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Food, ritual, and interspecies intimacy in the Chitwan elephant stables: a photo essay

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This photo essay focuses on the *hattisar*, or elephant stable, a multispecies institution where humans and elephants live together in intimate and mutually entangled ways. The Nepali *hattisar* was historically staffed by the indigenous Tharu, who captured and tamed elephants for the rulers of Nepal for trade, for tribute, for use in agriculture, and for use in regal hunting expeditions (*rastriya shikar*). This essay illustrates the daily routines involved in feeding captive elephants in and around the Chitwan National Park, the sacrificial practices conducted by handlers, and the ways in which worshipful acts convert gifts into sacred food that bind handlers to both elephants and gods.

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Introduction

The visceral quality of photography can be effective for conveying the intimate and sensory aspects of ethnographic fieldwork. This photo essay is concerned with the ways in which food and ritual configure intimacies between humans and elephants, and as such represents a modest experiment in the visual possibilities of multispecies ethnography. As an epistemologically reconfigured and ecologically contextualized approach in anthropology (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010), multispecies ethnography rejects the human exceptionalism that underwrites the genealogy of so much modernist thought (Haraway 2008), and seeks a symmetrical analysis of the relations between life forms (Latour 2004).

These intellectual challenges have profound implications for my research on Nepali captive elephant management. During the course of fieldwork in the Chitwan elephant stables, the mutually constituting entanglements of humans and elephants as two sentient species compelled me to rethink the epistemology underlying my research. Realizing that I was studying two types of person, only one of whom is human, the humanist ontology underlying the ethnographic tradition of fieldwork was no longer tenable, and the boundaries between the ethological and the ethnological blurred (see Lestel 2006). Such considerations provide a theoretical starting point for the development of ethnoelephantology as an interdisciplinary approach to the social and environmental mutualities of human-elephant relations (Mackenzie and Locke 2012).

My research focuses on the institution of the *hattisar*, or elephant stable, a network of which are maintained across the lowland Tarai region of Nepal. Historically staffed by the indigenous Tharu, who captured and tamed elephants for the rulers of Nepal for trade, for tribute, for use in agriculture, and in regal hunting expeditions (*rastriya shikar*) (Locke 2008, Locke 2011b), the *hattisar* represents a multispecies total institution (*cf.* Goffman 1961). This is because human and elephant lifeworlds are mutually bound together through regimented practice in an enclaved space in fulfillment of the dictates of ruling institutions (Locke 2011a:35). These include the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), which maintains elephant stables for the purposes of protected area management, biodiversity conservation, ecotourism, and breeding.

In this essay I explore the themes of food and ritual as they relate to elephants, their human handlers (*hattisare*), and the interspecies intimacies that unite them in a shared, mutually dependent livelihood. I seek to demonstrate the interconnections between food getting, food consumption, sacrificial activity, and elephant training as a multispecies rite of passage. By depicting practices of grazing, fodder collecting, food preparation, sacrifice, and consumption, I illustrate modes of relation I

designate as domination, companionship, and veneration, which are allied to the ontological states of animality, personhood, and divinity that handlers variously attribute to their elephants (Locke 2011a: 36-37).

1. Recently separated trainee elephant accompanied by guardians



Photo taken in the Chitwan National Park, Nepal, May 2004.

At the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center the working elephants of tomorrow are bred today, sustaining the population utilized in six national parks and wildlife reserves across the lowland Tarai of Nepal. Accompanied by a team of human and elephant guardians, the juvenile elephant Paras Gaj, tethered to the huge tusker Erawat Gaj, experiences his first day of grazing without his mother. The daily feeding routine proceeds, but with one crucial difference. He has been separated from his usual elephant companion, and so begins the practical and ritual process of training. Conforming to the three-stage model for rites of passage first proposed by Van Gennep (1960), this will take him and his allocated driver on a transformative journey, bound together as working companions (Locke 2011a:37-39). Whilst he feeds in the jungle, back at the *hattisar* a sacrifice is being prepared to ensure

the goodwill of the gods for the training ahead, which will involve consumption of the consecrated leftovers as a communal feast for the *hattisare*.

2. Elephant team returning from morning grass cutting



Photo taken in the Chitwan National Park, Nepal, February 2004

Grazing is the second jungle foray of the day however. Much earlier, the daily routine begins with a trip into the jungle to cut grass for the elephants' night rations and supplementary nutritional packages. The *hattisare* rise at dawn, obligated to their elephants' hunger before their own. On a misty winter morning, we see a fully loaded Koshi Kali, her team, and her untrained baby crossing the river on the way back to the Khorsor stable. Only after several hours driving across rivers and through savanna, using their sickles to cut grass which is bundled and loaded, will the handlers be able to return for a glass of morning tea. Time spent together in food-getting activity in situations of corporeal intimacy in the distant spaces of the park contributes to the companionable mode of relation between elephant and handler.

3. Mahut climbs simal tree to cut branches for elephant food



Photo taken in the Barandhabar forest, Chitwan, Nepal, December 2003

The village of Sauraha is a gateway to the national park and its buffer zone forests. It is populated by elephant stables that are variously maintained by government, by safari resorts, and by the Biodiversity Conservation Center (BCC, run by the National Trust for Nature Conservation, NTNC). BCC technicians and elephant teams are camping in the Barandabhar Forest to conduct a rhino and ungulate census. As non-human members of the biodiversity research team, the elephants' driving work will deprive them of daytime grazing time. Grass is not easily available in this buffer zone forest, requiring the junior ranked *mahut* Prabhu Chaudhary to climb a simal tree to cut branches for elephant fodder. On this occasion, his tree climbing skills prove their worth - to work as a *hattisare* requires dedicated commitment to the elephant you are paired with.

4. Ram Gaj tries to grab a snack



Photo taken at the Sauraha elephant stable, Chitwan, Nepal, December 2003

At the Sauraha government elephant stable, a hungry Ram Gaj tries to grab a snack, but this is grass collected in the mornings for his evening rations and for wrapping his nutritional supplements. Unlike the elephants engaged in the ungulate census, he will have all day in the jungle to feed at his leisure. Elephants have inefficient digestive systems and must eat more than a hundred kilos of grass a day, which is supplemented in the stables with unhusked rice, salt and molasses. Huge piles of dung grow quickly, which is either burnt for sanitary reasons, or removed to make paper for tourist products.

5. Phanet Dil Bahadur Kumal making dana



Photo taken at the Sauraha elephant stable, Chitwan, Nepal, December 2003

Every day unhusked rice, molasses, and salt are wrapped up in grass parcels as nutritional supplements. Known as *dana*, the Nepali word for a religious gift, these parcels are more than just food. They are given in recognition of the divine nature of the elephant, an animal that represents the earthly instantiation of the Hindu god *Ganesh*. The daily task of making *dana* not only carries the instrumental significance of satisfying an elephant's metabolic needs, it also signifies the disposition of veneration that characterizes aspects of the relations between human and elephant. On Tuesdays, the day of this Hindu elephant-headed god associated with the planet Mars, the salt and molasses are withheld – it is a day when the elephants are restricted to a more ascetic diet. Here we see Dil Bahadur Kumal preparing *dana*. He is a handler of the rank of *phanet*, the senior member of an elephant's three-man care team.

6. Feeding Shanti Kali dana



Photo taken at the Gaida Wildlife Camp, Chitwan, Nepal, December 2003

At the Gaida Wildlife Camp, one of seven resorts licensed to operate elephant safaris inside the Chitwan National Park, an elephant handler feeds Shanti Kali a few of these special grass parcels. Given in recognition of the divinity of elephants, these gifts are also tools used to help instill obedience. Two converse hierarchies are thereby revealed. On the one hand the inferior devotee venerates the superior god, but on the other, the superior human attempts to dominate the inferior animal, bending it to his will. Several *hattisare* explained to me that mastering the relationship with one's elephant requires the right balance between veneration, domination, and also companionship. Not long after this picture was taken, at the height of Nepal's civil war, Maoist insurgents burnt down the Gaida resort. Fortunately, no humans or elephants were injured.

7. Preparing a goat for sacrifice



Photo taken at the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center, Chitwan, Nepal, January 2011

On occasions when juvenile elephants commence and conclude their training, sacrifices are made to the Tharu deities *Ban Devi*, the forest goddess, and *Bikram Baba*, the local area god, as well as to the Hindu deity *Ganesha*, the elephant-headed god who instantiates himself in the bodies of elephants. An altar has been prepared at the boundary of stable and jungle, at which offerings to the fierce, carnivorous *Ban Devi* have been assembled. A square space with diagonal intersections is marked out

using red and black powder and rice. This serves as a proxy temple, or *mandir*, for the summoned deity to inhabit. The bottle contains *rakshi*, homemade liquor distilled from rice that appeals to *Ban Devi's* appetites. The space is adorned with red and white cloths, incense burns for purity, and gifts of fruit can also be discerned. *Ban Devi* presides over the jungle, and she must be appeased to ensure the safety of the handlers in her domain. If a wild animal such as a tiger attacked a handler, which has happened, it indicates the goddess has not been adequately appeased. A goat is prepared for sacrifice. Its remains will be eaten as *prasad* –consecrated leftovers that have been infused with divine power. This ritual is performed either to help ensure or to give thanks for the success of elephant training, with the added bonus of a rare feast of meat afterwards. The commensality of eating consecrated food unites the *hattisare* community in relation to the ritually marked juvenile elephant who occupies a liminal state during training.

8. Goat sacrificed to Ban Devi



Photo by Satya Man Lama at the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center, Chitwan, Nepal, April 2004

Tej Narayan offers an uncastrated goat to *Ban Devi* with the help of Sikendra and Bukh Lal. It has been ritually purified with water and red tika powder. This is a good killing because Tej Narayan has taken the goat's life swiftly with one cut from his sickle. The goat's head will be placed on the altar as an offering to *Ban Devi*, whilst its body will be removed for butchering. On this occasion, the sacrifice is performed not in the course of elephant training, but for the anthropologist, who will need *Ban Devi's* protection when he travels into the jungle with the elephant teams. The ritual has constructed a triadic relationship connecting human, elephant, and deity within an assemblage that includes the spatial relations of stable and jungle, the lively materialities of the ritual apparatus, the metabolic processing of divine food substance, and the dynamic traditionalism by which Tharu religiosity is adapted to *hattisare* ritual practice.

9. Satya Narayan offers an apple to Ganesha



Photo taken at the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center, Chitwan, Nepal, May 2004

Returning to the training of Paras Gaj, we see Satya Narayan, who has the honour and the challenge of serving as principal trainer. Whilst Paras Gaj is still in the jungle for the first time without

his mother, a sacrifice is performed. The friendly vegetarian god *Ganesha* must be pleased, and so fruit and sweets are given. They too will be eaten as *prasad*. Satya Narayan has 17 years experience with elephants, and occupies the rank of *phanet*, the chief of an elephant's three-man care team. During the liminal period of training, both he and his elephant must lead a ritually pure life – he will eat no meat, he will touch no alcohol, he will avoid the touch of women, and he will eat separately. Satya and Paras will be united through the ordeal of training, engaging in prolonged periods of corporeal intimacy every day as Paras learns to accept a rider and respond to commands.

10. Paras Gaj returns to his consecrated post



Photo taken at Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center, Chitwan, Nepal, May 2004

For the two-week duration of his training, Paras Gaj lives separately from the other elephants. At night he is tethered to a post at the borders of the stable and the jungle that has been made ritually pure. The sacrifices to the vegetarian *Ganesha* and to the carnivorous *Ban Devi* are complete, and Paras returns from the jungle, where some *dana* await him at his new post. No longer will he live alongside his mother. Involving intimate physical experience for trainer and trainee alike, the rite of

passage initiating Paras into an autonomous working life will produce a mutual attunement of human-elephant bodily comportment and haptic familiarity.

11. Cooking for the men in the Khorsor kitchen



Photo taken at the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center, Chitwan, Nepal, May 2004

In Nepal, elephant handlers take two meals a day, primarily consisting of lentil curry and cooked rice, known as *dal bhat*. There may also be some relish (*acchar*) and some vegetables (*sabji*). Elephant stable food is renowned for being very hot, and raw green chillies are frequently eaten on the side. Only on special occasions, such as a sacrifice (*puja*), do the men get to eat meat (*masu*). Here we see a

handler cooking up sacrificed goat meat in the smoky stable kitchen. The food being cooked represents a material-semiotic product of the interconnection between human, elephant, and deity, facilitated by the elephant training rites.

12. Sacrificial goat curry and rice



Photo taken at Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center, Chitwan, Nepal, January 2011

The sharing of consecrated leftovers (*prasad*) cooked up for a feast is perhaps the most visible expression of the *communitas* produced amongst the *hattisare* during the ritual process of elephant training. Here we see remaining portions of the sacrificed goat, along with rice, lentil curry, and some fried potato. Celebration has begun. Some of the elephant handlers will also drink *rakshi*. Only occasionally permitted by the *subba*, the chief of the elephant stable, this ‘moonshine’ can produce a powerful hangover! 🍷

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