Elephant training in Nepal: Rites of passage in an interspecies community

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Abstract: Focussing on fieldwork at the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Centre, Nepal, this paper argues for a form of ethnographic analysis that treats both humans and elephants as subjective actors bound together in constituting an interspecies community. By attending to the mutual, cross-species intimacies of life, labour, and moral responsibility in the elephant stable, I subvert the dominant categorical and disciplinary exclusions of the social sciences and the natural sciences, arguing for an integrated approach to human-elephant relations I call ethnoelephantology (Locke 2013). Here, I apply this more-than-human/not-just animal perspective to elephant training practices for captive-bred juvenile elephants, which adapt methods traditionally developed for captured adults. I analyse training not just as an assemblage of practical procedures for imparting obedience, understanding, and interspecies cooperation, but also as a ritual process of transformation, by which both elephant and mahout establish working relations, acquire new capabilities, as well as a changed status and identity among their human and nonhuman peers. In so doing, I extend the anthropological theory of rites of passage to include non-human actors, supporting an emerging, more-than-human literature that emphasises the mutual agency, historical entanglement, and negotiated relations of humans and elephants whose lives and landscapes intersect.

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The Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center lies at the edge of the Chitwan National Park in the lowland Terai of Nepal, situated between distinct spaces reserved for the activity of humans and of wildlife. The central node of a network of elephant stables (or *hattisar*) managed under the authority of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), Khorsor is the place where pregnant female elephants are brought to give birth, and where their young are trained for working life. In a country that has virtually exhausted its population of free roaming elephants, no longer available in sufficient quantity for sustainable capture from the wild, this successful captive breeding programme is intended to enable Nepal to replenish the elephant population it uses for managing its lowland protected areas. Furthermore, it enables Nepal to do so without resorting to trade and exchange with foreign countries, legally problematic for a country that is a signatory to the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

Historically, captive elephant management in Nepal was the preserve of the Tharu, an ethnic group indigenous to the Terai. Operating under royal authority in the inhospitably malarial jungle lowlands, the Tharu played a crucial role capturing, taming, and caring for elephants, which were used as trading commodities, objects of tributary fealty, symbols of political power, and vehicles for royal hunts, while also being treated with ritual veneration and respect for behavioural individuality (Locke 2011). It is this tradition of occupational expertise and its associated ritual practices that continues to inform the culture of the contemporary elephant stable as an adjunct institution of the DNPWC in the modern era of the National Park. Indeed, as I learned during fieldwork at Khorsor, it was some of the serving senior handlers themselves who had adapted the training of adult, wild caught elephants for a new regime training juvenile, captive born elephants.

Witnessing and participating in the training of two juvenile elephants on two occasions during doctoral fieldwork, I realised that elephant training had to be understood as more than just a sequence of practical procedures for imparting obedience, understanding, and interspecies cooperation. Training was also highly ritualised as an intensely social event enrolling human and elephant members of the *hattisar* community. Involving ritual practices that marked phases of separation, liminality, and reintegration, it also resembled what my anthropological education inclined me to recognise as a rite of passage, as most significantly theorised by Arnold van Gennep in the early 20th century, Victor Turner in the 1960s, and Maurice Bloch in the 1990s. In short, it typically involves a ritually marked separation from ordinary social life by which subjects sacrifice their autonomy, entering a temporary phase governed by non-ordinary expectations, and undergo ordeals which serve to dramatise and effect some kind of transformation, usually by reference to transcendental powers, resulting in changes in social status, social responsibilities, and social practices. However, unlike other ethnographically documented cases of ritual initiation, this was a transformative process for the acquisition of new skills, capabilities, and changed statuses under divine sanction involving both a human and their nonhuman partner.

To claim that the concept of rite of passage has applicability for elephants as well as humans has radical implications, forcing us to revisit the ontological starting points and disciplinary subject positions that determine how one frames and studies human-elephant relations. Let me explain. As a practitioner of a discipline traditionally focussed on one half of the oppositions of human and animal, and nature and culture, I was only trained to investigate the human condition in analytic isolation from a natural world populated by myriad life forms. As a social anthropologist then, I expected to study captive elephant management in a way that made elephants ancillary to humans, external to their sociality as animate objects – I was going to study the expert practice and occupational culture of mahouts in a way that would treat the social and ecological agency of elephants as separate and secondary, aware that my disciplinary expertise was limited regarding the science of elephant behaviour and ecology (Locke and Keil 2015).

However, the social world of interspecies relations that I encountered confounded such convenient delimitation of the human from the animal. It also suggested to me the potential benefits of greater expertise in animal behaviour and ecology, even if, in this context, they suffer from their own limits, of a zoocentric rather than anthropocentric kind. These limits become significant when one evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of natural scientists and social scientists exploring issues of conflict and coexistence between humans and elephants as experts on either one species or the other in their own characteristic ways. I think these limiting perspectives are also implicated in the typical reticence of social and natural scientists to engage in collaborative exchange. Yet to fully appreciate this during fieldwork, nonetheless it proved impossible for me to develop an ethnographic analysis that would restrict elephants to moving bodies subject to human purposes, in other words; to disregard them as subjective actors with whom humans develop meaningful, affective, as well as instrumental relations – a perspective that requires taking both kinds of sentient entity seriously. Their agency, their behavioural dispositions, their constitutive biographies, and their deep entanglement with human lives and projects made it much more complex than that, demanding they be fully incorporated as social actors.

Furthermore, it became evident that elephants represented world-making partners in generating the lifeways of the *hattisar,* not just as a configuration of actions and interactions in socially and materially constructed space, but also in terms of the cross-cutting moral responsibilities that make community a sociological phenomenon of

dynamic interrelations. Here then was what Dominque Lestel has termed a hybrid community (2006), comprising social relations not just among species, but also between them, involving social integration and shared obligation. Despite differing bodily qualities, sensorial capacities, and modes of communicative interaction, humans and elephants lived together in ways involving shared meaning and affect.

Here I should mention that it was this recognition that humans and elephants are mutually implicated in configuring shared lives in shared environments through intersecting social and environmental activity, that led me to develop a framework for an integrated approach to the generative relations of impact and encounter between humans and elephants that I have called ethnoelephantology (Locke 2013). Inspired by the anthropology of culturally and historically variable human-primate interactions known as ethnoprimatology, which combines ethnography with primatology (Fuentes 2010, 2012), this approach aims for simultaneously social, historical, and ecological forms of analysis focussed on direct and indirect relations between humans, elephants, and environments, across space, and through time. This concern with integrating perspectives traditionally associated with discrete disciplines from across the spectrum of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences motivated a symposium I convened at the University of Canterbury in 2013, which has led to a book forthcoming from Oxford University Press, which I hope you will permit me to mention – *Conflict, Negotiation, Coexistence: Rethinking Human-Elephant Relations in South Asia*, featuring contributions from anthropologists, biologists, ecologists, geographers, historians, political scientists, and Sanskritists (Locke and Buckingham 2016). As such, it represents an attempt to establish the interdisciplinary dialogue neccesary for developing an integrated approach to human-elephant relations. I hope it will inspire more multidisciplinary cooperation…

Now then, I have reached the point at which I can connect the agenda of ethno-elephantology and the idea of the hybrid community – of the *hattisar* as a place where social life is generated through and between species, to my argument for elephant training as an interspecies rite of passage. Unfortunately, the constraints of brevity force me to give primacy to the argument I wish to make both at the expense of detailed discussion of anthropological theories of rites of passage, and of detailed ethnographic description of the phenomena with which I am concerned. So please forgive me if I leave you hungry for more explanatory detail with which to persuade you of my thesis.

Elephant training as an interspecies rite of passage

Let us begin with a quote from an informant that indicates the role of divine sanction in ritually configuring the practice of elephant training:

> "We respect the elephant as a god like we respect the god Ganesha. So we bow to them as we would the god Ganesh – only then do we ride them. We think; 'we are riding you as an elephant, but we know you are a god'. So we bow to them because we have to respect them as gods. That's why for training we have to do Kamari puja (*the* kamari *is the special post to which an elephant being trained is tethered*). So that our elephant can succeed, we must pray to the gods and goddesses that the training goes well. We perform rituals in the hope that the elephant does well, doesn't get hurt, and that the elephant learns to walk well."
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> [Phanet Satya Narayan, the principal trainer of Paras Gaj, an elephant named after the then crown prince of Nepal].

Three points need to be made here. Firstly, I contend the ritual dimension of elephant

training should not be analysed apart from the practical procedures, as if it were merely cultural ornamentation for an assemblage of instrumentally purposeful practices, since action, belief, and understanding are so thoroughly intertwined – to separate behaviour from meaning and affect would produce a disarticulated and partial analysis. Conceiving of elephants as divine, not-just-animal beings has significance not only for the conduct of the petitioning rituals of appeasement that Satya Narayan alludes to, but also for attitudes of engagement with elephants in all aspects of the training process, which also includes daily driving sessions roped up to training elephants (known as *kunkies* in India), and communal evening sessions of desensitization and familiarisation, during which mahouts rub, touch, and sing songs to the elephant, as well as wield torches of fire.

Secondly, even though elephants cannot be expected to cognitively participate in the symbolic and semantic communication involved in this ritual process of transformation, this does not mean we should analyse training as if they were exempt from the rite of passage it represents. I argue that we treat elephant training as an interspecies rite of passage not only because it involves the acquisition of new capabilities and a changed status for both human and elephant, but also because it is achieved through a process that binds them together as working partners who attune themselves to each other's characteristics (most significantly during the daily driving sessions). Both human and elephant are subject to social and spatial separation from their *hattisar* companions, living apart from human and elephant others, and to ritual prohibitions- for the human, abstinence from meat, alcohol, and women, and for the elephant, substitution of the ritually impure metal of the training gear for specially constructed rope versions.

Thirdly, to assert that this is an interspecies rite of passage that binds human to elephant through a mutually transformative process, should not be taken as license to disregard the assymetry of power at play in these rites and procedures. It does involve the principal trainer acquiring practical mastery of the elephant through its submission to his commands, and it is conducted in the context of an institution that appropriates the labour and seeks to secure the obedience of elephants. Handlers perform a type of custodial labour that produces contradictions between veneration and subjugation, as well as trusting companionship – countervailing modes of relation that must be negotiated, as I have written in a chapter of the forthcoming book I mentioned earlier (Locke 2016).

In hasty conclusion then, firstly, I contend that an adequate understanding of the *hattisar* must recognise the generative role of both humans and elephants as individual actors with particular biographies, dispositions, and capabilities, whose shared lives constitute a hybrid or more-than-human moral community. Secondly, I contend that elephant training cannot be adequately treated as merely a practical procedure for fulfilling particular purposes, but must also be recognised as a ritual process of separation, liminality, and reintegration that results not only in the acquisition of new capabilities and synergistic relations, but also in a changed status for both human and elephant.

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