. Around the world, humanitarian aid agencies' access to camp sites is often limited to traditional office hours. Aid officials' presence may be limited by official curfews. Aid workers may retreat from camps for socializing and rest.

At night-time, refugee settlements – almost *terra incognita* - elicit ambiguous sentiments among those who eschew them. Aid workers often see refugees' nocturnal activities as merely physical (e.g. sleep and sexual relationships). They also point to increased dangers at night-time, and may use these to justify personal withdrawal.

Against this backdrop, this paper<sup>1</sup> makes a first attempt to shed light on nocturnal life in and around refugee camps. Most of the data used here stems from anthropological fieldwork with Karenni refugee and forced migrant youth in and around a refugee camp close to Mae Hong Son (Northern Thailand). I conducted this fieldwork during January and February 2006 as a preliminary study for my doctoral dissertation project.

During the course of this research, I had only one opportunity to participate in a nocturnal event within the camp and thus relied largely on the accounts of my interlocutors (some of whom I regularly met during the hours of darkness outside the camp) to form a picture of the time from dusk until dawn in and around refugee camps. While the majority of research participants consisted of refugee and forced migrant youth roughly between the ages of 17 and 25, the information presented in this paper is also based on the testimonies and accounts of adults working and/or living with these young people.

Besides the data originating from this case study, this text draws together findings on forced migrants' nocturnal lives in different geographical settings. Since this research is a work-in-progress, this paper does not purport to offer an authoritative picture of nocturnal camp life, but rather hopes to instigate discussion that might shape further research directions.

The paper begins by stressing the importance of scrutinizing night-time, whether in relation to forced migration or in social research, more generally. This is followed by a presentation of preliminary research findings with regard to the impact of nightfall on the lives of refugees and forced migrants, in particular, social relations; physical security; mental well-being; and livelihood provision after dark.

The paper concludes by suggesting that exploring nocturnal aspects of refugee camps and settlements might not only reveal new insights into refugees' livelihood strategies and coping mechanisms during the night, but also improve our general understanding of social life in refugee camps and settlements.

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## Why focus on night-time?

Although nocturnal life differs in many respects from social life during the day, it is highly under-researched, and the daytime appears to be perceived as the standard for human existence within social and historical studies (Ekirch 2006: 347, Steger and Brunt 2003: 5-7). Anthropologist Lodewijk Brunt even uses the neologism “diecentrism” to describe the long lasting night-blindness within the social sciences and humanities (Steger and Brunt 2003: 5). Only recently have anthropologists started suggesting that bringing different night cultures under scrutiny might not only provide new evidence on nocturnal phenomena, but also on socio-cultural life during the day (e.g. Steger and Brunt 2003, Schnepel 2006).

The few accounts focusing on social life from dusk until dawn have mostly been concerned with elite or bourgeois members of Western and/or industrialized societies. This scholarly ignorance of the economically disadvantaged, as well as of rural settings is based on two widespread presumptions. First, scholars followed the longstanding presumption that nothing of pertinence would occur in poorer households<sup>2</sup> (Ekirch 2006: xxv).

Second, there exists the assumption that electric lighting “revolutionized” night-time by expanding the scope of possible human activities beyond nightfall (e.g. Alvarez 1995, Melbin 1978 and Schlör 1998). Yet, whilst the impact of artificial light on nocturnal life is indisputable, no proportional relationship between the qualities of night-life and a particular type of illumination can be established (Steger 2004:43). Despite this insight, simplistic images of nocturnal behaviour in poor regions with limited or no access to electricity continue to be conveyed.

This also holds true for discussions on refugees’ and forced migrant’s social lives. While there exists a whole range of anthropological studies on refugee camps and settlements, I have identified few discussions of the impact of nightfall on these social settings. Most of these references relate to particular incidents of violence and insecurity without discussing other aspects of camp life after dark.

One exception is Marion Fresia’s study on Mauritanian refugees in Senegal, in which she offers a sustained ethnographic description of the nocturnal gatherings of mostly male refugees. Under the shelter of darkness, these *veillées nocturnes* used to function as frames for the secret planning of political activities in the past, while today they merely serve as convivial meetings (Fresia 2005:255-260).

This research gap is not so surprising when taking into account the methodological challenges accompanying any anthropological endeavour in regards to refugees’ nocturnal activities: camps are generally difficult to access without the support of other actors who, for example, provide a lift in their vehicles to often isolated camp sites. If aid workers leave camps after dark, researchers are most probably requested to exit the camp in their company.

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<sup>2</sup> For exceptions see, for example, Jean Vernon’s study on the night in medieval France (Verdon 1994) and A. Roger Ekirch’s account on the history of the nighttime in Europe during the early modern area (Ekirch 2006).

However, refugees are not only residing in camps, but also in other spaces that would allow for nocturnal research. Fresia, for instance, conducted her ethnography in a refugee settlement that was accessible around the clock and thus also rendered the observation of nightlife feasible. However, what appears even more pertinent is Fresia's interest in things nocturnal that stirred her to attend social gatherings after dark. In other words, by eschewing widespread simplistic assumptions about nightlife in poor settings, she witnessed aspects of social life that most humanitarian aid-workers and researchers tend to neglect.

This research paper suggests that refugees make an active use of evenings, nights and early morning hours. In fact, refugee camps and settlements after dark actually do allow for a wider range of social activities than sleeping or sexual relations. Moreover, nocturnal hours in camps are likely to reinforce differences and injustices experienced during the day; on the other hand, they also provide opportunities for interactions and projects that are less feasible in a diurnal setting.

### **Social relations and sociability after dark**

Darkness might impact on 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. Furthermore, certain actors might only leave their bamboo huts under the shelter of darkness. At the same time the night separates refugees from diurnal actors such as humanitarian aid workers and clerical staff.

In regards to this nocturnal union or segregation of social groups, the imposition of curfews as artificial markers of nightfall merits special attention. At the Thai-Burma border, humanitarian aid workers must leave camp-sites by 6 p.m., while refugees have to respect an internal curfew set at 9 p.m. The latter regulation – literally a *couvre-feu* – clearly aims at curbing nocturnal traffic by requiring camp residents to cover open fires and to keep silence within their housings.

Thus “night-time” starts at different hours for different persons. And while curfews indeed stem the mobility of refugees and others, the findings of this research suggest that most actors involved are also able to circumvent regulations in order to pursue their respective night-time activities.

*“For some must watch, while some must sleep”<sup>3</sup>*

With the imposition of a curfew, humanitarian aid-workers, higher officials and other foreigners usually leave campsites at day's close. Once these diurnal actors have left, the remaining authority is camp security<sup>4</sup> and Thai paramilitary (*or sor*) that are

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<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act III Scene II

<sup>4</sup> The two Karenni camps at the Thai-Burma border are administrated by one Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC) and one Camp Committee (CC) per camp. It is the responsibility of the CC to nominate security officers with similar functions to a national police force. Thus, the camp security personnel is charged with the enforcement of camp rules and the restoration of order. Furthermore, these officers are expected to report civil, administrative and criminal cases to the camp judiciary. (da Costa 2006:20)

respectively representing Karenni and Thai authority. Camp security is staffed by camp residents, while *or sor* paramilitaries are Thai nationals.

In theory, both parties are supposed to report any security incidents respectively to the Camp Committee, the assistant district officer (*palat*) or to UNHCR, and it is these parties who are responsible for the subsequent transmission of severe cases (e.g. rape and murder) to Thai legal authorities. Whilst there exist various circumstances that subvert this procedure (see da Costa 2006), nightfall marks an automatic shift of practical authority on a quotidian basis. With higher ranking officials and aid-agency staff sleeping in Mae Hong Son or (in the case of the Camp Committee) within the camp, fewer and lower-ranking officials are temporarily in charge of decision-making. Although the regulation of immediate communication appears to be upheld at night, in practice supervisors are not informed about relevant incidents before the morning hours (COERR, email-correspondence, 1 June 2006).

Being the first to react immediately to and decide upon further handling of incidents, nocturnal watchmen bear a great deal of responsibility. Moreover, despite the fact that both camp security and *or sor* paramilitaries are charged to guard the campsites, refugees report seeing few *or sor* on patrol. According to the Thai NGO COERR (Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees), it is mostly the refugee-guards who encounter incidents, report to the *or sor* and detain individuals with the knowledge of Thai sentries. (COERR, email-correspondence, 1 June 2006) This observation is interesting, as it indicates an unintended hierarchy and division of labour between the two guarding parties.

The relation between refugees and these nocturnal surveillance bodies is rather ambiguous. Concerning their protection potential, feelings of contempt in regards to the *or sor* paramilitaries surfaced during group discussions with refugee youth. One research participant recalled the great feeling of insecurity among the refugee community during an evening shelling in 2005. When asked about the role of the Thai paramilitaries during this incident the youth smilingly stated, “the Thai soldiers should protect us but now they are living with us!” thus provoking general amusement among his peers (Group discussion, post-ten school, 21 February 2006). Yet, according to another research participant, refugees do use camp security personnel when they feel annoyed by drunkards or persons who otherwise cause disturbance at night (Julian<sup>5</sup>, personal communication 21 January 2006).

Conversely, during a Protection Working Group<sup>6</sup> meeting, a refugee section leader reported that camp security complained about alcohol-intoxicated youth not respecting the orders of night watchmen. Furthermore, according to the guards’ statement, youth appear to counter the sentries’ discourses with reference to their “rights”. This account was enhanced by a colleague who equally argued that human rights training causes community members to claim these “rights” when entering in conflict with camp authorities (Protection Working Group, 16 February 2006).

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<sup>5</sup> All names of research participants are pseudonyms. All direct quotations are verbatim and derive from essays and interviews conducted in English.

<sup>6</sup> Protection Working Groups meetings are a UNHCR-initiative to gather on a monthly basis representatives of NGOs, the CC and other stakeholders in order to discuss protection related issues within the camp.

These testimonies not only illustrate the ambivalent relation between refugees and nocturnal surveillance bodies, but also hint at possible shortcomings of diurnal programmes in human rights education.

*Oh, pleasant eventide! Confidence, romance and mirth after dark*

While nightfall in the camp separates certain actors, it reunites others. Notwithstanding the importance of curfews to formally regulate activities within the camp, work and socialising occupy many families beyond curfew-hours.

Refugees normally rise at dawn and start working. After the completion of domestic chores, refugee children and youth spend several hours either in schools or workshops, earning money or hanging out with peers. Women are highly industrious – for example, foraging food in the jungle, fetching water, feeding livestock, brewing rice-wine, etc. Male adults were involved in tasks such as construction work and woodcutting.

Thus, whether idle or industrious, household members are usually dispersed throughout the camp area during most parts of the day. People tend to reassemble in the early evening before sunset when “dinner” is served. However, this moment is not necessarily associated with general positive sensations among the refugee community. For instance, one research participant, a young single woman, stated rather contemptuously: “I dislike in the evening because all of people come back home and most of children cry and shout. So it noisy for me. I like early morning because it is quiet” (Ree Meh, essay dated 17 January 2006).

The hours after dinner signify for many a period of relaxation, a bracket between daily chores and community and/or family obligations. Following the accounts of research participants, these hours are often spent in the company of close friends: women and adolescent girls use the twilight to enjoy the company of female friends, while some youth reported visiting friends’ houses where they play and listen to music, complete their homework or chat. Others spend their pocket money on movies or karaoke.

In general, the impact of nightfall appears to be different depending on the living conditions of individual youth. Those sharing a bamboo hut with senior caretakers as well as those dwelling in a border house seem to return home, whilst for others residing alone or with peers, nightfall does not necessarily mean an interruption of their evening activities. Once at home after dark, refugee youth recount pursuing rather quiet activities such as reading and studying with candlelight or in one case even watching TV (COERR workshop, 20 January 2006).

Besides drawing together families and friends, the night-time is also perceived as advantageous for courting and other amorous activities. Although the Karenni like to woo through letter-writing, young men are also encouraged to perform songs in order to discover the intentions of their prospective lovers and present them after nightfall until roughly 10 p.m. (Khon 2004: 116). If the courtship is more serious, youthful suitors are allowed to visit girls during evening hours in order to converse with them under parental supervision until midnight. In this respect, male research participants jauntily reported how they would make strategic use of alcohol in order to placate the

spirits of overprotective parents (Oh Thay, personal communication, 13 January 2006).

Some lovers circumvent this official courting procedure by sneaking out under the shelter of darkness. Even in the absence of senior vigilance and the possession of one's own bamboo hut, unmarried couples prefer (for the sake of discretion) visiting each other after nightfall. It is not only Karenni couples that find time together during the nocturnal hours; I also heard repeatedly of secret encounters between Karenni girls and Thai security personnel during the evening.

Finally, with regard to sociability within the refugee camp, the night-time allows for merriment including larger gatherings, parties and festivals. Although bigger events require special arrangements with camp security, watchmen do not seem to curb these activities once merry havoc is on its way.

Young Karenni seem to be fond of all things musical. I enjoyed the guitar playing of forced migrant youth during various nights outside the camp and learned that youth inside the camp indulge in similar "jam sessions." Furthermore, two rock bands exist within Karenni camp 1 where they are occasionally allowed to play in front of a larger audience. Organizing such performances is neither an easy nor inexpensive task: above all, the groups are obliged to pay a fee of 1,000 baht for official permission. In addition, the musicians have to organise petrol and a generator to supply the electricity which is indispensable for a rock music show (Moo Thaw, personal communication, 10 January 2006).

Karaoke is also very popular among camp youth who readily pay a modest contribution for this enjoyment. During celebrations, the fun extends to on-stage karaoke and fashion shows that demonstrate Karenni youth's creativity and awareness of global trends in pop culture. Anthropologist Sandra Dudley observed evening video performances organized by senior Karenni authorities. During these occasions, blockbuster movies are shown on normal-sized screens in front of hundreds of people attracted and fascinated by the flow of exotic images, rather than by the dialogue that is difficult to follow (Dudley 2002:17). Video performances on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights are a major source of the scarce camp entertainment.

During fieldwork, I had the chance to observe and participate in nocturnal revelry when assisting at a camp party organized by the Thai local district officer as recognition for the Thai paramilitary's work. The celebration was within the camp, and participants included (apart from the paramilitary) humanitarian aid workers, refugees, and the inhabitants of neighbouring villages. Curiously, with the exception of myself and another senior aid worker, no Westerners attended the party. One Western health worker later explained me that she "never considered going there" (Anna, personal communication, 10 February 2006), while another even reproached my participation by arguing that my attendance would "support certain things" (Rebecca, personal communication, 11 February 2006).

The young woman left me to wonder whether she was alluding to a possible political sensitivity related to the event or just the fact that aid workers are not supposed to indulge in merriment with the recipients of their services. However, interestingly enough, their organization not only sponsored the karaoke equipment for the party, but their Thai supervisor also turned out to be one of the most mirthful karaoke



performers! I suspect that the maintenance of cultural distance rather than the political delicacy of the event discouraged Western aid workers from joining the event.

The venue was set rather at the beginning of the camp zone, close to the military checkpoint at the camp entrance. Upon my arrival at 18.30, I already found a jovial gathering of Thais on benches alongside long tables and I subsequently made myself comfortable among the Thai aid workers I befriended. After a while, an already tipsy Thai official from the MOI gave a speech in which he stressed his satisfaction with the UNHCR attending the event for the first time. He then expressed his gratitude to the *or sor* paramilitaries, to aid agencies as well as to the Camp Committee for constructive cooperation with the Royal Thai Government, which he was representing in Mae Hong Son. The speech ended with the official opening of the buffet. While most guests then proceeded to arrange their barbecues, the jaunty official inaugurated the karaoke equipment by performing a Thai rock song on stage, while the paramilitary soldiers joined in by dancing. During dinner, aid agency staff prepared a game in which people were chosen randomly for karaoke performances.

Fuelled by beer, liquor and barbecue, the refugees, soldiers, villagers and Thai aid-workers joined in merriment after dinner. For the duration of one night, it seemed as if these stakeholders, whose relations are otherwise marked by distance, acted as part of the community. Bearing in mind the exceptionality of this event, the party nevertheless neatly illustrated how social relations might change after dark and how those who are strangers during the day can turn into playmates at night.

Besides these pleasures, the Karenni also make use of darkness for carrying out several of their biggest festivities. For instance, during the Kan Htein Boo festival in April, refugees offer their deities beer, rice wine and sticky rice and it is believed that the gods descend to earth at midnight to feast on the gifts. On-stage serenade dances and evening singing contests are also an attraction during this festival. Around Christmas, Karenni youth participate in carol singing and visit every camp household. Members of individual households rise from their beds and offer the singers whisky or rice wine to sustain their singing which may last until 1 a.m.:

By the end all inhibitions are banished and finally you end up eating soup or noodles at someone's house in the middle of the night. One night someone decided to kill a chicken to make us soup. That was at midnight and we finally ate at 2 a.m (Maude, email-correspondence, 24 March 2006).

In respect to festivals and other large gatherings, it should be mentioned that these events are also notorious for incidents of burglary. As these festivities attract most members of the refugee community, bamboo huts tend to be vacant and watchful neighbours absent (Daisy, personal communication, 17 January 2006).

The above observations concerning refugees' sociability after dark give proof of the rich cultural potential within the community. Whilst some humanitarian aid-workers recognize that merely diurnal interaction with refugees excludes them from various social events, many appear to link the nocturnal camp hours only with danger and security issues.

## **Physical security and mental well-being**

Changes in social relations that occur in the camp might facilitate nocturnal security threats to body and spirit, thus urging refugees to devise original ways of coping with such hazards. Indeed, research on camp security fosters the assumption of the existence of particular night-dangers and suggests that limited monitoring within camps is not only conducive to deviant behaviour among the refugees, but also an obstruction to protection activities (Crisp 1999:3, da Costa 2006: 7, Hyndman 2004:204).

During fieldwork, informal interviews with refugee youth and adults working with them suggested that camp residents at the Thai-Burma border are at night-time particularly prone to domestic and sexual violence often committed by household-members, as well as aggressions by Thai security personnel and drunken fellow refugees. Furthermore, during the dry season (roughly December until April), refugees have reason to fear that fighting between the Burmese Army and ethnic non-state armed actors might spill over the border to the refugee camp. Moreover, I identified other security concerns related to the permeability of refugee housings and the consequences of “indecent” sleeping positions. Finally, night-time fears related to machinations of supernatural beings also appear to play a salient role among Karenni refugees.

### *Corporal integrity*

Despite the existence of all kinds of nocturnal traffic in camp, it goes without saying that the majority of the camp population uses the night-time for sleeping. As “the farthest refuge from the throes of daily life” (Ekirch 2006:xxvi) sleep holds decidedly a recreational function in forced migrants’ daily life. However, due to the absence of a waking consciousness, sleeping persons are unable to control their environment and are therefore obliged to find means of protection in this heightened state of vulnerability (Steger and Brunt 2003: 11, Steger 2004:355). This is even more so when night-time fears add to insecurity, as might be the case in enclosed refugee camps in unstable border zones. In the light of these considerations, it appears worthwhile to consider the corporal security not only of those who are awake, but also of those who are sleeping when enquiring about refugees’ vulnerability and coping mechanisms during the night. During fieldwork, particular attention was focused on the organization of sleep within the camp. It indeed transpired that such an enquiry has the potential of revealing valid information on individuals’ fears and worries, as well as their social relations.

So far, I identified five factors causing worries with regard to corporal integrity at night-time: namely assaults on refugees by camp personnel; exposure to armed conflict; domestic and gender-based violence perpetrated by refugees and Thai villagers; the permeability of bamboo huts; and ‘indecent’ sleeping positions.

First, the fear of Thai security personnel assaulting, molesting or seducing refugee men, women and children was repeatedly expressed by research participants and fostered by the observations of humanitarian aid agencies. In a group discussion with five refugee girls, it transpired that parents tended to worry if their daughters did not return home between 10 p.m. and midnight (KnWO, group discussion, 17 January

2006). This parental fear apparently stems from accounts of Thai soldiers harrasing individuals who stroll around after curfew hours and cases of Karenni girls having romantic encounters and relations with Thai soldiers.

Concerning young women's engagements with soldiers, it is possible that some of these cases might consist of sexual aggression by soldiers. However, it has also been observed that girls enter voluntarily into such relations. Thai soldiers obviously hold more economic power than Karenni men, which enables them to impress young women with "luxurious" gifts. While some girls might doubtlessly hold sincere romantic feelings for their Thai partners, others hope their relationships with soldiers are a way to exit camp life. This hope, however, is a delusion, since soldiers are not allowed to marry camp residents.

UNHCR confirms that the behaviour of Thai security staff represents a problem in various camps alongside the Thai-Burma border. Incidents of verbal and physical abuse occur frequently, and in one camp, a drunken security guard allegedly fired gunshots in the air thus causing fear among camp residents. According to the same source, Thai security staff reportedly used excessive force against a refugee who did not respect the night-time curfew.

These cases clearly indicate violent transgressions against refugees from security personnel. In this respect, it is also noteworthy, that drunken refugees are also likely to provoke nocturnal sentries, as reported by a Karenni security guard (Protection Working Group, 16 February 2006).

When speaking about nocturnal assaults of security personnel against refugees, it should be noted, however, that humanitarian aid workers might also appear as sources of night-time disturbance if not aggression. A manual on registration during emergencies suggests that "spot checks involve an actual head count and are best carried out at *unsocial hours like midnight or dawn* when the majority of people will be in their houses" (Mitchell and Slim 1990, quoted in Harrell-Bond 1997:16, italics PV). Referring to implementations of this recommendation, Barbara Harrell-Bond points at the case of a camp in Somalia where a nocturnal intrusion disturbed refugees to such an extent that they turned to "retaliatory" violence against the aid workers (Harrell-Bond 1997:16).

Secondly, in contrast to the somewhat ambiguous role of the Thai soldiers, the Burmese Army as well as its ally, the ceasefire group KNPLF (Karenni Nationalities Peoples Liberation Front), continue to be perceived as serious threats by the refugee community and those working with them. According to a research participant, the permanent positioning of Thai soldiers within the Karenni camp might be directly linked to the last big battle between the Burmese Army and the Karenni Army. The fighting took place during the dry season, as the absence of rain facilitates Burmese soldiers' access to Karenni territory:

During that time the sound of gunfire and explosions was a daily back-drop and a curfew was imposed in the camp. Every night everyone had to be home and candles out by 8p.m. for fear of the Burmese invading the camp (they have done it before so this was not an imagined threat). There was real fear in the camp and the curfew also

impacted on study and entertainment. At that stage a boarding master refused to take in any new students as he was finding it so difficult to control the boarder students as they were so restless” (Maude, email correspondence, 26 March 2006).

During group discussion with refugee students, participants started describing the fighting at the border and a male student mentioned how insecure he and his friend felt because of the sounds of shelling and gunshots. As a result, many refugees were ready to leave the camp (Eh Say, personal communication, 21 February 2006). An NGO-worker (who was at that time also living in camp) confirmed that the shelling was audible, in particular during the evening and early night hours (Mary, personal communication, 21 February 2006). Furthermore, in his autobiography, a former soldier and resident of a camp close to Mae Hong Son frequently mentions scenes of night combat or surprise attacks between Karenni and Burmese troops; thus conveying the impression that evenings and night-time were indeed the favoured periods for armed clashes and organised assaults (Khoo Thwe 2002).

The above are only a few testimonies, and more research on the impact of armed fighting on refugee camps is required. Notwithstanding this limitation, these accounts suggest that fighting does take place during evening and night-time and that this hazard might increase refugee’s perception of insecurity.

A third fear is domestic- and gender-based violence inside camps and their immediate surroundings. Although often experienced as agreeable, the nocturnal reunion of households can also be tedious if not painful. While these moments can be relaxing, they also bear a high potential of erupting domestic violence ranging from petty quarrels to serious acts of violence. This is probably so because members of refugee households, and thus potential perpetrators, are more likely to be together at home during the evenings and at night.

In fact, domestic violence and alcohol abuse are major concerns within the camp. According to a Thai social-worker, children find it difficult to sleep when they are plagued by worries about their quarrelling parents (Thiphawan Teethong, personal communication, 20 January 2006).

During the course of fieldwork, refugees never referred explicitly to individual experiences of domestic or sexual violence. It generally appears that speaking about domestic violence remains a taboo subject among camp residents. For example, they often hesitate to use the Women Community Center, a shelter house for abused women. However, silence in problematic social settings is often very expressive in itself, and it would be wrong to assume that such incidents are not occurring during the night-time. Indeed, participants of NGO workshops and Protection Working Group-meetings strongly suggest that the camp population does have reasons for fearing such transgressions.

Furthermore, when the president of the Karenni Women’s Organization (KnWO) suggested the introduction of night security personnel for the centre for women, she was questioned as to why such severe measures were needed and argued: “Because we have material there and maybe also for the women” (KnWO, workshop, 23 January 2006).

Although her first concern was related to burglaries, the president also expressed concern for the women. Sandra Dudley describes how during her research stay in a Karenni camp, an unknown man repeatedly sneaked into all female households – including her own - during the night, molesting young women. First attempts to catch the prowler consisted of male youth who moved into the public areas of the chosen bamboo houses where - equipped with sticks and stones - they spent the night. Yet, their efforts remained unsuccessful, and the refugees started to interpret the machinations of the prowler as those of a supernatural being (Dudley 2000: 274). I shall revert to this case in the following section on mental well-being.

With regard to sexual violence perpetrated by persons outside the refugee community, UNHCR reported the case of a young refugee woman having been raped by a Thai villager upon her way back to the camp in the late evening. Of course, aggressions against refugees by locals are not restricted to the context of the Thai-Burma border. For example, Rohingya refugee women in Bangladesh have been found particularly vulnerable at night and during the early morning hours when male household members venture out to pursue their livelihood through fishing. According to anthropologist Thomas Feeny, during the night-time locals sometimes molest Rohingyas in settlements outside camps by throwing stones at their houses. He also mentions cases of Bangladeshi forcing Rohingya families to leave them their daughters overnight or else they faced the threat of denouncing the family to security forces (Feeny 2001: 76).

Fourthly, it emerged that refugees at the Thai-Burma border are further endangered by natural annoyances. Sleeping places inside the refugee camp consist mostly of unstable bamboo huts built by the refugees themselves. The instability of the huts cannot be linked to weak construction skills of the refugees. Instead, the physical condition of the camp area appears to be a major obstacle for building stable houses. Houses are located in the deep jungle on steep hillsides and the designated area does not allow decent space between individual houses. The huts are constructed of bamboo provided by NGOs as well as the Royal Thai Government, and roofs are built out of leaves. Although the bamboo weakens rapidly and has to be exchanged every two years, camp residents are not allowed to use other building materials due to Thai authorities' fear of refugees depleting local forests (TBBC 2005: 68).

Due to their weak structure, the houses are prone to various natural hazards: the porous roofs, walls and floors cannot completely protect the inhabitants from the sometimes extreme weather conditions in Northern Thailand; be it the oppressive heat during March and April or during heavy and constant rainfalls of the rainy season that lasts until October. In particular, during this monsoon period, landslides and falling trees might completely destroy or wash away individual houses. The cold conditions of the winter months are also difficult for locals and refugees.

Generally, NGOs provide refugees with blankets, bed nets and plastic sleeping mats. During exceptionally cold winters, the refugees might also receive knitted blankets. Used in conjunction, the mats and nets provide an essential protection against wind and mosquitoes (as the huts are built on piles, insects can enter through the bamboo floor!). So far the distribution pattern has been one blanket for every two refugees as well as one family size bed net and one sleeping mat per three persons. However, changes of these rates to one blanket per refugee every two years and from family to double size bed nets are under consideration (TBBC 2005: 70).

According to my field observations, the actual usage of blankets, mosquito nets and plastic mats seems to differ according to refugees' economic status. While most people seem to use the sleeping items distributed by aid agencies, well-off refugees acquire additional items such as quilts and thicker blankets. These can be obtained either through purchase at shops within or outside the camp or by bartering. In contrast, destitute households appear to trade off their own sleeping items for other goods, thus endangering the corporal security of family members during sleep.

The weakness of bamboo huts not only exposes inhabitants to severe climatic conditions and malarial mosquitoes, but also to a variety of disturbing noises. These include sounds of footsteps in neighbouring bamboo-huts, snoring, the waking-up of neighbours, and the sounds of wood-cutting in the early morning. Further, one research participant mentioned that camp residents would call the security personnel if drunkards were too loud (Julian, personal communication, 21 January 2006), and a young refugee woman reported a "crazy" woman, who would during full-moon nights, sit on the roof of her hut singing the entire night (Ree Meh, personal communication, 25 January 2006). The noises of pigs, chickens, and roosters in the morning, and noises of frogs during night count as factors of disturbance. While research participants reported the annoyance of neighbouring noises, it would be worthwhile to ask in future research: to what extent the permeability of bamboo huts also provides security, as incidents of domestic dispute and violence are easier for neighbours to observe.

Finally, the proper arrangement of individual bodies appears to be an important factor for securing corporal integrity during sleep – the Burmese refugees never sleep naked. More so than their male counterparts, women and girls are expected to cover their skin carefully when sleeping. My Burmese co-worker Moe Nyo emphasised the importance of the sarong covering the legs down to the ankles. In order to guarantee a maximum protection, women would use - independent of the weather conditions – a blanket. Should the blanket be removed, female friends or relatives are expected to re-cover the sleeping person.

According to Moe Nyo, when men – apart from husbands - would see an uncovered woman, they would look away, move on and ask someone else to re-cover the body. She also indicated that the sight of such a "messy" sleeper might appear ridiculous to the onlooker: "In their heart they will say something. They want to laugh" (Moe Nyo, personal communication, 12 January 2006). In contrast to highly visible places, Moe Nyo suggests that they can be more relaxed inside their huts. While men and boys appear to have greater freedom in choosing their sleeping place and are sometimes even sent outside to spend the night on the veranda, girls and women are encouraged to seek the privacy of the bamboo hut.

### *Mental well-being and supernatural belief systems*

The discussion above focused on factors perceived by Burmese refugees as threatening to their physical security. While these fears are merely relating to empirical threats such as human beings, insects and weather conditions, there also exist supernatural factors that influence refugees' mental and spiritual well-being.

Anthropologists have been stressing the pertinence of indigenous healing methods for a long time, and gradually representatives of health studies and psychology have also started to acknowledge the value of cultural and spiritual belief systems as alternatives to Western diagnosis of phenomena such as the famous “post-traumatic stress disorder.” For example, Eshani Ruwanpura and his colleagues recently raised the important role of the belief in spirit possession for an understanding of Tibetan refugees’ understandings of and coping mechanisms for mental distress (Ruwanpura et alii 2006:190-192).

Aid agencies also demonstrate serious concern for these issues. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in other African countries, Save the Children UK stresses that “witchcraft is a real system of belief, rooted in popular mentality” (Aguilar Molina 2006:9). In a recent assessment of the needs of displaced persons on the Thailand-Burma border, leading aid agencies noted that the protracted refugee situation has an exacerbating effect on the psychological state of camp residents (CCSDPT and UNHCR 2006:5). Following this observation, the report recommends a focus on community-based interventions that might prevent overall medicalization of mental problems. Similarly, Ruwanpura and his colleagues underscore the importance of combining local coping strategies with Western approaches to counselling (Ruwanpura et al 2006: 198).

In Burma, animist beliefs in supernatural beings exist parallel to the official state religion of Theravada Buddhism. In particular, the belief in *nat* (ghost-spirit) is very popular throughout Burma. For instance, anthropologist Monique Skidmore notes, “The boundaries between the many planes and levels of reality are extremely porous in Burma, and this is another reason why miraculous events can easily occur” (Skidmore 2004: 201-202). Together with witches, ghosts and demons, *nats* constitute a system of supernatural beings that appears to play a salient role in everyday life of most Burmese, including the ethnic minorities (Spiro 1996:4, Lee Lewis 1924:105-107, Ma 1999:77). Clearly, such belief systems are not limited to the Burmese. In fact, they appear in many Asian societies where pre-Buddhist beliefs coexist with Hindu, Buddhist, Islam or Christian religions. Although many concerns with regard to supernatural beings centre on both diurnal and nocturnal life, I so far identified three aspects related to such beliefs that are particularly related to the night.

The woman who sang all night during full moons was said by one neighbour to be possessed by spirits. During fieldwork, it appeared that one research participant made reference to a case of nightly spirit possession. The young woman described how her neighbour, a woman with four children, would loiter around the camp during full moon nights. Moreover, the woman is reported to sing during these special lunar nights and does so on top of the roof of her bamboo hut (Ree Meh, personal communication, 25 January). Ree Meh referred to her neighbour as “crazy woman” and added that there are “many crazy” inside the camp.

By using the word “crazy” it appeared as if she was using her moderate English vocabulary to explain the woman’s suffering to me. Possibly, the young woman referred to a concept (“crazy”) she supposed would make sense to me. This however, does not mean that she translated directly from Burmese, a language in which concepts like “crazy” might not even exist, as a behaviour like this would usually pass as “possessed.” Indeed, Spiro argues in his study that “behavior which the Burmese characterize as mental illness is attributed exclusively to supernatural causes” (Spiro

1996: 157). Similar observations on the limitations of language and the translation of concepts to express mental illness have been made among Tibetan refugees in Northern India as well as in other studies on indigenous healing methods in Asia. (Ruwanpura et alii 2006: 197)

It appears that Burmese refugees perceive ghosts of the deceased as malicious forces likely to pay nightly visits and wake people. For example, Pascal Khoo Thwe recounts his grandfather's ghost paying his wife and grandchildren a visit (Khoo Thwe 2002:93-94). Prior to coming to Thailand, he served as a youth officer in an ethnic army training camp where his sleep was also disturbed by ghosts of buried Burmese soldiers (Khoo Thwe 2002:212).

In this respect the further development of the above-described case of nocturnal prowling within the Karenni camp is interesting. According to Dudley, two weeks after the first occurrence of night-time intrusions into female households, some refugees claimed that they witnessed a strange, one-legged figure radiating green light and producing noises similar to a cat's yowl. Rumour said that the figure was moving around the camp and leaving strange footprints in one quarter of the camp. Gradually, more and more people adhered to the belief that supernatural events were occurring. While some argued that this was the spirit of a recently deceased woman, others attributed the nocturnal unrest to *nats*, who had been irritated by the refugee population (Dudley 2000: 274-275).

Interestingly, many of those who would usually refute the idea of the existence of supernatural beings increasingly began to consider the possibility that some human action must indeed have offended a local *nat*. At this point, the majority of the camp population was already alert and extremely disturbed by stories of ongoing incidents of prowling. Peace of mind was only reinstalled when a senior member of the KNPP (Karenni National Progressive Party) ordered the intervention of a shaman (Dudley 2000:275-276).

This incident leads directly to another point on Burmese refugees' belief in supernatural beings and its impact on night-time fears. Several purifying rites to counter the effects of supernatural beings are carried out during the late hours of the day in the hope of restoring mental tranquillity; for example, the shaman ordered to bring the above-described machinations of the prowling spirit/person to an end, by conducting a ritual appeasement and exorcism of bad spirits at the spot where the spirit/person had first been seen. The ritual took place around midnight (Dudley 2000: 276).

Another example is the remedy recommended for calming crying infants who are believed to be troubled by evil spirits. According to traditional Karenni beliefs, their state can be abated by the dispersal of rice grains at dusk while reciting the following verses for the rice: "[...] You rout out the evils. You overpower the disease at sundown. You strangle the disease at midnight. You exalt the formation of mankind" (Khon 2004:78-79). As mentioned with regard to refugees' sociability after dark, some of the Karenni major festivals include night-related rituals aimed at appeasing the gods for the year to come.



In the light of these observations, it might be relevant for future research to pay more attention to Burmese refugees' belief in supernatural forces and their impact on perceptions of danger and insecurity, as well as coping strategies.

On a more general level, but not necessarily related to the Burmese, there exist examples of extreme repercussions of spirit belief that are summarized as Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome (SUNDS)<sup>7</sup>. This sudden nocturnal death syndrome has been striking Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees and migrants in their sleep since the 1970s. While the medical discourse refers to an "unexplained syndrome" (Munger and Booten 1998:682), anthropological research with survivors suggests that the phenomenon cannot be disassociated from supernatural beliefs and spiritual possessions.

For instance, anthropologist Shelly Adler discusses how the geographical separation from Laos severely affected ethnic Hmong on resettlement in the USA. After their arrival in the USA, many Hmong were concerned that their protective ancestor spirits would be unable to leave Laos and undertake the overseas journey with them. This perception caused them to feel increasingly threatened by the nightmare spirit. In their region of origin, such a spiritual dilemma is usually understood as a manifestation of evil spirits that were not fed by the head-of-household as required by local customs. Usually, these spirits are appeased by resuming religious practices exercised by the male head-of-household. However, in the absence of animals for slaughter, shamans and the dissolution of clan ties, performing religious duties becomes difficult, if not impossible in exile. Unable to resort to indigenous healing methods, several male refugees felt such extreme distress and this was seen as culminating – in some cases –in sudden nocturnal death. Survivors claimed that a foreign body was sitting on their chest preventing them from breathing.

To the Hmong refugees participating in Adler's study, it appeared to be evident that the deaths of these men were related to their failure to perform religious duties required by their role as household authorities. Indeed, the lethal potential of nightmare visits was unheard of in Laos prior to the Hmong exodus (Adler 1995: 1626).

While the experience of nightmares appears to be a universal one, the lethal outcome of dreadful dreams and the uncanny perception of ghostly visits is not. Instead, the phenomenon of the sudden nocturnal death syndrome seems to relate to Southeast Asians' geographical detachment from their ancestors' lands and ghosts, and the resulting spiritual dilemma. In particular, refugees and migrants have been struck by this nocturnal death (Munger and Booten 1998: 682).

Against the backdrop of the above delineations, I suggest that it would be worthwhile to study the impact of the belief in (nocturnal and diurnal) supernatural beings on individual/community suffering and corresponding indigenous healing mechanisms.

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<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Jeff Crisp for having drawn my attention to SUNDS.

## **Livelihood provision after dark**

In their paper on sustainable livelihoods, Robert Chambers and Gordon R. Conway point at two aspects of social sustainability of livelihoods: first a reactive dimension consisting in the ability to cope with stress and shocks, and second a proactive dimension relating to the enhancement of capabilities through the adaptation, exploitation and creation of change and through assuring continuity (Chambers and Conway 1991: 10). With regard to the first dimension, they note that regularly occurring stress might originate from diurnal (mosquitoes in the evening, difficult night vision, midday heat) or seasonal cycles. According to the authors, seasonal stresses are more significant with regard to the sustainability of livelihoods than diurnal ones (Chambers and Conway 1991:10).

While this might be true for sedentary populations, that diurnal stresses might equal seasonal ones when it comes to the everyday lives of those who cannot rely on a stable shelter, such as the homeless (Rensen 2003: 101) or forced migrants residing in or hiding outside of refugee camps. Furthermore, due to their delicate legal status, refugees and forced migrants are sometimes obliged to pursue their livelihoods under the cover of darkness.

However, to my knowledge, no concrete research on refugee livelihoods after dark exists. For example, in a book on the economic life of refugees with an entire chapter on economic survival strategies in refugee camps, no reference is made to night-time activities (Jacobsen 2005: 23-38). Indications to refugees' nocturnal livelihood strategies are also missing in a recent EPAU publication on refugee livelihoods (De Vriese 2006).

Notwithstanding this silence, the overall argument of this paper, i.e. the value of paying more attention to social life of refugees and forced migrants after dark, also applies to enquiries about the livelihood provision of these populations.

Indeed, I found that refugees at the Thai-Burma border were socio-economically active during the night. First, the night-time might allow carrying out economic and migratory projects that are otherwise deemed "lawless", "illicit" or more moderately referred to as "negative coping strategies". Secondly, as a break from diurnal obligations, the night provides refugees with time to spend on personal, not community- or household-related tasks, such as intellectual activities.

During an initial period of fieldwork, I identified nocturnal livelihood strategies relating to trade, migration and studies, and I am confident that an in-depth enquiry would discover many more livelihood strategies after dark.

### *Trade and services*

Within the parameters of the camp, many refugees engage in trade and household work during evenings and night-time. Activities carried out within the confines of the campsite are not "illegal" and problems are likely to arise when peoples' activities enter into conflict with curfew hours.

For example, some women are reported to earn an additional income by selling self-made snacks in front of their bamboo huts during the evening hours (Aunty Sally, personal communication, 10 January 2006). Economically well-off refugees with access to one of the few generators available in camp are selling electricity and bulbs for 40 baht per month to individual households. Others make money by displaying movies at night or organizing karaoke events. Movies come from various sources and comprise different genres, ranging from family comedy to pornography. Entry prices usually depend on the language of the film: while English and Thai versions are available for only 2 baht, businessmen charge 3 baht for movies in Burmese (Maude, personal communication, 11 January 2006).

Furthermore, many household chores are carried out towards the end of the day. Ree Meh, for instance, reported that she prefers fetching water in the evening at around 8.30 p.m. in order to avoid queuing up for water supply early in the morning (Ree Meh, personal communication, 13 January 2006). Ree Meh's peers agreed on the problems related to water fetching at daybreak and mentioned that some girls and boys would even head out at midnight.

In addition to economic activities carried out inside the camp, refugees also use the night to pursue ways of income-generation that require them to leave the camp. It goes without saying that in contrast to the business and chores described above, these activities are more delicate, as refugees are officially forbidden to move outside their assigned living area.

For instance, a refugee from Umpiem Mai camp reported that shop owners use the night-time to transport consumer items for resale into the camp. However, these operations are not without risk for refugee tradespersons: "I heard that one shop owner from zone B in the camp brought some snacks and materials from outside the camp to his small shop at night. Suddenly, the Thai leader and his soldiers came and made the owner of the shop to take back his goods to outside the camp. Things like this keep the price of food high" (Saw Poe Kler Htoo 2005: 7).

Moreover, one research participant recounted that during the rainy season many refugees find employment at Thai farms in Mae Hong Son province. For this occupation, people tend to get up at midnight. Equipped with rice that has been prepared the evening before, they leave the camp during the late night hours in order to be on village streets at 3 a.m., where they wait to be picked up by farmers in search of daily labour forces. Usually refugees stay there until 10 a.m. and then – in the absence of any labour demand – return to the camp (Ree Meh, personal communication, 25 January 2006). Refugees clearly manage to pass military checkpoints either by using alternative jungle routes or with the tacit approval of Thai soldiers<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> According to the UNHCR "despite the official restrictions of movement from the camps, corrupt officials and local business entrepreneurs joined forces at the local level to exploit refugees for their cheap labour and thus allowed them to leave the camps (at the refugees' risk!)." (UNHCR, internal information) In this description refugees appear like passive victims of evil businessman and corrupt authorities. Yet, research suggests that refugees are very much aware of potential risks when leaving camps. However, the incentives for going outside (education, livelihood provision!) are so appealing that many refugees readily trade them against security.

*“Who dares not stir by day must walk by night”<sup>9</sup>*

Despite official restrictions of their movements, refugees and forced migrants along the Thai-Burma border use migration as a livelihood strategy for a variety of reasons. In these cases, moving at night has above all the advantage of an increased degree of safety. First, inside Thailand, with fewer authorities posted on roads and other routes, travelling during the night appears to be safer than in the daytime according to the testimony of forced migrants (Caouette 2001:112, Khoo Thwe 2002: 208). Moreover, Pascal Khoo Thwe describes in his autobiography how the difference of day and night-time impacted on him and his friends when they crossed the Burmese jungle towards Thailand:

Traveling by night turned out to be the best way of keeping terror at bay, because then we could not see the possible dangers such as landmines, booby traps, cliffs and awaiting guns. It behoved us all the more to watch our steps. [...] We held each other's hands and moved slowly in the dark, smiling. We desired, above all, a good night's sleep, but that was not possible. [...] We tried to see each other's smiles in the darkness. We traveled together at night, but stayed apart during the day (Khoo Thwe 2002: 195)

This passage is interesting since it highlights how the night-time altered the perception of security threats, thus enhancing the watchfulness of these nocturnal migrants.

Speaking about nocturnal movements of refugees and asylum-seekers, it is also noteworthy that deportation transfers from Bangkok to the border town Mae Sot usually occur during the night. According to UNHCR, the timing of the transfers is one major obstruction to a more successful monitoring of deportation movements that more often than not result in forced repatriation of urban refugees and asylum-seekers to Burma.

### *Education and study activities*

The hours of darkness also appear to allow many Karenni refugee youth to pursue educational and intellectual activities. Research participants mentioned repeatedly that they use evenings and nights for study. In the absence of electric light, most students use candles for completing their homework. This trend is also reflected in a survey conducted by the Karenni Student Union according to which candles feature among the three items mostly needed by camp students (the other two being hygiene products and dictionaries) (KSU 2005:# KSU's Activities Report). The latest UNHCR-CCSDPT draft comprehensive plan addressing the needs of displaced persons along the Thai-Burma border urges for “lighting, preferably with electricity supply where feasible” to target education and health needs. Furthermore, the agencies suggest that electric lighting could be made available through land power lines in accessible areas. For inaccessible camp zones, they recommend the usage of

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<sup>9</sup> William Shakespeare, King John, I, 1, 172

generators maintained by health and education agencies (CCSDPT and UNHCR 2006:4).

With regard to study activities during the evening and night hours, it is also noteworthy to mention that two of the seven Karen refugee camps examined in a recent survey on education, offer alternative schooling through night schools. These night schools are predominantly attended by adult learners as well as children and youth who interrupted their formal educational path (Oh 2006:66). Given the high percentage of illiterate adult refugees and the large numbers of school-drop-outs among youth within the camps along the Thai-Burma border, it might be productive to increase the number of night schools. As refugee youth and adults often stop their education for economic reasons, evening classes might be a realistic alternative for those who are busy with income generation during the day.

## **Conclusion**

This paper started out with the assumption that social life in refugee camps and settlements is likely to differ according to day and night-time. This assertion has been supported by anthropological fieldwork in a refugee camp close to Mae Hong Son, as well as by data drawn from other studies and research reports.

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 night-time 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.

Notwithstanding the benefits of fresh insights expected to be gained from researching the night, any endeavour in this direction is likely to be accompanied by methodological challenges and ultimately also raise ethical concerns.

For example, anthropologists studying primarily the social situation of refugee camps may be obliged to negotiate accessibility to nocturnal research settings. Likewise, other environments such as impoverished urban neighbourhoods or isolated settlements may be difficult to enter due to urban curfews or lack of transportation and/or drivers. Moreover, access to information is not enough when there is no genuine willingness to deliver findings on the night-time. This is not self-evident, since nocturnal research practices do differ from diurnal ones. There would be much to say in this respect, but suffice for now to consider the simple fact that researchers, like aid-workers, often follow an agenda that foresees personal leisure time at the end of the day. Bartering the hours of private indulgence for fieldwork may not be to everyone's taste.

Furthermore, some might rightly point at security concerns after dark. It goes without saying that such threats have to be assessed prior to embarking on research. At the same time it is important to bear in mind that not every curfew actually aims at

enhancing security. As suggested in this paper, curbing the nocturnal mobility of different social groups can also be a major function of these regulations.

This leads directly to the major ethical concern I perceive in regard to studying the nocturnal worlds of refugees and forced migrants, namely the possibility of repercussions unintended by researchers. Portraying refugees and forced migrants as lovers, merrymakers or intellectuals may not sit well with donors, policy-makers and aid workers who have their respective motivations for clinging to the image of “needy refugees”. In this respect, there exists the risk that knowledge and information about nightlife in settings already imbued with social control may be used to justify the enforcement of existing surveillance mechanisms. It is thus the responsibility of researchers to find a sound balance between the disclosure of potentially sensitive information and the presentation of findings capable of challenging existing views on refugees and forced migrants.

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