Conservation and Society 21(3): 205-207, 2023

Book Review

Lainé, N. *Living and Working with Giants: A Multispecies Ethnography of the Khamti and Elephants in Northeast India*. Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle (Natures en Sociétés; 2), Paris. 2020. (pp. 272) Paperback (ISBN 978-2-85653-928-6) price unknown

Living and Working with Giants: A Multispecies Ethnography of the Khamti and Elephants in Northeast India

Recent scholarship in human-nonhuman multispecies relationships across the social sciences and humanities—often conceptualised as more-than-human lifeworlds—has been increasingly influencing the biological sciences, with new empirical research focussing on human-nonhuman entanglements across locations, practices, encounters, and traditional cultures. Such multispecies ethnographies now recognise that nonhumans can no longer be restricted to their typically objectified status in our cultural imaginations or considered only in terms of their socioeconomic or political utility. Nonhuman lifeforms have now become lively agencies in their own right, active and functional components of our own lifeworlds.

It is against such a paradigmatically shifting academic background that Nicolas Lainé's remarkable narrative of the close relationship between Asian elephants and the Tai-Khamti, a Shan tribal community of Arunachal Pradesh in north-eastern India, becomes a landmark study in multispecies ethnography. Based on extensive fieldwork, conducted between October 2008 and December 2010 in the Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh, where the Khamtis of India now predominantly live, Lainé presents a detailed account of the entangled lifeworlds of elephants and this Hinayana Buddhist community, co-constructed professionally through the lens of their joint labour and more personally, through their everyday, intimately shared, social lives.

The theoretical approach of the book is one based on anthropological inquiry, adopting a bottom-up approach and involving methods typical of multispecies ethnographies, including participating in and repeatedly observing key practices, providing rich descriptions with great attention to detail and collection of data in the vernacular language. This not only allows Lainé to explore and counterbalance the narrowly one-sided account of human-elephant relations, based on fear and domination, typically described in the scientific literature, but also enables him to go beyond an often-superficial study of the relationship between two beings and more effectively consider it as a network of relations. Living and working with elephants also necessarily entails uninhibited access to their world, including, but not limited to, pachyderm knowledge of the forest, its various components, and how they could be used for one's health and welfare. Lainé thus presents a particular worldview, one that explicitly brings to us the world of the forest and that of the village, and makes us intensely aware of the manner of circulation of elephants within and across these two worlds, thus allowing them to actively create and shape a unique socioecological world of their own.

Given the unusual worldview that Lainé instils in us, this volume, I am confident, will be of great value to anyone interested in working elephant cultures, well beyond the problems of their conservation and management. The deep ethnographic descriptions of training—in which both elephants and humans learn from and grow to respect one another—is a truly welcome reprieve from the often absurdly sensationalised and biased accounts that tend to dominate popular discourse on captive elephants in our country.

What I admire most about Lainé is his ability to eschew anthropocentrism (often central to many multispecies ethnographic accounts) and explore the unique sensitivities and sensibilities of the elephants and their perspectives of their environments, both physical and social, as they work alongside humans. The elephants then become interlocutors, responding to the human imperative in often inexplicable ways, uniquely contributing to their shared lifeworlds, guided by their own cognitive capacities, intimate socioecological knowledge, learnt perceptions of the human, and their quotidian experiences. Now an actively cognisant participant and equal partner in timber operations, some individuals occasionally stubbornly refuse to work, even, if necessary, by crafty deceptive strategies. At other times, however, they are willing to give consent to the requested work, systematically lifting and creatively arranging the logs in a trailer, no bidding required. Lainé also suggests that the interspecies communication that the Khamti engage in does not simply involve specific, curtly transmitted, executive commands but conveys a more general human decision, to which the elephants respond intentionally, and possibly, I believe, reflexively, to cooperatively perform the requested task. Lainé thus describes, to great effect, how the members of two disparate species, but bonded together as compatriots, become willing co-workers, contractually bound by "negotiations" that, unsurprisingly, are shaped in the immediate by their respective moods, their often-tired bodily condition, and not in the least by the underlying spirit of their friendship, typically marked, of course, by unequal distributions of power.

In the first two sections of the book, Lainé traces out the roots of what would later lead to the unfolding of a lifetime of, ironically happily bonded, human-elephant labour: the capture of wild juvenile elephants with the help of domestic *koonkie* (spelt *konkie* by Lainé) elephants and the socialising of the

captured elephants, respectively. The trapping of elephants clearly requires invaluable expertise in multistep planning, an important aspect of it constituted by the assistance of trained *koonkies* to locate the presence of their wild counterparts. This is a striking example, once again, of a uniquely performing multispecies—distinctly multi-individual—assemblage that appears to carry other incidental complexities, in one case contributed to by disgruntled insurgent outfits, who have made their hideouts in the surrounding forests.

The second section discusses the gradual transformation of the wild elephant—*chang than*—into a working village elephant—*chang man*—wherein Lainé highlights the crucial importance of the initial complex interactions between the human and the elephant, for it is here that the foundations are laid for the relationships that will unfold between them over time, each different from the other, each challenging to both partners, given that they follow their own, perhaps unpredictable, trajectories.

A very important insight of Lainé's that makes, I believe, a fundamental contribution to our increasing understanding of nonhuman culture is his speculation on the behavioural distinctiveness of the—yet non-domesticated—village elephants from their forest conspecifics and how some of these acquired traits and behavioural attitudes are transmitted to the newly captured elephants, possibly by direct experiential and embodied, imitative learning on the part of the latter. The village elephants appear to be remarkably capable of innovative, typically autonomously generated, actions that are able to solve a variety of occasionally novel tasks. What is also illuminating is how, as Lainé points out, the Khamtis create—what I would surmise—affective and possibly emotive contexts that facilitate such behavioural and perceptual transmission pathways, although they are clearly not able to contribute to them consciously. What this finally results in, fascinatingly, is the creation of a more-than-human community, which includes, within it, collectives of highly sensitised, now sensitive, facilitating and labouring humans, as well as highly socialised but non-domesticated nonhumans that are able to share particular attitudes, behaviours, and communicative acts amongst themselves and with their humans. What is also remarkable is that these actions are, in a manner, self-perpetuating over their individual and collective lifetimes.

Lainé also describes another striking aspect of the process of transformation of a wild elephant to a tame one: the mediation of chants and melodies as interspecies communication. During the initial training of a forest elephant, when the two beings encounter and begin to know one another first, define the rules of their engagement, and establish a mutual attachment, which will guide their long-term working relationship, the Khamtis mandatorily chant and sing to their elephants. They believe that the melody and rhythm of their words alone exert power over the animal, and that it is only by singing that the elephant will listen to them. Throughout his fieldwork, therefore, Lainé found the mahouts and the *phandis*—the elephant catchers—extensively singing to their elephants, when in the forest to capture the *chang than* and later, when working together. Lainé also observed occasions when a mahout would sing to his tired and demotivated elephant to inspire them to complete their daily work.

Lainé's fascinating ethnographic account, interestingly, steps out well beyond the elephants and their Khamti to often include other more-than-humans. There are, for example, the spirits and deities inhabiting the forests, who are believed to exercise ownership over the elephants and guide the actions of people as and when they interact with them. Maan Barua, in his foreword to the book, too refers to a spirit called *Dangariya*, who the Assamese believe control elephant movements, even as they negotiate threats posed by humans. Lainé moves even further ahead in his analysis, as he discusses the faith of the Khamti in spirits such as *Chao Pling Chang* or *Hodon-Modon*, who apparently gift elephants to their prospective catchers; such beliefs, Barua argues, represent a possible form of Khamti resistance to state control and its ownership over the animal.

A difficult question that persisted in my mind right through the reading of this book and which, I am sure, will animate others as well is where, amidst the gradually urbanising forests of Namsai, lies the future of the closely bonded lives led by the Khamti and their elephants over centuries? Lainé poignantly describes the decline in timber operations, largely brought about by the decision of the Supreme Court of India to put a blanket ban on timber felling in 1996 to save our last surviving tropical forests. This decision to save, in some sense, the homeland of the Khamti and the elephants, nevertheless, ironically, marked the beginning of the end of the intensive work that made the Khamti and the elephants come so close together, especially in the heyday of colonialism, and formed the basis of their ultimately intimate social relations. Many of the *chang man* became unemployed, and this must have led to several, often undesirable, socioeconomic and welfare-related ramifications for the captive animals, affecting deeply, in the process, the nature of the prevalent human-elephant bond. Lainé also fears for the future of the Asian elephant, which has been considered to be 'endangered' since 1986, and wonders whether this region of our country might actually become the last bastion for the species, especially as their distribution range has begun to reduce drastically, driven by humanity's increasing demands for agriculture, industry, and urbanisation. What also sadly remains to be assessed is the future of the Khamti, Rabha, Moran, and Singpho communities of Arunachal Pradesh, whose economy has largely been elephant-based and who have consequently developed a rich culture and age-old traditions of capturing, training, and maintaining elephants.

The time has perhaps come, as Lainé implicitly seems to assert and as we seem to read him, to think beyond materialistic requirements and demands, of critical ecosophies that we have to urgently engage with and incorporate in our lives for our own survival and wellbeing. The time has perhaps come to think more deeply with and mentally connect, through our extant—and yet unrecognised—interspecies subjectivities, with the elephants and other beings in our shared spaces, as has been done by the Khamti in the past and which possibly

continues, far more precariously, in the present. The time has perhaps come to develop new philosophies of coexistence and to forge new ways of living, which will no longer centre on the human alone but be more open and welcoming of the other beings, with who we share our increasingly impoverished lives in the Anthropocene.

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Website: www.conservationandsociety.org.in

DOI: 10.4103/cs.cs_41_23