

Animals, Persons, Gods: Kaleidoscopic Ontologies in a Multispecies Total Institution

(Slide 1) This paper is about elephants traversing the borders of animality, personhood, and divinity. Based on fieldwork in the elephant stables of Nepal (Hart and Locke 2007, Locke 2008, 2011a, 2011b), I deploy the metaphor of the kaleidoscope, that multiple mirrored cylinder through which the act of looking yields beautiful forms, to help me make sense of the multiple ontological states and multiple relational modalities through which handlers conceive of and engage with their elephants in the *hattisar*, or elephant stable. In so doing, this paper also tells a story of affective and semiotic relations in a multispecies total institution in which elephant and human bodies and lifeworlds are thoroughly entangled in fulfillment of their shared role in and around the territory of a National Park.

(Slide 2) Prologue: Beyond Anthropomorphism

During my time living and apprenticing with elephants and their handlers in Chitwan, Nepal, I found that captive elephants are variously accorded the status of animal, person, and god. From the conventional standpoint of Western thought, this raises the issue of anthropomorphism, not so much in its pre-modern sense of the attribution of human form to divinity, but rather in its modern sense of the attribution of uniquely human features to animals (Daston and Mitman 2005: 2), a taboo instilled in animal ethologists that many have found hard to resist (*cf.* Isenberg 2002). It is worth noting that this prohibition on recognizing the humanity of animals (Fuentes 2006) ought to be anomalous if we consider the phylogenetic model of evolutionary relatedness to which almost all biologists subscribe, and which implicitly challenges the Cartesian categorical separation of humanity and animality (Willerslev 2007:114). The cultural primatologist Frans de Waal has even fired off a rhetorical salvo against the repudiation of cross-species continuities in the form of his very own neologism – ‘anthropodenial’ (1999). This recognition similarly informs Dominique Lestel’s discussion of the interrelations between

ethology and ethnology (Lestel 2006, Lestel, Brunois & Gaunet 2006), which revisits the issue of human and non-human socialities after the controversies of Sociobiology, by focusing on methodological convergence rather than imperialist, reductive theory. The similarities of the etho- and ethno- endeavors perhaps first became evident in the fieldwork practices of Jane Goodall, who began treating the Gombe chimpanzees like ethnographic subjects, which in turn led the way for the chimpanzee cultures thesis (Wrangham et al 1994). Such perspectives inform Ethnoprimatology (see Fuentes 2010), an emergent field dedicated to human-primate interactions, that exemplifies the application of a multispecies ethnographic perspective, and which this author contends can be adapted for human-elephant relations under the rubric of Ethnoelephantology (Locke & Mackenzie *in press*). The necessity for a multispecies approach to my ethnography of captive elephant management became evident when I realized that I was not merely conducting research into the human use of animals in the context of occupational community, skilled apprenticeship, biodiversity conservation, and nature tourism, but also rather of the social intimacies between two types of person, only one of which happens to be human. To re-conceive my research as additionally involving participant observation with non-human subjects reminded me of the humanist epistemology underlying the ethnographic tradition of fieldwork in which I began my work (*cf.* Kohn 2007).

(Slide 3) Ontological States and Relational Modalities

“Elephants are just like people too” was a ubiquitous refrain I heard from many of my elephant handler companions, a claim I realized only poses a threat to an ontological order preoccupied with what Donna Haraway has called human exceptionalism (2008), a conceptual order quite unlike the permeable one I found myself inhabiting. For in the lifeworld of the Nepali elephant handlers, I found that elephants simultaneously occupy the ontological states of animality, personhood, and divinity. Whilst ultimately these states are understood as co-extensive, they are nonetheless variably emphasized. Indeed, I found that each state had a concomitant relational modality, which I identify as domination, companionship, and veneration.

Only the dynamic of companionship is balanced, the others placing human and elephant in converse hierarchies, making a handler a master in one, and a devotee in another. I invoke the metaphor of the kaleidoscope to convey the fluid manner by which the relative salience of animality, personhood, and divinity continually shift, the configuration changing according to spatio-temporal activity like the refractive turns of the mirrored cylinder that yield new configurations of colour and form.

Firstly, I discuss the state of personhood within the context of apprenticeship, deriving from the experience of embodied practice, and emphasizing the balanced modality of companionship. I go on to explore the state of animality that emerges from the language of didactic instruction, which emphasizes the hierarchic modality of domination. Arguing for the primacy of embodied practice in the assertion of elephant personhood, I then discuss the contrasting contexts in which these other states become salient, and in which elephant personhood is seemingly de-emphasized. Finally, I explore the conceptual order implied by the ritual practices of the elephant stable, explaining the third modality of veneration, which constitutes elephants as divine beings.

(Slide 4) Personhood, Companionship, and Embodied Practice

Most forms of tutelary apprenticeship entail the mastery of a set of transposable skills, transmitted from expert to neophyte through demonstration and imitation (Lave and Wenger 1991, Lave 1993). However, the skills to be mastered in apprenticing as an elephant handler involve the mastery of a relationship between two particular sentient beings, albeit mediated by an expert tutor. Whilst generic skill sets are acquired, and are similarly predicated upon a relationship between a neophyte and an expert, in this context the intended outcome of mastery entails a cross-species inter-subjectivity of mutual attunement (*cf.* Despret 2004:125). To master the basic skills of elephant handling is to initiate an intimate and reciprocal relationship with an elephant, a process suggested by Donna Haraway's term 'becoming with' (2006). The additional third conscious subject in this form of

apprenticeship is extremely significant then for its ontological implications of interpersonal subjectivity and its attendant modality of companionship.

This is the basis for the personhood of elephants in practical experience - one learns to be with one's elephant through a routine in which time spent together in the jungle, cutting grass, bathing, or grazing, is central, and which entails acquired proficiency in interactive bodily comportment. Apprenticeship learning typically depends on the development of an empathic bond between tutor and tutee, as Gieser (2008) has recently argued by combining Tim Ingold's emphasis on practical environmental engagement in situated social relationships (2000) with Kay Milton's emphasis on emotion as a learning mechanism in filtering attention (2002). In the case of becoming an elephant handler (*hattisare*) however, the object of one's enskilment is also a subject accorded agency, and the empathic bond with one's elephant is even more important, as I myself learnt with Sitasma Kali, the female elephant with whom I apprenticed, and as all the *hattisare* regularly concurred.

For an elephant to permit you to care and ride him or her, trust, understanding, and an appreciation of each other's dispositions is vital. An index of this in the relationship Sitasma and I developed, was the ritual greeting with which we began our days together, a kind of material-semiotic dance representing what Haraway describes as "embodied communication that takes place in entwined, semiotic, overlapping, somatic-patterning" (2006:110-111). This involved Sitasma hugging me with her trunk, recognizing me as 'her human' through my smell. It is significant that she was as much 'my elephant' as I was 'her human', and this mutuality was acknowledged by all the handlers in discussing their working life.

One's elephant also represents a tutor, and the mutuality of companionship becomes especially evident in the experience of enskilment as a competent handler. As my mentor, Sitasma would for example, wiggle her head to inform me that I was misapplying my toes in transmitting driving instructions. Similarly, she would demonstrate that her insistence on turning left when I was trying to turn right was

not disobedience on her part, but rather her revealing to me her preferred grazing foods, which it was my responsibility to learn, and which include medicinal plants that indicate digestive ill health.

(Slide 5) Animality, Domination and Didactic Instruction

But my apprenticeship with Sitasma was also mediated by Ram Ekval, her chief driver or *phanit*, in charge of her three man care team, and his didactic instruction served to shift the modal register from companionship to domination – a turn of the kaleidoscope yielding a new relational pattern. The language of instruction revolved around driving your elephant, suggesting a mechanistic perspective of handler-directed control. Converting practical into propositional knowledge, Ram Ekval's verbalizations instilled in me an inventory of verbal commands, and an understanding of when and how to use the stick (*kocha*) to discipline Sitasma. He also demonstrated the ways to depress my toes in order to make Sitasma go left, right, forwards, backwards, to sit, to stand, and so on, all to be mastered in practice through imitation. Constituting a set of techniques for intentional action, this emphasizes human control over elephants as objectified subjects, negating companionable mutuality in favor of domineering authority. The pedagogy of elephant handling then, widespread in *hattisare* discourse, in contrast to the mutuality of enskilment, has the effect of de-emphasizing elephant personhood.

This ontological rupture, this irreverent distancing from a personhood usually shared with elephants, is experienced by *hattisare* as problematic. As a necessary prelude to practical enskilment, it is tacitly acknowledged that such instrumentalized instruction exaggerates the realities of human control in captive elephant management – we would be fooling ourselves if we believed our mastery simply amounted to subjugation, since its efficacy is always dependent upon consent. The conundrum that the elephants' cooperation ultimately presents is explained with regard to the necessity of respectful relations, which is why I found the treatment of elephants as merely servile, animate machines to be such a powerful trope of cautionary tales in which bad handlers get what they deserve.

(Slide 6) The Kaleidoscopic Shifts Between Animality, Personhood, and Divinity

The proposition that elephants have personalities is considered self-evident among Nepali *hattisare*, irrespective of one's social and cultural conditioning. On many occasions this claim was supported by handlers explaining to me that elephants have memories of prior experiences that influence attitudes and behaviour, that elephants can effectively communicate preferences, that elephants have reasoning and problem-solving abilities, and that elephants can demonstrate loyalty and affection, as well as bear a grudge! (see Varner 2008). Aren't those also the attributes of humans, they rhetorically asked? Here, it is correlated experiential knowledge of elephants that is given primacy in attributing personhood. Despite this however, there are other discursive contexts just like those of handling pedagogy, in which not only is domination emphasized over companionship, but personhood and divinity de-emphasized in favor of animality.

The spatial relations of the *hattisar* can be highly significant in this regard, with the effect that the parameters of personhood contract to exclude elephants. The stable is arranged like a set of nested circles, with the elephants on the perimeter, protecting the humans at the centre from the jungle surrounding the stable. In the evenings, in informal contexts free of handling duties (*dipti*), away from immediate proximity to their elephants, handlers relax, talk about themselves, and even indulge in irreverent joking. As a total institution (Goffman 1961), the *hattisar* is totalizing in the way it structures a handler's life and conditions their habitus (*cf* Bourdieu 1990, Crossley 2001), leaving little time free of obligation. Providing a rare (and only provisional) opportunity to define oneself outside of the context of the elephant to whom one is tied, these are times when handlers talk within the modal register of domination – talking of the challenge of maintaining control over a disobedient elephant during musth (a periodic hormonal surge that makes males aggressive), or during the ritual initiation of a juvenile's driving training. And so another metaphoric turn of the kaleidoscope yields another configuration, one in which the elephant's animality assumes primacy.

By contrast, at the perimeter of the stable, when mounting one's elephant before entering the jungle, when one is about to resume mutuality with one's companion, most handlers reverentially touch their forehead, chest, and elephant's flank with the first two fingers of their right hand, the same gestures as when one anoints oneself with *tika* powder as *prasad*, the consecrated leftovers from *puja*, a devotional act of worship. Ram Ekval explained to me that this was the *hattisare* way of acknowledging your elephant's divinity and requesting the goodwill and protection of Ganesh the elephant-headed god, whilst riding his incarnation. This may be seen to serve the purpose of counter-balancing the modal register of domination which life in the separate interior can encourage, with the modal register of veneration which life in the exterior requires. As another *phanit*, Satya Narayan explained: "We ride you as a servant, but we know you are a god".

(Slide 7) Caste, Cosmos, and Divinity

This then brings us to the final section of my argument, in which I explore the modality of devotion and the ontological status of divinity through *hattisares'* underlying cosmological ideas about nature, authority, and the logic of caste. The jungle is emblematic of nature in the sense of a wild domain not ostensibly transformed by human activity (Ellen 1996). In Chitwan, the jungle is the domain of the Tharu forest goddess *Ban Devi* who controls dangerous animals like tigers that frequent it. Testament to this, five years previous to my doctoral fieldwork with the Chitwan *hattisare*, a handler was killed by a tiger whilst out with his elephant cutting grass. Her potential anger must be appeased by conducting sacrificial rituals involving gifts pleasing to her ferocious 'substance-nature'. These include meat, alcohol, money, and feminine items of beautification. Similarly, the goodwill of Ganesh must be petitioned with gifts pleasing to his 'substance-nature', especially during the ritual period of elephant training, in which a juvenile is separated from its mother and paired with a human companion who temporarily adopts ascetic vows of ritual purity (*sanyas*). With a renowned appetite celebrated in myth, it is sweets that must be given to the vegetarian Ganesh, whose divine 'substance-

nature' incarnates the sacred elephants that handlers apologetically drive and rely on for their safety in the jungle.

The conception of nature evident in these practices and their supporting beliefs is not so much the one of the nature/culture dualism of western thought that categorically separates, but is instead one that distinguishes the wild from the socialized along a continuum (Ellen 1996). Following the Durkheimian symbolic ecology of Phillipe Descola (1992, 1996), I term the handlers' conception of nature sociocentric in that domains distinguished by western thought as nature and society, are here understood as subject to the same organizing logic, modeled on anthropic understandings. This is evident in the tenorial sovereignty of *Bikram Baba*, clearly modeled on the hierarchical authority of the king as the lord of the land (Burghart 1978:521-524). Perhaps more significant though, is the organising logic of caste in terms of shared substance, presented as typical of Hindu and South Asian thought in McKim Marriott's *Ethnosociology* (Marriott 1976, Marriott & Inden 1977, Marriott 1989, and see also Moffatt 1990).

To explain - in a world in which all life shares substance that varies according to the ratio of its component qualities, the three humoral *guna* of *satvas*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, which can be transmuted as a result of the effect of action or *karma*, which determines rebirth in the cycle of life, or *samsara*, it follows that the ontological separation of animality, humanity and divinity is ultimately permeable. In previous existences we may have dwelt as animals, but with the potential for godhood within us all, in a future existence we might be able to realize our intrinsically divine nature and ascend the hierarchy of being, evident in the ubiquitous Hindi and Nepali greeting of *namaste* meaning; "I salute that bit of god that dwells within you" (Babb 1975:52).

This simultaneity of animality and divinity in elephants encompasses both low and high status within a hierarchic continuum of being. Puzzling upon this led me to consider the implicit logic of caste and how integral it is to the handlers' hierarchic

and sociocentric conception of cosmic nature. The word for caste, a group of identical substance, i.e. of *guna* composition, whose interactions with other groups of differing substance-nature must be strategically and ritually mediated according to a rationale of purity, is *jāt*. This word also means type, kind, or even species (Marriott & Inden 1977, Burghart 1984:116-118). Thus it was that I realized that for the handlers there was no problem in extending the logic of caste to elephants, it being as much an essentialist theory of kinds, as a social theory of discrete, ranked groups (Burghart 1978).

Indeed, the Sanskrit genre of texts on elephantology, known as *Gaja Sastra*, which parallel oral traditions of practical knowledge, and continued to influence Nepali veterinarian texts into the early 20th century (see Karki 1923 in Shrestha et al 1985), recognize eight ranked castes of elephant, understood in terms of *guna* composition (Edgerton 1931, Locke 2008). For example, the *rajo guni* elephant is angry, impatient and restless, the *tamo guni* elephant is disobedient, fearful and weak, whilst the *satva guni* elephant is of good temperament, beautiful appearance, and is quick to learn. In everyday practice, three classes of elephant are recognized, by form rather than 'substance-nature', just as Sanderson reported for Bengal in the 19th century (1878). These may be seen as analogous to *varna*, the hierarchic classes into which castes are grouped (Marriott 2004), and include *koomeriah*, the regal first-rate, *dwásala*, the blended second-rate, and *meerga*, the deer-like third rate. For *hattisare* the taxonomic principle of caste to which the ordering of people is subject is then theoretically as applicable to relations between humans and elephants as it is among humans and among elephants. The idea of two castes ritually regulating their interactions with each other seems highly appropriate to the situation pertaining to human and elephant in the *sarkari hattisar* of Nepal.

(Slide 8) Conclusion

Three ontological states (animality, personhood, and divinity) have been correlated with three relational modalities (domination, companionship and veneration). I have intimated the modality of domination in didactic commentary and in demotic

discourse in the interior of the stable; the modality of companionship in the mutuality of embodied practice in the jungle; and the modality of veneration both in special ritual events that pair elephants with humans, and in everyday ritual acts just before humans enter the dangerous exterior of the jungle. Crucially though, these ontological states and relational modalities are not exclusive. Rather, they are differentially emphasized in contextually contingent ways, each informing the other like the refractive play of light on the glass beads that produces the beautiful forms of the kaleidoscope. The production of beautiful form (*kalos* and *eidos*) is also metaphorically significant in this multispecies ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) since through this plural, overlapping status handlers learn to hold their elephants in esteem and regard by paying reciprocal attention – just the kind of interdependent, cross-species relationship that Donna Haraway recognizes as a thing of beauty.

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