

An integrated approach? Exploring the social, historical, and ecological dimensions of human-elephant relations

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- As we all know, the relations between humans and elephants are complex, diverse, and longstanding- Professor Sukumar's magisterial survey is surely testament to such a claim. It is very exciting to have assembled here today a group of scholars, researchers, and practitioners whose expertise traverses the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences, and that also encompasses the pure and applied aspects of the human-elephant nexus.
- We have here today anthropologists, ecologists, geographers, historians, political scientists, Sanskritists, and zoologists, as well as experts on captive elephant management.
- We have papers on the ancient origins of mahouting, on knowledge about elephants in Sanskrit literature, on the personal and political significance of elephant keeping for imperial regimes, and on the idea of cloning extinct woolly mammoths.
- We have papers on the role of music in elephant training traditions, on elephants, logging and tourism in Laos, on the changing situation of elephant employment in Thailand, on the relations between elephant and mahout welfare, and on the ethical politics of keeping captive elephants.
- We have papers on the policies and practices for elephant conservation and the mitigation of human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka, on possibilities for tolerant coexistence between humans and elephants in South India, and on the political and ecological entanglements that produce conflict between humans and elephants in and around a protected area in South India.
- We also have papers that explore theoretical approaches to problems of coexistence and conservation drawing on political ecology and more-than-

human geography, on the methodological possibilities of ethnoecological approaches, and on the prospects of an integrated approach to the study of human-elephant relations.

- This is certainly not the first time such an event has been convened- I could point to the Smithsonian-sponsored conference in 2003, that led to the book *Elephants and Ethics: Toward a Morality of Coexistence*, edited by Chris Wemmer and Catherine Christen, and to the *Symposium on Human-Elephant Relations and Conflicts* convened by the Biodiversity and Elephant Conservation Trust, also in 2003, and published as *Endangered Elephants: Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Jayanatha Jayarwardene, editor of the journal *Gajah*.

- I'm sure such events help to encourage conversation across disciplinary divides. Of course, this symposium is on a rather more modest scale, but I do not doubt that it will also encourage discussions that cannot be contained by the respective domains of our disciplinary expertise. Indeed, this symposium was motivated by a conviction that the time might be right to build upon such events in order to go beyond multidisciplinary and towards interdisciplinarity. With a degree of trepidation then, I would like to make a proposal- a proposal for a more integrated approach to human elephant relations that recognizes the complexity of our social, historical, and ecological entanglements.

- Rather than suggesting something new though, instead I think I am merely identifying an emerging trend, a trend that perhaps you will agree warrants its own designation- ethnoelephantology. What I would like to do in this presentation then, is to persuade you that this is not merely an act of vacuous sloganeering on my part. In order to do so, I shall briefly outline the theoretical parameters, explore the precedents, and intimate the prospects for ethnoelephantology as both shared discursive space and integrated programme for the investigation of human-elephant relations.

- So what will this involve? Well, firstly I would like to very briefly talk about posthumanism and the biocultural synthesis as the broad-brushstroke

intellectual context, about more-than-human geographies and multispecies ethnography as applications of these perspectives, and about ethnoprimateology - a cross-disciplinary field that investigates human-primate encounters using ethnographic and ethological methods, which I think provides an instructive precedent for ethnoelephantology. It should also become clear that these intellectual currents and new trends in research relate to two principal propositions that I suggest can characterize ethnoelephantology: The first is that both humans and elephants share sentient and affective lifeworlds, by which I mean to suggest that we should not underestimate the similarities of these two species as thinking and feeling social beings (an idea unlikely to be strange to many of the experts assembled here today). And as species that may be understood to have not only coexisted, but also coevolved, the second is that the social, historical, and ecological lives of humans and elephants are not just mutually entangled, but also, to some extent, mutually constituted- mutuality is a key theme of my discussion, which you can also find for instance in Jamie Lorimer's paper on elephants as companion species.

- So what do I mean by Posthumanism? Basically, it can be characterized as an epistemological stance that comes after Humanism - Humanism being that tradition of thought in which the human serves as an Archimedean point for knowing the world. In other words, I am acknowledging the anthropocentrism of Humanism, and this is what Posthumanism rejects, for good reasons, as we will see. This is significant, since the architecture of modernist thought has been dependent upon oppositions such as subject/object, nature/culture, and animality/humanity. Such oppositions are integral to the differentiation of the biological and the social sciences, helping to produce disciplinary silos that both facilitate and limit the possibilities of understanding, relevant to my concern with drawing on theory and method from both the human and the animal sciences in order to understand the human-elephant nexus. The consequences of this categorical configuration lead Donna Haraway to criticize the arrogance of what she calls human exceptionalism.

- I can illustrate my own unwitting capitulation to human exceptionalism in

relation to my field research. I originally conceived of my research in the government elephant stables of Nepal in very conventional anthropological terms – I thought of it as an ethnographic study of the human use of elephants. However, in the course of experiencing cross-species intimacies, I came to realize that my ethnographic subjects did not just consist of humans- Even if the primary communicative mode was not verbal; my engagements with elephants as intentional agents with particular life-histories and temperaments (or even ‘personalities’) from whom I could learn, made them ethnographic subjects who happened to be non-human. This gave me cause to reflect on the humanist ontology upon which conventional ethnography is predicated- the study of humans conceived as unique beings completely unlike other animals, despite the fact that we have known for sometime that humans are not unique in using tools, or in possessing traditions of socially transmitted knowledge. Without realizing it, I was then conducting research that later could be called multispecies ethnography (more on that later).

-Somewhat related to the philosophical perspective of Posthumanism is the rise of what some call the biocultural synthesis. What do I mean by this? Well, I shall limit myself to an indicative observation. As a result of an increasing recognition of the interconnections between the social and the ecological (and we might mention the work of Madav Gadgil as an early pioneer in developing a social ecology), it has become clear that there is a need to combine approaches from the natural and the social sciences to understand such pressing issues as natural disaster, climate change, and also human-animal relations. As with Posthumanism, it seeks to overcome the constraints of the exclusionary logics of nature and society, human and animal, mind and body. It is evident in biodiversity conservation, which increasingly incorporates sociological methods and perspectives (I consider the journal *Conservation and Society* exemplary in this regard), and in ethnobiology, which uses biological methods and perspectives in order to understand how different human populations use and understand their biophysical environments (Newing 2010).

-So, with Posthumanism we have an epistemological stance, and with the biocultural synthesis a research paradigm, both of which pertain to my proposal

for ethnoelephantology, and both of which inform the more-than-human geography and multispecies ethnography I have alluded to, which may be seen as parallel developments in geography and anthropology respectively. I think Maan Barua is better qualified than I to explain more-than-human geography. As is also the case with multispecies ethnography, I'm not sure if a substantive definition and programmatic statement has yet been articulated. But, both terms are gaining discursive traction, and both terms suggest some very distinct concerns and orientations- with decentering the human and the artificial separation of nature and culture, with the ways in which nonhumans inhabit shared space with humans, with the ways in which nonhumans are actively implicated in human social, political, historical, and ecological relations, and with the ways in which subjectivities arise from affective relations, communication, cooperation and conflict between species. In both cases we find a literature informed by Actor-Network Theory (mapping networks and recognizing agency through effects) and political ecology (recognizing the social and political processes that configure lived environments and relations between species).

- To better understand my proposal for ethnoelephantology we need to get a little more grounded. This is where ethnoprimateology comes in, which we can see as a type of multispecies ethnography – I hope you will excuse me for this diversion into the world of primates. Many of you may appreciate that a great deal of primatology is quite reasonably concerned with studying primates as our evolutionary cousins. For primatologist Agustin Fuentes this led to a succession of failed research grant applications. Why? He wanted to study the contact zones between humans and primates, to understand the mutual significance of their interactions, but this went against the grain of the evolutionary paradigm, which required researching primates in a pristine state, unfettered by human interference. Eventually he succeeded though, going on to play a key role in the emergence of an exciting new field.

- Representing a convergence of field primatology and sociocultural anthropology, ethnoprimateology employs a revised primatological practice that allows for analyses of the intersecting lifeworlds of humans and other primates in an integrated, shared, social and ecological space (remember my propositions

about sentient and affective lifeworlds, and about the social, historical and ecological intersections between species?) First proposed by cultural anthropologist Leslie Sponsel (1997), primatologist Agustin Fuentes has become one of the most prominent exponents of ethnoprimateology, explaining that the ethno prefix; “marks the inclusion of anthropogenic elements, including social, economic, and political histories and contexts” (2010:601). This is because humans and primates, as with humans and elephants; “are simultaneously actors and participants in sharing and shaping mutual ecologies” (2010:600). The concept of mutual ecology entails both the ‘structural ecology’ of the biotic landscape and physical environment in which humans and primates, or indeed humans and elephants live, and the ‘social ecology’ by which; “different agents navigate and create social networks, sometimes across species lines”, which keep; “the forces of history, political economy, interindividual relationships and culture clearly in view” (Fuentes 2010: 600). To think about mutual ecologies is to consider how interacting organisms co-produce and co-construct each other’s niches in behavioral, ecological, and physiological senses.

- In *Natural Cultural Encounters in Bali: Monkeys, Temples, Tourists and Ethnoprimateology*, an essay appearing in a special issue of the journal *Cultural Anthropology* dedicated to multispecies ethnography, Fuentes provides a case study demonstrating the potentials of such an approach. Based on research at the Padangtal Temple and the Ubud Monkey Forest, he considers the temple as a naturalcultural contact zone in which, economies, bodies, and daily practice are entangled in the co-production of niches, which affect the behaviour, composition and size of macaque populations.

- Edible religious gifts shape the macaques’ dietary ecology, whilst patterns of distribution, involving tourists, affect the socio-political dynamics of macaque populations. Touristic and religious activity at the monkey temple also affects the agro-ecological systems of wet rice agriculture and irrigation, and hence the landscape of the riverine forest corridors, such that humanly altered landscapes affect macaque social patterns and population genetics. This is due to males moving through clusters of related females as units of gene flow, according to the

channels created by the anthropogenic landscape. Here I can think of parallel elephant cases in the work of Jamie Lorimer for Sri Lanka, Maan Barua for Assam, and Michael Hathaway for China.

- But Fuentes takes his analysis further, recognizing the epidemiological significance of macaque bodies for zoonotic disease transmission to humans (and here I'm inclined to think about the problem of elephant tuberculosis, a current topic in my own research in Nepal, where Susan Mikota and Elephant Care International are running a treatment programme). In a more conventionally ethnographic register, his analysis also includes consideration of the roles of macaques as crop raiding pests, tolerated co-residents, household pets, participants in the Balinese Hindu mythos, and tourist attractions. With these roles comes an attendant range of emotions: tolerance, anger, and affection. (Again, here it should not be difficult for us to think about parallel issues of elephant crop raiding, the sacred qualities of the elephant in Hinduism and Buddhism, and elephant-back ecotourism).

- Furthermore, Fuentes explores the relationship between space, behavior and tourists, noting that as an asset for tourism, macaques attract entrance fees and contributions to local tourist economy, supporting village community building, temple enhancement and restoration, and agricultural projects. This in turn can lead to the human expansion of macaque habitat, an example of the mutual shaping of ecologies and modification of interfaced niches.

- Clearly then, macaque behavior and ecology is tied to the local actions of humans. It would be incomplete to view this solely through an adaptive ecological lens though, since cultural elements are at play in building and reshaping the local niches of macaques and humans. What we have that is novel is a hybrid methodological and conceptual toolkit, integrating the social, mythical, economic, and historical alongside the ecological and behavioural, as a way to make sense of the countervailing forces and agents of a multispecies system. I am happy to report that it is not only in the field of ethnoprimateology that such approaches are being pursued.

- It should be evident then that this approach can also be applied to the interactions between humans and elephants. Indeed, I think there is already work that is variously concerned with the interface between the affective and sentient lifeworlds of humans and elephants, and the mutual entanglement of their social, historical and ecological worlds- many of the papers that will be presented at this conference are precisely concerned not only with how humans live with and share space with elephants, in the past or in the present, but also with how we can best conceive of the intimacy and intensity of cross-species relations.

- I have been compiling examples from history, anthropology, and geography that I consider to exemplify this ethnoelephantology I am proposing, but time prevents me from much in the way of discussion. I would though like to mention an example of historical ethnoelephantology- Susan Nance's *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus*, a work of history that draws on animal behavioural science to inform an account that is attentive to the agency of elephants. Nance tells us that there is a growing body of historians interested in nonhumans not just as representations or as foils for telling human stories, but as living beings for charting an interspecific past. Indeed, she claims that the key lesson of writing transspecies histories is the insight that human and nonhuman lives exist in symbiosis. Her account of elephants in 19th century circuses is distinctive for recognizing elephants as historical actors with consciousness and subjectivity.