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Elephant Training in Nepal: Multispecies Ethnography and Rites of Passage

What I would like to do today is to revisit a long-neglected topic from my doctoral research that I intend on developing for publication. I must emphasize however, that what I will present today is very much in a rough-and-ready state, which I will also admit has been hastily prepared. My agenda in this presentation is threefold: Firstly to situate my research on Nepali captive elephant management within the emerging field of multispecies ethnography, secondly to briefly summarize anthropological thought on rites of passage, and thirdly to apply this to the elephant training practices that occur at the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Centre at the Chitwan National Park, Nepal.

So what is significant about the material I am presenting today? The contemporary literature on elephant training almost exclusively treats the subject purely in practical terms, without any significant consideration of either how the culture of the practitioners affects the practical procedures, or how training is variously understood by handlers of differing ethnicity, culture and regional origin. In other words, indigenous understandings of traditional training practices have been neglected, as have associated ritual practices (if and where they persist in other places).

I would like to begin with a quote from an informant that will give you a sense of what I shall be dealing with. *“We respect the elephant as a god like we respect the god Ganesha. So we bow to them as we would the god Ganesha-only then do we ride them. We ask them to please forgive us, and to protect us while 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. 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.”-Phanet Satya Narayan, the principal trainer of Paras Gaj*

Slide 2 Chitwan and The Khorsor Breeding Centre

To begin though, I must provide a little contextualization. Firstly- place and space: here we see the Chitwan National Park (no longer Royal, since the monarchy were

deposed and Nepal became a republic in 2006) in the lowland portion of Nepal known as the Tarai.

Sign reads: *shahi chitwan rashtriya nikunj, hatti prajnan kendra*

Slide 3 The Hattisar and The Use of Captive Elephants in Nepal

Secondly- institution and working practice: The *sarkari hattisar* or government elephant stable was the primary focus of my doctoral research. It is the location for a community of expert practitioners with a culturally distinctive occupational sub-culture. Ritual and institutional life in the *sarkari hattisar* is shaped by Tharu tradition, even though this ethnic group indigenous to the formerly malarial Tarai no longer exclusively staffs the stables of today. Originally sponsored by the Kings of Nepal, and recruiting Tharu men through networks of kinship and community, the stable was the location for the capture of wild elephants for trade and tribute. Later, during the rule of the Ranas from the mid 19th to mid 20th centuries, by which time wild stocks were almost exhausted, the *hattisar* was maintained to facilitate royal hunting expeditions (*rastriya shikar*), at which foreign dignitaries were hosted to hunt tigers, rhinos, leopards and bears. Then in the 20th century, Nepal's captive elephant management apparatus was deployed in service to the new agendas of conservation and tourism.

Nepal exhausted its stocks of wild elephants for capture long ago, and as a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) since 1975, Nepal is prohibited from purchasing elephants from abroad (although there have been gift exchanges of rhinos for elephants from India, Thailand, and Myanmar). This paucity of legally available elephants necessitated a captive breeding programme to sustain Nepal's population of working elephants (private owners who procure elephants from the Sonapur Mela and elsewhere in India circumvent this legal obstacle by arranging for elephants to be 'gifted' in exchange for a cash donation). This was initiated with the founding of the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center in 1986, which has had an impressive record of success since its first birth in 1991.

Slide 4 Multispecies Ethnography and The Anthropology of Human-Elephant Relations

So what does my research on human-elephant relations have to do with something called 'multispecies ethnography'? Back in 2010 a special issue of the journal *Cultural*

Anthropology was dedicated to a new kind of ethnography, both as a genre of writing and as a mode of research, which I might add happens to be ideally suited to my own work. Indeed, later this year I will be presenting on a panel and participating in a roundtable discussion at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco dedicated to multispecies ethnography.

Influenced by critiques of the human exceptionalism that has been integral to scholarship in the humanities, multispecies ethnography argues that non-human creatures should no longer be treated merely as part of the landscape, as food for humans, or as symbols. It's about the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social worlds, and how their livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces. It means that multispecies ethnographers study contact zones where lines separating nature from culture have broken down, where encounters between *Homo sapiens* and other beings generate mutual ecologies and co-produced niches (something exemplified by the field of ethnoprimateology).

In the case of my research, originally conceived in conventional terms as an ethnographic study of the human use of elephants, I realised that my ethnographic subjects were not just the humans, but the elephants as well. I found the relations between human and elephant to be inextricably intertwined in ways far more complex and profound than I initially anticipated. This challenged the implicitly humanist epistemology informing my fieldwork, as I realized that I was conducting research with two types of person, only one of whom was human.

Slide 5 Rites of Passage in Anthropological Theory

Although 'rites of passage' is now a widely used generic term which has escaped the confines of specialist, academic usage, typically being utilised to describe life-changing ritual events that mark admission to adulthood and its various responsibilities, it is a curious fact that van Gennep's theoretical contribution only belatedly received the recognition that it was due. And this is despite the fact that his ideas, although uncited, were clearly known to, and an influence upon such renowned thinkers as Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown (Kimball 1960:xii). This anomalous situation becomes more intelligible when one realises that his 1909 book was only translated into English as recently as 1960, thereby enabling it to reach a wider scholarly audience. By the late twentieth century however, the name of van Gennep and the term 'rites of passage' became a regular feature in student introductions to the discipline of anthropology. For neophyte anthropologists, the

successful completion of fieldwork; implying long-term research involving participant observation, has often been likened to a rite of passage, since it is an endeavour that entails the liminal experience of being a professional stranger adapting to a foreign context, the completion of which admits one to the ranks of ‘authentic’ anthropologists (Epstein 1967:vii, Holy 1983:18, also cited in Watson 2000:3, and Mills & Harris [eds] 2004). Since then, perhaps the two most significant theorists to have utilised and developed van Gennep’s rite of passage formulation are Victor Turner (1969) and Maurice Bloch (1992).

Victor Turner was initially trained in the synchronic approach of British Structural-Functional Anthropology. However, under the influence of Max Gluckman at the University of Manchester, he developed a diachronic approach that considered human society from a processual rather than a purely systemic perspective. This approach was applied to an increasing concern with ritual and symbolism, perhaps most significantly in “The Ritual Process; Structure and Anti-Structure” (1969), in which he elaborated upon van Gennep’s intermediary phase of ‘transition’ (*marge*) through his extended discussion of liminality. In a posthumously published work, Turner claimed that he had been inspired to adopt van Gennep’s interpretive apparatus after encountering the missionary Henri Junod’s use of the rite of passage typology to discuss circumcision rites in his ethnography of the Thonga of South Africa (Turner 1986:159)¹.

Whilst van Gennep presents the intermediary stage as a means of leaving an old state behind in order to achieve a new one, Turner pays greater attention to what this entails, as a process of deconditioning and reconditioning. In the terminology of Pierre Bourdieu, and for the purposes of my appropriation, this can be alternately expressed as the negation of a prior habitus, to be replaced by the acquisition of a new habitus, where ‘habitus’ refers to socially-inscribed and subconscious dispositions, schemas, forms of know-how, and competencies (Crossley 2001:83). Articulation in such terms serves to incorporate an additional component to the rite of passage, one that Turner did not emphasise, in that elephant training should not be analysed merely as a process of initiation, but also as a process of teaching and learning.

¹ Junod’s “The Life of a South African Tribe” was first published in 1912, then in an enlarged edition in 1926, before its most recent publication in two volumes (I Social Life, II Mental Life) in 1962.

For Turner, in terms of social structure, the intervening period of liminality entails a state of ambiguity for the ritual subject (individual or corporate), in which ordinary rights and obligations are suspended, which can be seen to apply both to the elephant and his trainer, as I shall argue. In terms of the cultural condition, the liminal subject eludes or slips; “though the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner 1969:95). Furthermore, the ambiguous and indeterminate state of the liminal subject is expressed through a set of symbols specific to the ritualisation of social and cultural transitions. In the final phase, that of re-aggregation or reincorporation, the passage is consummated and the rights, obligations and signifiers of the new state come into effect (Turner 1969:95).

Turner’s idea of the liminal phase entailing a negation of the ordinary social position and cultural state is represented by his use of the term ‘anti-structure’. “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial...Their behaviour is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life” (Turner 1969:95). It can be seen then, that rites of passage involve the subject being forced to sacrifice their autonomy and to be subjected to ordeals which both dramatise and serve to effect some kind of transformation, both of which will be evident in my account of Nepali elephant training.

Reviewing numerous rites, especially those of initiation, Turner notes then that the liminal state entails a curious blend of lowliness and sacredness (Turner 1969:96), another aspect that is clearly evident in Nepali elephant training, as I shall argue. Noting two broad models of human inter-relatedness, the first of structure (who’s who in relation to each other), and the second of community (the solidarity of relatively undifferentiated individuals), Turner argues that the liminal state concerns the recognition of an essential and generic human bond without which there could be no society (1969:97). This suggests then, some kind of unconditioned basis upon which new norms and conventions can be imprinted.

In other words, the previous state must be negated in order to impose a new state, which in the terms of Bourdieu we might metaphorically refer to as reinscribing the

habitus. In the case of elephant training, this would relate to the negation of a state in which the young elephant responds primarily to its own kind, to be replaced by a new state in which the young elephant, now weaned and separated from its mother, responds effectively to humans as well as to other elephants. For the handler, this would entail acquiring the mastery to control his elephant, achieved through his alienation from ordinary *hattisare* social life, whilst subjected to ritual prohibitions. Once relieved of these strictures and able to again fully participate in the social life of the *hattisar*, the successful trainer will ideally return with an enlarged fund of cultural capital, since he should have earned the respect of his peers from enduring the rigours of training and subordinating the elephant to his command.

Regarding Maurice Bloch's treatment of rites of passage in 'Prey Into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience' (1992), I shall skip the background context, focussing on the key concept for us to consider, namely that of 'rebounding violence'. Bloch picks up on the marked element of violence or conquest rites of passage so often display. It is this concern with violence, which distinguishes his formulation and makes it so suitable for a ritual analysis of elephant training, in which both physical and symbolic violence play such a salient role.

In developing his argument, Bloch reiterates some basic assertions about the shared ideas that underlie all human cultures. He notes that all cultures in some way recognise birth, maturation, reproduction, decline and death as constitutive of the process of material life. In ritual, life is represented as an inversion of such understandings, in which some kind of 'other' life is implicitly propounded, one beyond such material constraints. By means of the passage of reversal, one can enter a world beyond such process to be part of an entity beyond process, i.e to affirm a life-transcending principle. In Nepali elephant training, this is evident in the appeals to the forest goddess *Ban Devi* and the elephant-headed god *Ganesha*, since their intervention is considered crucial in mitigating against the possibility of the training process threatening the mortality of participants, both elephant and human. But for Bloch, merely departing the world of material constraint would have no political significance. The solution seems to be found in the rejoining of the here and now with the transcendental units that rituals create.

So we find a ritual process that involves both a departure from the constraints of materiality, and then a return to the materiality of the here and now as a conquest by the transcendental. "In the case of initiation, the initiate does not merely return to

the world he had left behind. He is a changed person, a permanently transcendental person who can therefore dominate the here and now of which he previously was a part” (Bloch 1992:5). So Bloch is saying that rituals dramatise a journey of the person to the beyond, coupled with a conquering return. By entering the transcendental, vitality is lost, but is regained on return, albeit in an altered form, in which the limits of vitality have been coupled with the power of the transcendental. In Nepali elephant training, both the survival of the elephant and his trainers as well as the acquisition of new skills, dispositions and competencies is considered dependent upon the transcendental intervention of divine power. The elephant and his handler, having survived the violent uncertainties of training, and as a result been imbued with beneficial divine power, are understood to have had their prospects for the future considerably altered and improved.

Bloch is utilising the three-stage process of separation, liminality and re-incorporation of van Gennep (1909), but in his formulation a different content is attributed. For van Gennep, the first stage was a separation between the primary actor and the group they leave behind, whilst for Bloch it is seen “principally as a dramatically constructed dichotomisation located within the body of each of the participants” (1992:6); not so much a social departure as entry to a drama of resolution. For van Gennep, the third stage was seen as a re-integration into society, and for Turner, into mundane reality, whilst for Bloch, “the third stage is not seen as a return to the condition left behind in the first stage but as an aggressive consumption of a vitality which is different in origin from that which had originally been lost” (1992:6); a conquering return. For Bloch, the accounts of van Gennep and Turner ignored or at least underplayed the symbolism of violence present in so many religious phenomena, which are accounted for in Bloch’s formulation by means of his idea of ‘rebounding violence’. Bloch notes that the violence is not the result of some innate propensity, but is; “a result of the attempt to create the transcendental in religion and politics” (1992:7).

In applying these theoretical formulations to elephant training, the most significant issue that must be addressed is that the ritual subject is dual, both human and animal. Through the ritual process the destiny of man and elephant are bound together. The elephant must be transformed and the trainer must acquire the means to subjugate it, resulting in a practical mastery deriving from a combination of divine sanction and the trainer’s own skill. Only if the principal trainer adheres to a

ritualised discipline for the duration of training will he receive the divine assistance necessary to achieve practical mastery over his elephant, and this includes his abstinence from the natural imperative to procreate. The elephant is subject to a process that is administered by humans, which entails a dialectical negotiation of the transcendental and the mundane, and which depends upon the appropriate honouring of the divinity inhering within it.

Slide 6 Elephant Training as Practical and Ritual Process-Separation

At the Khorsor *hattisar*, the training process commences with the young elephant being separated from its mother and taken into the jungle without her for the very first time. Whereas previously the young elephant would accompany its mother untethered as she was driven into the jungle for grass cutting and grazing duties, on the occasion of its separation, it is tethered to a different elephant by its neck and taken into the jungle. The mother may be visibly and audibly distraught, and may demonstrate her distress through agitated movements and loud trumpeting sounds, whilst her baby appears confused and initially unwilling to submit to being led away. Although technically elephants cannot jump, Paras Gaj's *phanet* Satya Narayan described his elephant's mother Prena Kali as jumping in distress, by which he was referring to the uncharacteristic manner by which she mounted her post with her front legs, almost as if to gain a better vantage to see Paras Gaj as he was led away by Erawat Gaj (you can see this in my film).

Here we see the male Erawat Gaj performing the separating duties, chosen because he is considered unlikely to sympathize with the juvenile and disobey his handler. Paras Gaj is visibly straining at the ropes as he is led away from his mother for the first time. He will not return to his normal place of shelter under a corrugated tin roof at the *khamba* or post where his mother is tethered, nor will he feed from his mother's teat again.

Slide 7 Purifying the *Kamari*, Preparing the Sacrificial ground

This ritual is named after, and conducted at a special, tall post, located some distance away from its mother's post and those of the other elephants. It is performed before the trainee elephant returns from the jungle, on its first day of separation, and is considered essential for ensuring the success of training. For training to be successful, the gods upon whom such an endeavour depends must be propitiated (*Ganesh*, *Ban Devi* and *Bikram Baba*).

In terms of the three aspects of the rite of passage, the *kamari puja* ritually finalises the process of separation and marks the beginning of the liminal phase for both the elephant and its principal trainer. On the completion of training, a similar ritual honouring the same deities is performed, which ritually marks the end of liminality and the induction of elephant and handler into both their new co-dependent relationship as well as their respective transformed statuses. This finalising ritual is not conducted at the *kamari*, but on the space bordering the *hattisar* and the jungle, the domain of *Ban Devi*. These rituals then symbolically demarcate the time of training, bracketing the period of liminality, during which the ordinary routines and obligations of both the trainee elephant and his principal trainer are suspended, and after which they will return transformed as a result of their dramatic ordeal and the intervention of transcendental powers.

The ritual officiant (*pujari*), typically a *hattisare* oversees the preparations for the sacrificial ritual (*puja*) with the assistance of the other *hattisares*.

Before the sacrifices can be performed, various purificatory preparations must be made. Consonant with the understanding that Hindu worship (*puja*) is a means of honouring deities, these preparatory acts also serve the function of symbolically conveying the *hattisares'* respect for the deities to be worshipped (Fuller 1992:68). These should not be seen merely as necessary preparations for a ritual act of sacrifice, but as integral components of the total practice of worship (*puja*) which entails acts of devotion (*bhakti*) as well as sacrifice (*yajna*).

Facing east and in front of the *kamari*, a rectangular patch of ground is cut from the grass. The orientation is of significance since this is the direction from where the sun rises, said to be the direction from where the gods come². A sanctifying mixture of elephant dung and water is applied to this sacrificial and devotional space in order to make it ritually pure (whereas in most Hindu ritual, in acknowledgement of the sacred status and ubiquity of the cow, a mixture of cow dung and water would be applied). The *kamari* must also be sanctified, and this is effected by several means; the purificatory application of water, the insertion of a burning incense stick into the

² My informants were bemused that Muslims pray in the 'wrong' direction, since they face west, the direction of Mecca, the significance of which they were unaware of. Although there are many Muslim elephant handlers in India, a legacy of the era of imperial Mughal stables, I know of only one Muslim elephant handler in Chitwan, who works at the *hattisar* of the Temple Tiger jungle resort.

grain of the post, the smearing of red and yellow tikka powder onto the post, the placing of red and white strips of cloth and flower petals at the base, and the wafting of a flame. The acts of consecration administered to the *kamari* resemble those administered to a divine image (*murti*) in typical Hindu worship, in that it can be seen to entail acts of bathing (*abhisheka*), clothing and decoration (*alankara*), and the display of lamps (*diparadhana*). Although the *kamari* is not a *murti* for which devotees seek *darsan*, nonetheless, these acts of consecration of the *kamari* may be interpreted to accord with the intention commonly attributed to image worship; namely to install divine power within them (Fuller 1992:57-58, 64-65).

Slide 8 Placing The Training Ropes Between The Kamari and The Sacrificial Space

The handmade ropes to be used in the training must also be imbued with divine power, and so are placed between the space of worship and the *kamari*

Slide 9 Attracting The Gods

In order to attract the deities, the sacrificial space must be made alluring to them. And so, just as an architecturally-constructed temple (*mandir*) is intended to be a special place worthy of attracting divine beings, serving as a residence for temporarily receiving and entertaining them (Michell 1977:61), so here in the *hattisar*, with more meagre means available, a simpler and more transitory house of the gods is created. This consists of the application of charcoal powder, rice grains, and both red and yellow tikka powder, to create square forms intersected with diagonal lines. According to my informants, these represent a proxy for the structure of the temple at which religious gifts (*dana*) may be offered. However, these geometric forms may also be interpreted as a simple *yantra*, a sacred diagram which in Tantric traditions are seen as one means of representing the goddess (Flood 1996:160), and/or as a 'cosmogram' or map of the cosmos (Flood 1996:188). The *tikka* squares, as proxies for a temple, are also decorated with tiny flags of red and white cloth and flower petals, said to serve to attract and please the deities, as well as burning incense sticks, which serve to purify the sacred space, and lamps moulded from a malleable clay composed of an earth-water mix, in which cooking oil serves as fuel, and fine rope strands as wicks. For the goddess *Ban Devi*, artefacts of feminine beautification, such as a mirror and a comb, are also often presented (in

keeping with the anthropomorphic conception of deities typical of Hinduism). This then, concludes the worshipful preparations, all of which are accompanied by the invocation of *mantras*, the knowledge of which is a key criterion of qualification to act as a *pujari*.

Slide 10 Presenting Sacrificial Gifts to Ganesha

The final component in the conduct of the ritual at the elephant's training post is the presentation of sacrificial gifts for the deities to symbolically consume. Having been presented, the consecrated 'leftovers' are apportioned to the ritual participants, namely the staff of the *hattisar* and any guests who might be in attendance. These 'leftovers' are known as *prasada*, which literally means 'grace' (Fuller 1992:74). *Prasada* are substances that have been ritually transubstantiated so that they are temporarily infused with divine power and grace (the fact that the power fades over time provides the imperative for having to repeat acts of *puja*) (Fuller 1992:74). *Prasada* can include food as well as non-consumables such as *tikka* powder and blood. These are taken by dabbing one's first finger onto the *tikka* and applying it to one's forehead, which also serves to signify one's participation in a *puja*, and hence the partaking in divine power.

In the *puja* at the *kamari*, both vegetarian and meat-eating deities are worshipped, and as such will have been presented with gifts appropriate to their temperaments. As a fierce goddess capable of wrathful acts, *Ban Devi* must be appeased by satiating her appetite with meat and alcohol, typically receiving as much as two pigeons, two chickens (*kukhuro*, ideally cockerels, *bhale*), two goats (*bakhro*) and a bottle of *raksi*, a clear spirit distilled from rice (*dhan*) or maize (*makka*)³. The animals' are decapitated by severing their throats with a grass-cutting sickle (*asi* or *hasiya*), blood is then purposely dripped over the *yantra*/proxy *mandir*, and the heads are reverently placed upon the *yantra*, close to the flame of the lamp, the incense and the flags.

Ganesh, by contrast, as a deity to be petitioned for assistance, who is typically iconographically represented with a bloated belly and a tray of sweet rice balls, does not accept meat, and is thus given fruit and sweets, especially his favourite, the sweet

³ In the elephant training rituals I observed, the goats were only included for sacrifice on the occasion of the *puja* performed on completion of training. Yielding more meat for consumption as *prasada*, this was also more convenient since the completion of training is a time for celebration, free of the anxious uncertainty as to the outcome of training.

rice balls⁴. In the cases I observed, the fruit was apple, but the ritual does not specifically prescribe apples. Rather, the choice of fruit is determined by seasonal availability. The rice balls are presented on plant leaves, next to the apples, just in front of the geometric forms of the *yantra*.

At Khorsor, *Ban Devi puja* are always eagerly anticipated since it implies the atypical opportunity to feast upon meat (*masu*) as well as an opportunity to celebrate, at which all the staff know that Section Sahib will not disapprove of the drinking of *raksi*. Typically, in the evenings after a *Ban Devi puja* and the taking of *dal-bhat* with the added extra of *masu*, the men will gather in a social area to make music, to sing, to drink, to dance and to generally make merry, all the more so if the *puja* was one of completion.

Slide 11 Paras Struggling Wit His Bonds

Once the *puja* at the *kamari* has been completed, the trainee elephant is led to its training post, at which it will reside for the duration of its training. It will be tethered by both feet as well as by its neck. For training it will be tethered especially tightly so as to restrict its movement to a mere circumambulation in very close proximity to its *kamari*. This is in contrast to adult, trained elephants whose range of possible movement is much larger. Furthermore, subsequent to training, it is only usually the male elephants that are tethered by both feet.

Slide 12 Constructing Atargal with mathiya Made of Rope

Trainee elephants are shackled by ropes rather than chains primarily because the elephant will initially struggle against its state of bondage, and rope abrasions are less injurious than those caused by chains⁵. However, whilst watching Satya Narayan construct a *mathiya* from rope (the ring component of the stirrups), I was also told that according to tradition the use of metal during training is ill advised as it is considered impure (*jutho*). Not all trainers take such a ritually assiduous approach to training however, and some do not bother to substitute metal for rope *mathiya*.

⁴ It is believed that the pan-Hindu deity known both as *Ganesh* and *Ganpati* historically developed from a fierce *yaksa*, a type of nature spirit that required propitiation to avoid negative consequences, only later to become the much-loved *Vinayaka*, or remover of obstacles, invoked at the commencement of all endeavours to ensure good luck.

⁵ Photos by Hank Hammatt of Elephant Care International, of untreated abrasions on elephant ankles in Sumatra are particularly shocking, and provide a testament to the importance of vigilance and care in keeping captive elephants shackled (see appendix six).

So- the trainee elephant has had a state of liminality imposed upon it. At the *kamari* it has been divorced from its previous state, in which it lived in contented proximity to its mother, and will be subjected to dramatic ordeals that will effect its transformation towards becoming an elephant that can be ridden and obeys its driver. Having petitioned deities for their assistance, its sacred status will be more acutely appreciated, even though this entails the handlers exercising a far greater degree of coercive and punitive control than at any other time in its life.

Slide 13 Day Time Driving Training Begins

Having been separated from its mother, taken into the jungle attached to an elephant like Erawat Gaj, and had the *Kamari Puja* performed, a trainee elephant will soon be adjudged ready to begin receiving its day-time driving training. According to the *hattisares*, the acute effects of the trauma of separation only afflict the mother and her baby for a few days. All the while, as it adjusts to its restricted movement at the *kamari*, separated from its mother, and receiving reduced rations, it will be tiring itself out. As the handlers explained to me, the more the trainee struggles the better, since as it gets weaker it becomes more compliant, and therefore more receptive to human intervention.

This is why training has often been represented as an attempt to 'break' the elephant's will. This is a rather stark interpretation with unpleasant connotations that the ritual process seems intended to attenuate. Indeed, the necessary suffering inflicted upon the elephant is something the handlers readily admit that they regret, and is one reason why they believe they must ritually communicate their apologies to *Ganesha*. Furthermore, since training is not without risk to the long-term welfare of the elephant and his principal trainer, the thought of transcendental intervention is psychologically reassuring for the handlers.

Precisely how soon driving training commences is a decision made by the chief elephant handler in consultation with senior staff experienced in giving training (*talim dine*). Sometimes several days of isolation and solitary jungle trips tethered to Erawat Gaj will be deemed necessary, depending on evaluations of the physical and mental stamina of the elephant. If the trainee is too boisterous, then he could jeopardise the safety of his driver. Females usually receive driving training a day or two after separation, whilst males usually begin to receive theirs two or three days after separation. This also indicates the importance of vigilance, which depends on

the acquired ability to discern signs of change in an elephant's demeanour as it endures the ordeal of training.

Once the decision to commence driving training has been made, the trainee will be subject to a new routine of daily sessions lasting about four or five hours for a period of two to four weeks, depending on the elephant's aptitude for learning to respond to basic verbal commands as well as the tactile commands applied by the toes to the back of the neck, by which a driver can steer his elephant to the left and right. The basic verbal commands that must be taught during training are: move forward (*agad!*), sit (*baith!*), stand (*maiel!*), stop (*ra!*), lay down (*sut!*), give (*le!*), and leave alone (*chhi!*), which is important since the trainee will not yet have learnt that it's inappropriate to shower himself with cooling and protective earth whilst bearing a driver. Over the next six months a trainee elephant will learn further commands, typically responding to a repertoire of around 25 words, although more can be taught.

This new driving routine entails Paras Gaj being roped up to the two training elephants. The daily departure is a collectively witnessed event, inaugurated by shouts and hollers from the onlooking *hattisares* as the training team runs off at full pelt. A sense of festive excitement is palpable. Each *talim dine hatti* carries a driver and a passenger on a *gada*. Despite the joyous atmosphere of the send-off, the early days of training can be quite tense, demanding a great deal of effort and attentiveness from elephants and riders. For this reason, the passenger may be called upon to use a kind of truncheon called a *lohauta*, which is attached to the elephant's rigging by rope, and is occasionally used to beat the training elephant's haunches if it needs to be spurred on to go faster. During these first days the primary concern is for the trainee to be thoroughly exercised and to become accustomed to bearing a rider. As Satya Narayan explained to me: "Once the elephant is fatigued, then he will be willing to learn from us". More concerted efforts to inculcate understanding of specific commands will come later. The passengers will often sing songs, since the trainee needs to become desensitised to loud noise.

Slide 14 Paras Gaj in a Willful Mood During Training

At first the trainee elephant is wilful, trying to go this way and that, yet to realise that life will be easier once he relinquishes his autonomy. As a result, it takes all of his rider's efforts just to hold on. Without effective trust and communication between the principal trainer and the other drivers, who in turn must be able to

depend on their elephants' ability to understand what is required of them, then the training session will not proceed well.

In the first few days of Paras Gaj's training, an incident occurred which illustrated just how crucial this working synchrony is. Dil Bahadur was unable to drive as a result of abrasions on his foot due to his stirrup rubbing as the elephants twisted, turned and pulled against the obdurate Paras Gaj. The secondary elephant training teams were now being deployed, and their drivers were considerably less experienced. Whilst out in the open fields adjacent to the *hattisar*, a sudden turn by Paras took one of the *phanets* by surprise, and he failed to ensure his elephant (Chanchal Kali) kept the connecting ropes untangled. As a result, Satya Narayan was forced to jump off Paras Gaj, otherwise he might have been crushed between ropes that were threatening to enclose him. Fortunately his quick response ensured he did not contract an injury that could have necessitated the abandonment of training. Harsh words were spoken, and accusations cast regarding the competence of one of the drivers (who was not a *phanet*). He had to bear the public indignity of incurring Section Sahib's displeasure, and did not receive a further opportunity to prove himself in giving driving training.

With regard to the elephant's ability to learn what is required of it, this is partially instilled through the use of violence, especially the principal trainer's use of sharpened bamboo sticks (*kocha*) applied to the backside of the elephant's ears. The rationale here is that once the elephant realises what it's driver is requesting of it, and acts accordingly, such as turning to the left, then the application of pain will desist. According to the handlers, after training, during everyday driving, it is the bodily memories of these unpleasant experiences that are activated when a handler depresses his toes to direct his elephant. The elephant responds they say, because it understands the causal relation, and has no desire to be subjected to those prior pain states again. The elephant has learnt that compliance with a request will ensure that it is not punished, and this learning is not easily forgotten, because it is somehow 'imprinted in the body' just as the ability to ride a bicycle is for humans.

Slide 15 Training Elephant Helps Correct The Trainee

The assistance of the training elephants is also integral to this teaching process. Whilst a principal trainer is trying to instil the response to a command to go right or left, the pulling of the *talim dine hatt*i plays a reinforcing role. For example, Satya Narayan might jab Paras Gaj on the left hand side, and at the same time the right hand *talim dine hatt*i will receive a command from its driver to pull to the right. On occasion, especially when taking the trainee up and down inclines, the training elephants will even use their trunks to help correct the trainee. As we can see from the photo, when one elephant is pulling the trainee up an incline, the driver of the other elephant must ensure that his elephant's connecting ropes are not taut, otherwise the trainee could get injured. Small inclines such as these are very useful during training as it is considered easier to get elephants to respond to the lay down and sit commands (*sut!/baith!*)

Slide 16 Giving Trust (*bishwas dine*)

Although this 'conditioning by aversion' is a fundamental component of elephant training, handlers were always keen to remind me that training also entails the building of trust, and that they considered reward just as important as punishment. When a trainee successfully performs a required command, the principal trainer will pat his head with protective earth or mud, in a gesture they call 'giving trust' (*bishwas dine*).

Slide 17 The Sensory Experience of Urban Environments

As the trainee progresses, becoming increasingly responsive to its *phanet*, then the driving sessions begin to range further a field. Having mastered rural sights, sounds and smells, a decision will be made to take the trainee into town, the final stage of its driving training. This is because government elephants have to be trained to tolerate the sights, sounds and smells of the city, with all its traffic and hustle and bustle. The sight of an elephant in the midst of being trained is an unusual sight and always attracts a crowd of curious onlookers.

Slide 18 Night Time Training

Whereas daytime training only requires a select few, night time training is a truly collective event for all *hattisares*. Each night, as the dark closes in, the handlers congregate around the trainee elephant, armed with burning torches, and begin to sing. These sessions always begin and end with devotional songs, and usually last

for about 40 minutes. However, in between these songs, the men all have fun singing songs of a very lewd character, usually involving female genitalia. Just as rites of passage often involve ritual humiliation, so too they often permit reversals of propriety, and this is evident in a much loved song in which the men sing of having intercourse with the *adikrit subba's* wife, which he accepts without offence⁶. This helps to create a festive atmosphere, and whilst singing, the men will also massage the elephant's body so as to desensitise it, to 'take away its ticklishness' as Section Sahib explained to me. On these occasions men will also begin to clamber onto the elephant and will begin to shout commands such as 'agad!', whilst simultaneously applying pressure on the elephant to move it forwards as desired by the command. It seems obvious that these occasions serve to integrate the whole elephant handling community of Khorsor with the training endeavour. The symbolism of conquest that Bloch alludes to also plays out in the night time training sessions. The practical basis of these ordeals (conditioning the elephant not to fear ordinarily alarming stimuli, including fire, noise, touching and poking all over its body), effects a behavioural transformation. However, these ordeals can also be seen as a symbolic drama of subjugation.

Duty of Care to the Elephant

The principal trainer, the *phanet* of the trainee, as well as the *raut* and the *adikrit subba*, are all responsible for the wellbeing of the elephant, for which they are subject to several incentives. Firstly and most importantly, elephants are valuable economic commodities owned by their employers, the Department of National Parks, the government, and by tradition also the King, and as such their professional reputations are at stake⁷. Secondly, one should not discount the fact that every elephant is conceived as being infused with the spirit of *Ganesha*, and that the handlers have therefore effectively taken a solemn vow not to displease the patron god upon whom their livelihood depends. After all, they have petitioned his grace

⁶ Recordings I made of these songs represent a data set worthy of further analysis.

⁷ Traditionally, elephants were always the property of the King, except by special dispensation, but even in the era of constitutional monarchy, government elephants still seem to be conceived as royal property. The venerable and legendary elephant handler, *Bhagu Tharu*, a man in his 70s, shaped by the attitudes of the pre-democratic era, would regularly talk of the King by use of the term *sarkar*, which means 'government', thereby conflating the two, since in his thinking the King still not only personifies government, but is synonymous with it (and at the time of the research, the King had not yet resumed power as an absolute monarch as he did on February 1 2005, before being subsequently deposed after a month of popular public protest in April 2006). For more on this, see section 3.5 in chapter three.

and power to ensure that training goes well, so are in some sense bound by a responsibility to him. If training should go wrong, then it must not be a result of the handlers' own negligence. The validity of this contention is supported by the frequent gestures of obeisance most handlers make to their elephants when they mount them.

Slide 19 Paras Still Inclined to Coat Himself with Protective Mud and Earth

Consequently, the *phanet*, *raut*, and *adikrit subba*, in whom ultimate responsibility is vested, are especially vigilant during elephant training. Should the elephant cause itself excessive abrasive injuries during the first few days when it is still strong and struggling against its new restraints, then the neck tether can be removed. It is at the neck that the elephant is capable of creating the most friction⁸. The raw wounds are prone to infection and irritation from insects and so the trainee's *mahout* is responsible for boiling up a mixture of water with the fine earth from a termite mound, which once cool, is applied as a paste to the wounds, thereby protecting them from insect attack.

It is a popular myth that elephants have thick skin. Indeed, quite the reverse is true. During training, whilst being driven, elephants have to be taught not to throw dirt over themselves, which they do in order to protect themselves from insect bites. With a rider upon them, thereby precluding application of a protective coating of mud and/or dust, insect bites easily draw blood. A considerate handler must be cognisant of this, and many handlers will consequently occupy themselves by squashing flies with their stick (*kocha*), the flat side of their sickle (*asi* or *hasiya*), or Nepali knife (*khukri*).

Slide 20

The Phanet's Ritual Relation to the Trainee Elephant

The *phanet*, as the principal trainer who will take the greatest risk by riding an elephant not yet habituated to being ridden, differs from the *raut* and *adikrit subba* in

⁸ As we have seen, when *Paras Gaj* was first shackled to his *kamari*, there was great difficulty in securing him by his neck. The knots were insufficient to restrain him at the neck, there were cracks in the old *kamari*, at the notch where neck ropes are secured, leading to worry as to whether the post would be strong enough, and he began to loosen the knots. In November 2005, when Kha Prasad, the son of Sitasma Kali was given training, an abrasive injury to his neck became infected and he subsequently died. Narayani Kali, during her training in January 2004 also received abrasive wounds that became infected and which had to be treated by the vet. These cases serve to demonstrate that training is a risky venture that demands utmost vigilance.

his responsibility and relation to the elephant. He has a greater personal investment, since before training begins, he will already have developed a close bond through caring for the young elephant, which should have had its own staff allocated to it from at least the age of two. Training represents something of an ordeal for him as well as for the elephant, and the successful completion of this dangerous endeavour will bring him prestige and respect from his colleagues. Satya Narayan explained that the physical rigours of driving training were exhausting and caused aches and pains in his body, especially his lower back. In addition, the ritual prohibitions he must abide by serve to symbolically bond him to 'his' elephant, placing both the elephant and the trainer in a state of liminality.

For the duration of training, it is said that the *phanet* adopts a state of *sanyas*, or ascetic renunciation. Just as a *samnyasi*, or *sadhu* as they are popularly known, is someone who has abdicated his familial duties (the *asrama*, or life stage of *grhastha*, or householder) in order to work towards achieving *moksa* through the pursuit of *gnan*, (the knowledge of realisation), and the practice of *yoga*, so too during training, the *phanet* must give up many of the practices which signify his participation in everyday life in order to bring himself closer to the divine⁹.

He must avoid becoming polluted (*jutho*) by abstaining from meat and alcohol. In order to avoid being polluted, he must take his *dal-bhat* before anyone else has removed food from the cooking pots, and may even consume his meals in isolation¹⁰. Furthermore, he must avoid sexual intercourse and any physical contact with women. In fact, the close proximity of women and young girls to trainee elephants and their *kamari* is considered extremely unlucky and they must be prevented from doing so. As Satya Narayan explained to me: "We have to take *sanyas* (live like an ascetic). That's been our tradition (*parampara*) from way back. Whoever's training, they eat first. We have to eat separately so we are not eating anyone's *jutho*

⁹ *Samnyasa* is the final stage of the Brahmanic ideal typology of the four *asrama*, or life stages, which along with the four *varna* or classes of society, are the central components in the ideology of *dharma*, a model of and for (cf Geertz 1966), life in the moral order of the cosmos, thus together comprising the *varnasramadharm*. The stages are as follows: celibate student (*brahmacarya*), householder (*grhastha*), hermit or forest dweller (*vanaprastha*) and renouncer (*samnyasa*) (Flood 1996:62).

¹⁰ At Khorsor, there is a separate housing quarter known as 'the *sadhu* house' at which the non-meat eaters cook and consume their food separate from the others, smoke *chilums*, and where a few of them also reside. Paras Gaj's *phanet* ate his food at the '*sadhu* house' throughout training, although Narayani Kali's *phanet* chose to take his from the main kitchen, albeit ensuring that the food (*khana*) was untouched, and therefore not *jutho*.

(impurity). We have to wash out own dishes and water vessels, because we believe that if we are *jutho* the elephant might get sick. It's an old belief.”

Finally, at the completion of training the principal trainer has to shave his head and wear white. In other words, he has to fulfil the obligations of a chief mourner at a funeral. After all, in Bloch's formulation of the rite of passage, the final stage is conceived as a return to materiality entailing a conquest of the transcendental. Through divine intervention, the trainer has brought the elephant under his control. The funerary symbolism suggests then that the old handler and the old elephant are no more—they have both been transformed, and the handler's novel appearance serves to remind us of the dramatic change that has been effected.

Conclusion

Elephant training undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in the reproduction of *hattisare* professional identity in Nepali government stables. In the last few years, the practices I have described have received the attention of various Humane Elephant Training Programmes, international interventions from foreign NGOs working with the local Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC). Whilst their stated aims are of reducing the use of punitive training methods, they have not significantly interfered with the customary ritual of training, its sustaining ideology, or the community of practice as a basis for enskilment and professional identity formation.