

## The Last Kraal in Sri Lanka

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### Introduction

Elephants have been captured from the wild and tamed for mans use in many Asian countries including India, Thailand, Burma(now Myanmar), Nepal, Cambodia Laos, Vietnam and Sri Lanka. The initial captures have been recorded from over 2000 years ago. Some think that elephants may have been captured even before that. Many forms of capture have been used – noosing, in pits and the Keddah, Kraal and Mela Shikar method.

In the Kheddah or Kraal method a stockade is constructed. It is made of strong jungle timber. It was triangular in shape with a wide mouth and ending in a funnel or narrow passage. Inside were two timber enclosures. This is big enough to accommodate the elephants that are driven in as a group and then captured, tamed and trained. I will give in detail the last elephant kraal held in Sri Lanka later. The Portuguese first introduced the kraal method of capture.

The elephants are surrounded and driven into the first enclosure within the stockade were they were given a short respite during which time they were able to drink water made available within the enclosure. Then trained, decoy elephants, assisted by drivers, entered the stockade and drove the wild elephants into the second enclosure and thence into the funnel. As each captive arrived at this point cross-bars were pushed in behind him to imprison him. Then it was noosed, secured to two tame elephants, and led out.

The Dutch stockade followed the Portuguese pattern but was often a rounded triangle with a somewhat broader funnel. The stockade in this triangular form continued to be used till about 1800 when the inner enclosure was done away with leaving only one main enclosure and the funnel at the apex. In early British times , prior to 1833, the shape of the stockade underwent

radical change and became a plain rectangle with a narrow entrance and no funnel; from the front angles two lines of fencing, well concealed, were continued forward and outward so as to contain and guide the elephants to the stockade's entrance.

In the Mela Shikar method men, on the backs of tame elephants, go into a wild herd with a noose at the end of a long pole. They choose the wild elephant to be captured and pursue it till they come close to it. Once close they hold the pole so that the noose is in front of the face of the elephant. Then they try to noose the elephant by putting the noose over the elephant's head and onto the neck. It has been argued that the Mela Shikar method is better in that only selected elephants are caught and there are no unnecessary deaths.

In Cambodia herds were driven into swamps and noosed with the help of specially trained hunting elephants. In the lakes of Cambodia harpoons were shot at their ears from boats. These drives were only possible with hundreds of people.

In the Peoples Democratic of Lao elephant capture was mainly in the provinces of Attopeu and Champassak. It was first practiced by a 'ethno-linguistic group, which is said to speak a Khemer –like language'. Capture here was by Mela Shikar. There are no captures now by this method.

In Myanmar (formerly Burma) elephant capture has been practiced for a long period. Olivier (1978) says "Before 1658 elephants were being exported to South India and to Gujarat in north-west India. After 1650 many of them went to Ceylon as well". The capture of elephants from the wild was to serve the numbers required for export. Burma had a Keddah Department which was disbanded only in 1912. Records show that 1,286 elephants were captured in Keddahs.

In India, Raman Sukumar says that it could be assumed that between 30,000 and 50,000 elephants have been captured or killed during the period 1868 and 1980. He goes on to say 'Entire herds were taken in the north but only solitary animals in the south, with the exception of the kheddah captures in the southern Mysore state'.

The first mention of Thailand trading in elephants is in the 13th century. Therefore the capture of wild elephants has been from before that time. Tachard (1688) recorded that in 1681, that 40,000 men were employed for various work in the conduct of a Kheddah. Capture by the Kheddah method was stopped in 1906. However elephant capture continued in that country using the Mela Shikar method.

In Sri Lanka during ancient times the capture or killing of any wild elephant was punishable by death. The king had the sole authority to capture or kill elephants. His stables were supervised by the 'Gajanayaka Nilame' who was responsible for the capture and taming of wild elephants. Elephants were used for different purposes by the king - as draught animals; for ceremonial use, in warfare; kings staged elephant combats for their entertainment; kings used elephants to execute criminals and also used elephants as decoys in the capture of wild elephants.

The pit method of capture was found to cause injury to the captives and was given up, and noosing became the method of choice. Wild elephants were noosed in four ways. One by laying a noose along an elephant path, by using a trained female as a decoy and then noosing the elephant, with the use of intoxicants Cannabis was mixed into a ball made of Tamarind fruit. These balls were kept along a path used by elephants, which consume these balls and become intoxicated. After that the intoxicated animal was noosed and led away. Noosing of elephants on the run by Panikkans is where the leader selects an animal to be noosed and runs behind the herd and slips a noose on a hind leg of the selected animal and quickly fastens the loose end to a tree.

The elephants from Sri Lanka were famous, from ancient times, and had been exported mainly to

neighbouring India. It was during the period of Portuguese occupation that the Stockade method of capture of elephants was introduced to Ceylon. By then it was the method of choice in South India. The Kraal (pronounced crawl.) consists of a stockade of varying dimensions to which a herd of elephants were driven. They are then noosed to trees that are within the stockade, and later taken out for taming and training. Robert Knox, the captive in the Kandyan Kingdom in the 17th century refers to the stockade as a Pound.

This method of capture was continued by the Dutch and later by the British. As the number of captures increased so did the number of elephants exported. Such Kraals were conducted in various parts of Sri Lanka, from the South, Labugama to Kurunegala and Sabaragamuwa.

One must remember that these Kraals were held when much of the country was still covered in jungle and there were a large number of wild elephants. It has been estimated that at the turn of the 19th century there were about 12,000 wild elephants. Loss of habitat, shooting for sport, and other deaths soon reduced the number of wild elephants and by the time Sri Lanka got independence in 1948, their numbers had reduced to around 3,000. So it was that the last elephant Kraal in Sri Lanka, was held at Panamure in 1950.

### **A short history of Kraals held at Panamure**

In 1870 an elephant Kraal was organized by Iddamalgoda Basnayaka Nilame and Ekneligoda Dissawa at Labugama, for the entertainment of The Duke Of Edinburgh who was visiting Ceylon. Maduwanwela Rate Mahathmaya and J.T. Ellawela went to witness this event. Some time later, in the 1880's Maduwanwela R.M. Encouraged by J.T. Ellawela went to Kolonna Korale in search of a suitable place to organize a kraal. The two of them selected the site at Panamure to have a Kraal including the main stream to which the elephants came. There was also a perennial spring to which elephants came; perhaps it contained some minerals that elephants craved for. The stockade was built surrounding the stream and the eternal spring. From then on



**Figure 1.** Map of the stockade as drawn by the late Sam Elapata Dissawa, giving the dimensions and situations of the camps.

Kraals were held at this site. Elephant Kraals were held at this site in 1896, 1898, 1902, 1907, 1912, 1914, 1918, 1922, 1924, 1929, 1944 and the last in 1950 (Elapata 1997).

The last elephant Kraal held at Panamure in 1950 was held on private land owned by Sir Francis Molamure. Figure 1 shows the map of the stockade. It is customary as in past Kraals that the organizers should invoke the blessings of the jungle deities before embarking on such a massive project.

The first operation is the building of the stockade. Large logs were used, all the trees cut were from Sir Francis's private land. The posts used in the 1944 Kraal were tested for their strength and those that were in good condition were used again. Tame elephants were used to keep the logs in place till they were tied. This elephant was 'Gunaya', which was the only one that stood up to the young mating Bull that had to be destroyed. All the posts of the stockade were tested and the logs fastened while building the stockade. Every knot too was checked out. It must be noted that only every other vertical post was fixed to the ground. This ensures a certain amount of 'give' when a wild elephant charges the stockade. The upright posts were ten feet apart.

The knots that fasten the horizontal bars of the stockade were done (Fig. 2). A large number

of men were involved in the operation. Over a hundred men were involved in building the stockade and several tame elephants were used to get the logs in place (Fig. 3).

During this time several temporary buildings came up. A post office was established and a Police station. Soon Kraal town came to be. Sir Francis visited the site periodically to supervise the stockade and see to the setting up of the camps for the other helpers in running the Kraal. These were mainly The Francis Molamure camp, Sam Elapata Camp, Willie Maduwanwela camp, Danny Muttetuwegama camp. One for the Governor General and for several others.

When every thing was ready and the wild elephants were located the main Kraal began. Before the actual driving of the elephants begins a ceremony is held to bless the Kraal and to ensure the successful completion of the capture. It is interesting to note that such ceremonies are observed in most Asian countries. Such ceremonies are held in India before a 'Mele Shikar.' and before the 'Kedah.' in South India. So too in countries like Burma and Indonesia. It stems from a belief that the 'Jungle Deities' must be prayed for, seeking the blessings from them for the successful completion of all such activities before the actual capture operations begin.

At Panamure too such a ceremony was held, a mock stockade was made and dancers and 'Kattandiyas' were called in to perform this ritual. Once the preliminaries are over the next step is to guide the wild elephants into this stockade.



**Figure 2.** Making knots to fasten the bars.



**Figure 3.** Tame elephant helping to build the stockade..

### *The drive*

Now the selected herd has to be guided into the stockade. This is a huge undertaking. A large number of men, around six hundred of them were involved in this operation. A line of beaters is established to surround the herds and guide the wild elephants in the direction of the enclosure without causing a stampede.

No guns, fire crackers, tom toms (drums) or banging of tin cans was allowed during the Panamure Kraal of 1950. In most countries guns were fired in the air and fire crackers used to stampede the wild elephants towards the stockade. In such cases some elephants were lost during a stampede. But this was not done here.

Walalgoda Ralahamy was in charge. Sam Elapata was in the thick of proceedings. A stout stick was given to each man to tap on trees. Gentle talking too helped. These unnatural noises were enough to keep the wild elephants moving forward. The wild herd was never allowed to stampede. Beaters on either side prevented them from going out. Beaters, divided into groups of three, were responsible for keeping fires burning during the nights to prevent elephants from breaking out during the night. Food was carried to the beaters. Strict vegetarian meals were provided during the drive. The beaters kept a ring of fires and kept singing 'Pel Kavi' to keep the wild elephants in check. Pel Kavi is a chan like singing which tell a story.

Slowly but surely the herd was brought close to the stockade gate. Finally the gate was opened and the herd driven in. After all the elephants were inside the gate was closed. This herd was made up of 16 elephants with a few loners hanging around. Two of the females were in oestrus. Unfortunately one strong young bull ran into the stockade with the herd.

### *The noosing*

Expert noosers get help from tame elephants to get this dangerous job done (Fig. 4). One end of the rope is tied to the neck of the tame elephant. The nooser carries the other end of the rope, walking by the side of the tame one. The ropes used for this are strong and made of hide for the initial noosing. Two other tame elephants come in to help in keeping the wild ones in place.

In the meantime the young bull elephant that came in with the herd was mating with two of the females inside the stockade. Once noosing started there was no trouble and a few elephants were noosed. The noosing went on uneventfully with the noosers and tame elephants doing their job. Things were going on as expected till the matriarch was tied up.

When the matriarch was tied up, the young bull that was mating in the stockade became uncontrollable and began charging all the tame elephants that came in for noosing. He was mating in the stockade with the matriarch till she was tied to a tree. He was noosed but he snapped the ropes on two occasions. He broke free even



**Figure 4.** Noosers and their tame elephants at work.

from the 'Hira Gala'. A man was sent up a tree and a wire rope one inch thick was kept as a noose. Unfortunately as the young bull stepped on the noose the man pulled up the rope it did not get the whole foot only half of the foot. The noose was stuck between the nails. The wire was broken with one kick but the wire irritated the bull even more.

Many tame ones were sent in but they refused to confront the maddened bull. Then three tame elephants, including the 'Mapitigama Tusker', were sent in to confront the young bull. I will quote from Sam Elapata Jr. who witnessed this episode:

'The Mapitigama tusker when confronted by the bull turned his back in fear and was dug in his hind quarters by the wild bull using his tusks. He fled screaming. The other two fled in fear and only Gunaya owned by my father stood up to him. He could not match the strength of the wild one, which was bigger and stronger. On the head on clash Gunaya was pushed side ways on impact, then a hard thrust on the shoulder and Gunaya fell on impact. The wild bull then placed his right foot on Gunaya and began thrusting his tusks on the shoulder of the fallen elephant. Ratharahamy his keeper fell with the tame elephant and fled to safety. It was then that Sir Francis came up with his 'charmed stick' and managed to chase the wild one away'.

The organizers considered the release of the bull but that was too dangerous, as the mating bull would never have left the area. He would have been a grave danger to the beaters and thousands of visitors that came to witness the event.

After considering all options at the time Sir Francis decided to have the bull shot. It was a sad moment. There was another problem. No firearms were allowed in Kraal Town. As Sir Francis was considering getting the police to do the shooting, fate intervened in his favour. In the form of Sam Kadirgama, Arthur Molamure and Shelton Ratwatte, who arrived at Panamure returning from a shoot. It was found that Sam Kadirgama had a powerful rifle that could do it. Sam Kadirgama shot the elephant as it was

charging towards him. The hind legs of the elephant buckled at the impact of the bullet, which shows that it was indeed a superb shot that had penetrated the brain. Next his front legs gave way and he rolled over (Fig. 5). The young bull would not have known what hit him and probably was dead before he hit the ground.

Though the News Papers screamed, "Tusker shot while defending the herd" it was not a tusker nor was he the leader of the herd. He was just a strong male that had joined the herd because of his sexual desires. I must also state that the shooting of elephants was not banned at the time. They were shot in defence of crops and for 'sport', with a license of course.

There was much agitation about the 'unnecessary deaths' caused by these kraals and public opinion ran high. Finally Parliament decided and passed a law banning elephant Kraals. So this became the last Kraal to be held in this country.

#### *A few incidents that occurred during the Kraal*

An adult female charged Sam Elapata whilst he was in the stockade supervising the noosing. The position of her trunk, curled up and tucked away under the chin away from harm as this is the most sensitive part of in her anatomy. This is a sure sign that this is no mock charge. In a mock charge the trunk is swinging, ears spread out, tail up and the elephant will come screaming. Sam Elapata was able to quickly get behind an upright of the stockade and escape from harm.

On another occasion Sam was with the Governor



**Figure 5.** Bull shot at the last Kraal.



**Figure 6.** Baby accepting milk from a bottle.

General Lord Soul bury inside the stockade when an enraged female elephant charged them. Running back Sam Elapata pushed Lord Soulbury into a deep ditch and jumped in after him. The elephant reached the ditch, looked down at them and ran away. Elephants can never jump into ditches thanks to the structure of their knees. Lord Soulbury and Sam escaped from the elephant.

A mother straining at her bonds while the youngster stays by her side and the little baby has a nap on the sand. All three animals were captured without difficulty and it was heartening to see this little one accepting milk from a bottle from her captors the next morning (Fig. 6). Noosing was coming to an end and the captives were seen straining at their bonds. All adult elephants captured during the Kraal except for the two tiny babies had gunshot injuries.

The noosing was finally over and the next event was the public auction of the captive elephants. Elephant owners came from far and wide to

purchase the wild ones. Prices vary from elephant to elephant. When one buys an elephant he must take the animal away as soon as possible, usually between five or six days.

All this hue and cry that was made on the death of one animal. The emotions expressed and the debates in Parliament about this unfortunate incident, finally led to the ban on Kraals, capture and killing of elephants. Considering the fast declining number of elephants in the wild this ban came at the correct time.

Panamure is but a memory now. Gone are the elephants, bear, leopards and all the other smaller animals that roamed free in these jungles. The jungle itself is no more. Panamure is a developing town today. Just one or perhaps two of the upright post of the stockade are left and preserved in this town as historical mementos. They still stand in mute testimony reminding us of the event that took place over fifty years ago.

### **Acknowledgements**

My grateful thanks to: The late Sam Elapata Snr. for relating all those incidents to me over and over again. Mr. Jayantha Jayewardene for persuading me to write this down, editing and finally getting it in print. Sam Elapata Jnr. for kindly allowing me to get a set of his father's photographs from his album and for all the information about the Kraal. Also to Mr. Eddie Elapata for all the information about the Kraal. To my late brother Upali and to the late Mr. Willie Maduwanwela for all the information gathered by me during our conversations in Kandy some years ago.

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