

## Speaking with an Upside-Down Tongue: Reflections on Human-Elephant Multispecies Culture in Northern Thailand

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**Abstract.** In Karen villages in northern Thailand, humans often coexist with captive wild Asian elephants, in what can be described as a multispecies culture. A variety of ethnographic data is presented here as evidence of this culture, including an elephant origin story, rituals performed throughout elephant lives, and associated beliefs and practices. Together these rituals and beliefs mediate and define the human-elephant relationship. This relationship exists not only on physical, intellectual and emotional levels, but also within the spiritual worldview of Karen people. In this worldview, elephants are entangled in the same complex relations with spirits, both within their bodies and within the landscape in which they live, that influence Karen human lives. The shared life between humans, elephants and spirits can be understood as a form of multispecies culture resulting from a long process of cultural co-evolution.

### Introduction

*“The fourteenth-century lexicographer Muhammad al-Damiri suggested that the elephant’s tongue is upside down and if only it could be turned around this animal would be able to speak... Until such time, however, human beings are left to recount the life story of this species, even as we intrude upon the telling of the tale.”* (Stephen 2004)

The human-Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) connection is one of the most complex, dynamic and idiosyncratic relationships that have ever evolved between human and more-than-human beings. As Lorimer (2010) puts it, elephants are “too social and sagacious to be objects; too strange to be human; too captive to be wild, but too wild to be domesticated”. Asian elephants have been entangled in human lifeways for more than 4,000 years as captives and companions, participating directly in all the strands of knowledge and practice that collectively comprise human culture: religion, art, construction, commerce, and war. Wild and captive elephants were present in ancient Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Central Asia and China, and at the dawn of the Aryan conquest of India

(Singh 1963; Lobban & de Liedekerke 2000; Clarence-Smith 2019). A branch of Ayurvedic medicine, Gaja Ayurveda, was developed specifically for the care of elephants, who were an indispensable part of armies and the retinues of kings (Somvanshi 2006). But the connection goes deeper still: the widespread archaeological evidence of proboscidean hunting, bones used in construction, and the carving of elephant figurines in the upper Paleolithic indicates that elephants and mammoths were not only a key food source for ancient humans but likely played a significant role in their cosmology (Lev & Barkai 2016; Barkai 2019).

Today, this ancient relationship continues, despite significant changes in the nature of humanity’s material entanglement with elephants. Two populations continue to exist: those who live free lives in the ‘wild’, and those who are raised and live in a state of constant companionship with humans. Yet the elephant-human relationship perfectly encapsulates the changing winds of modern scholarship and the steadily unravelling dependency on a nature/culture duality. Captive or companion elephants are not domesticated and never have been. Leery of breeding in captivity,

the elephants in human care often mate with free-roaming elephants (Locke 2014; Lainé 2018), producing offspring that are hybrids of the postulated ‘wild’ and ‘captive’ elephant cultures. Capturing free-roaming elephants is no longer common, but the ‘wild’ populations that roam the lowland and mountain forests of Asia not only thrive in human-altered landscapes but also constantly interact with humans, often in conflict and sometimes in peace (Fernando 2000; Lainé 2017a). To understand this complex entanglement requires us to shed the nature/culture divide and adopt a more flexible discursive space, one that recognizes the ‘ambivalent intimacies’ that weave together human and elephant lives (Münster 2016).

It is in this spirit of reaching for new modes of understanding that Locke (2013) has proposed a novel approach, ethnoelephantology, which is premised on the recognition of human and elephant sentience and coevolution and employs inter- and multidisciplinary tools. This study takes inspiration from the principles of ethnoelephantology to explore the multispecies culture of Asian elephants and the Karen, a highland people of Southeast Asia. As with all attempts to arrive at an ‘anthropology beyond humanity’ (Ingold 2013) by conducting ‘multispecies ethnography’ (Kirksey & Helmreich 2010), the challenge is clear: elephants cannot tell their own story. Cursed, or blessed, with an upside-down tongue, one half of the multispecies culture to be discussed remains mute, and so, as the quote that introduces this paper points out, we must ‘intrude upon the telling of the tale.’

To do so, I rely on a range of ethnographic material: stories, beliefs and practices of Karen people in relation to their elephant companions. This material, which forms the backbone of my argument for the existence of an elephant-Karen multispecies culture, comes from four Sgaw Karen communities in the highlands of northern Thailand. I interpret this material from the perspective of an American researcher without a cultural connection to Asian elephants or elephant husbandry; however, my experiences in northern Thai elephant camps and friendships with mahouts, elephant owners and elephant

conservationists directly inform the analysis presented here. After an introduction to Karen and elephant lifeways, I present an elephant origin story, then proceed through an elephant’s life cycle, discussing relevant practices and beliefs at each stage. Finally, I argue that this material is evidence of a dynamic, coevolving multispecies culture that continues to shape the lives of humans and elephants in Karen villages today.

### *The Karen*

A highland people of Thailand and Myanmar, the Karen have traditionally lived in small villages in mountainous areas cultivating rotating swiddens of upland rice (Fukushima *et al.* 2007). Their connection with elephants is long-standing, as this colonial-era quote attests to: “In some of the backward jungle districts especially amongst the Karen, elephants take a place somewhat akin to the horse or ox, living with their owner on easy terms of intimacy and liking” (Giles 1929). In the period in which this was written, and continuing today in some areas, one of the major practical roles elephants played in daily life was in agriculture. They were indispensable in bringing rice from the fields back to the village during the harvest, and also assisted during planting and other times of strenuous labour (Schliesinger 2010).

The Karen are the largest ethnic minority group in northern Thailand, but they are far more numerous in neighbouring Myanmar, where Karen military groups control Kayin State in opposition of the Myanmarese government. Decades of conflict in Kayin State have internally displaced hundreds of thousands of people, many of whom have fled to refugee camps on the Thai side of the border (Bartholomew *et al.* 2015). In the face of pressure from the governments of Thailand and Myanmar, many Karen have also responded with forms of non-violent resistance (Isager & Ivarsson 2002), including grassroots activism and millenarian religious movements (Gravers 2001). In Thailand, Karen groups have successfully opposed the appropriation of their ancestral lands by Thai government bodies (Trakansuphakorn 2008). In Myanmar, a partnership between Karen communities, the Karen National Union

(KNU) and the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) has recently founded the Salween Peace Park as a means of both de-escalating military tensions and promoting sustainable livelihood development in the Karen homeland (Kamiński *et al.* 2019).

Karen people have often been perceived in Thailand as environmentally friendly due to their use of sustainable and ecologically responsible methods of rotational agriculture and forest management (Santasombat 2004). But in recent decades, Thai government policies and market forces have pushed many communities to adopt intensive corn agriculture, resulting in deforestation and environmental degradation (Buergin 2002). These changes are due to the cascading effects of growth in population and per capita income throughout Asia, which has increased meat consumption, leading to expanded meat production and high demand for corn for animal feed (Machovina *et al.* 2015). These regional forces are coupled with attempts by the Thai government to pressure highland peoples to abandon rotational farming, convert to Buddhism and generally assimilate within the nationalistic agenda of the state-building enterprise (Trakansuphakorn 2008). The ways in which Karen communities respond to these external forces are complex and varied: of the communities visited during this study, two had transitioned much of their land to corn over recent decades, while one community had placed limits on corn agriculture, and another had banned it entirely.

The changes in the material relations between Thai Karen communities and their environment have been echoed by other cultural changes. Karen people traditionally practiced an animistic religion involving the propitiation of deities, landscape spirits and ancestors (Rajah 1984; Yamamoto 1991; Paul 2018). Today however, the majority of Karen communities have been converted to Buddhism, while a smaller but significant number have been converted to Christianity (Hayami 1996). However, elements of the traditional cosmology have been incorporated into these new religions and continue to shape many agricultural rituals,

healing practices, and beliefs that Karen people hold about elephants, themselves, and their landscape.

### *Asian elephants*

A common ecological claim is that Asian elephants have a profound impact on the ecosystems they inhabit. Their voracious feeding and herd movements create patches of disturbance within the forest, which play an important role in promoting plant succession. As they feed, travel and defecate, they redistribute undigested seeds in convenient packages of fertilizer, thus promoting seed dispersal and nutrient cycling (Harich *et al.* 2016). Some of the Karen knowledge holders interviewed during this study believe that as elephant populations decrease in Thailand, the mountain forests are becoming denser and more impenetrable, because elephants are no longer present to control the rampant growth of their favourite food, bamboo.

However, the full picture may be more complex: elephants are edge species, and benefit from moderate human disturbance such as swidden agriculture, selective logging and episodic fire (Fernando & Leimgruber 2011). Only when ecological succession is prevented, such as by urbanization or the transition from shifting to permanent agriculture, do elephant populations disappear. As such, the ecological disturbance of elephants and traditional swidden cultivators like the Karen are actually linked rather than opposing forces. A ‘natural’ disturbance regime in the highlands of Southeast Asia might be best characterized as the product of an ancient landscape management relationship coevolved between humans and elephants.

Another level on which elephant and human lives are interwoven is the spiritual plane; elephants occupy an important spiritual role in nearly all south and southeast Asian cultures. In Buddhism, elephants are closely linked with the life of Buddha, from the dream of Queen Maya that a white elephant came to her the night she conceived the Buddha, to the subduing of Mara mounted on an elephant (Ramanathapillai 2009). In the Jataka tales, Buddha was reincarnated

as an elephant several times before his final, human birth (Wisumperuma 2012). In Thailand, monks once rode elephants to the temple on the way to their ordination ceremonies as a symbol of having tamed the wild nature of their mind (Denes 2006). Today elephants can still be seen built into the bases of stupas and protecting the four corners of the roof on Buddhist temples.

In Hinduism, the religious significance of elephants includes the traditions of Ganesh and Erawan (*Airavata* in Sanskrit). Ganesh, the son of Shiva, has the body of a man and the head of an elephant. As both the god of knowledge and the remover of obstacles, Ganesh is propitiated first at almost every Hindu ritual (Padhy 2008). Even in Buddhist Thailand, Ganesh has prominent shrines in major cities and is venerated in many Thai elephant camps (Harrington 2005). Ganesh's spiritual attributes are clearly linked to the intellectual and physical capabilities of elephants, which are sufficient to remove nearly any obstacle in their path. In many ways the half-human, half-elephant figure of Ganesh encapsulates the multispecies human-elephant culture that has coevolved over millennia of interdependence.

Erawan, a divine white elephant with three heads, is the mount of Indra, the Hindu king of heaven and god of rain and fertility (Harrington 2005). Associations between elephants and fertility continue today. Thai couples will sometimes take photographs standing beneath an elephant, whose fertility is believed to descend into them. The association between fertility, kingship and sacred white elephants led many monarchies of Southeast Asia to develop strong traditions connected to white elephants. White elephants occur naturally and are recognized by their lighter-coloured (although not completely white) skin and hair, as well as other features (Bujarbarua 1979). In Thailand, all white elephants have traditionally belonged to the king, and as sacred symbols of divine kingship, have been employed in ceremonies and rituals (Denes 2006). Many provinces in Thailand continue to hold annual fertility ceremonies centred around the participation of elephants in parades and feasts.

## Methods

The material presented here is based on fieldwork conducted at four Sgaw Karen villages in northern Thailand in 2018–2019. The human inhabitants of the villages, located in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces, ranged from 30 to nearly 200 households per village, while the number of elephant residents ranged from three to more than 50. Villages were selected based on the historical and contemporary presence of human-elephant culture, as part of a research project focused on how humans and elephants exchange and co-produce medicinal knowledge used in elephant veterinary care (Greene *et al.* 2020; Lainé 2020). Efforts were made to select field sites, which varied in age, elevation, landscape setting and forest type.

Each of the four villages operates some form of elephant tourism, ranging from 'elephant camps' in two of the villages to a more experimental method in two other villages based on the principles of compassionate conservation. Many older mahouts in all four communities had previous experience working on human-elephant logging teams in Thailand, Laos or Myanmar. More than 40 current and former mahouts, elephant camp operators and elephant owners were interviewed, with a primary focus on veterinary medicine and elephant healthcare. Individual interviews were semi-structured, open-ended and conducted in Thai to English or Pakinyaw to English (the Sgaw Karen language) with the help of interpreters. Focus groups were also held with groups of mahouts, often at the site of the elephant camp or program, in order to learn more general knowledge about elephant practices. Detailed life histories of older mahouts were recorded to provide in-depth data about the long-term elephant-human connection, and how this connection has changed within recent generations. Participant observation at the elephant camp or program of each village was critical to understand the daily rhythms of elephant-human coexistence.

The beliefs, rituals and practices reported here emerged as supplemental information during early interviews and focus groups. Later this

emergent material became an additional focus of the research, and early findings were corroborated and expanded upon by additional knowledge holders. To provide context, a literature review was conducted on elephant-human cultural practices with an initial focus on the Karen. When almost no comparative material was located, the scope was broadened to Southeast Asia, then throughout the Asian elephant range, and finally to encompass Africa and the African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) as well. Although there is a vast literature touching on many different aspects of the elephant-human relationship, very little material was located that focuses in detail on the daily rituals and beliefs of human-elephant coexistence presented here.

## Results and discussion

### Origins

The following elephant origin story was told in only one of the four study sites; knowledge holders in the other communities claimed not to know the origin story of elephants. As such, it is reported here only with the understanding that it may not be representative or in wide circulation:

*Once, a long time ago, a man got married and moved in with his wife's family. His father-in-law said to him, "When you stay in this house while I am away, please do not open this box," and he showed him which box he should not open. When his father-in-law went out, the man thought to himself, "What is in that box?" Overcome by curiosity, he opened the box, and a white fly flew out and flew up into his nose. He sneezed and sneezed and as he did, his nose got longer and longer. It got so long that he could not stay in the house anymore, so he moved down to the ground floor, beneath the house, where the buffalos and pigs live. Then one day the elephant said to his father-in-law, "Make me a saddle so I can help you carry the rice from the fields." So the father-in-law made a saddle and the elephant helped carry the harvested rice, heavy logs and many other things. But the father-in-law made the elephant work very hard, much harder than he expected, and one day the elephant said, "Why are you making me work so hard?" So the father-*

*in-law plucked out the tongue of the elephant and put it back in upside down. From this day on, the elephant could no longer speak.*

This story (Fig. 1) provides context for the widespread equation of elephants with people in Karen rituals. Originally human, elephants lost their human body and descended to the level of animal habitation due to an uncontrollable, inordinate curiosity. Anyone who has spent time with elephants knows that they are particularly curious beings, intent on exploring their surroundings. Unlike in the classical Greek story of Pandora's Box, in this tale the negative effects of curiosity become internalized, affecting only the being who transgressed the taboo and their descendants rather than the world at large.

The story also provides a justification for elephant participation in physical labour, explaining that the elephant, seeking to maintain their connection to their human family, voluntarily offered their services to the agricultural workforce of the village. It is also made clear, however, that people have taken advantage of this generous gift and made the elephant work much harder than they intended or expected. In the end, it is the elephant's own human father who cements their status as something less than human by removing their last human attribute, the ability to speak.



**Figure 1.** Artist's interpretation of the Karen elephant origin story, by Gloria Treseder.

What is clear throughout the story, however, is the presence of elephant sentience and agency. The elephant is a principal actor in their own story rather than a passive recipient that is acted upon from the outside. In expressing the elephant's human origin as well as the tragedy of their fall, this tale readily encapsulates the complex interdependencies, and also the power imbalance, intrinsic to human-elephant culture today.

The Karen are not the only people to believe that the elephant was originally human. Although in Hindu traditions the elephant manifests directly, rather than first through a human form (Edgerton 1931), several origin tales about the African elephant are remarkably similar to the Karen account. A Maasai elephant origin story goes:

*“Once upon a time there was a girl to be married. She was warned by her parents not to turn back as she walked to her husband’s house. On the day of her wedding she set out to travel to her husband’s house and on the way, she looked behind her and all of her decorative jewellery disappeared. She continued walking and again looked behind her and she turned into an elephant, with her veil as the trunk” (Kioko et al. 2015).*

Here we find the same basic frame: the elephant was human, married into another human family, transgressed by breaking a taboo and as a result, lost their human body. A significant difference is that the elephant is female instead of male, but this is less a result of gender than of the different social structures of the peoples in question: the Maasai are patrilocal, while the Karen are matrilineal. So what is important is that in both stories the elephant is human, but an *outsider* in some way, who enters into the already-existing human family, which can perhaps be understood as the archetypal family of the Karen/Maasai. However the elephant in both cases breaks the social pact between the outsider and the insider (which is delineated and reinforced by taboos) and as a consequence, loses their human form.

One additional origin story, this one from the Nuer people of Sudan, reinforces these observations:

*One of the original Nuer... was called Loh. Loh’s wife gave birth to a monstrous girl-child with long teeth. She was named Nyalou. Her appetite was enormous and increased with the growth of her body, so that when she was still quite young, the food of man was insufficient to satisfy her hunger. Every day she would go into the forest and fill her belly with grass and the branches of trees, with roots and heglig nuts, and every day she grew larger and larger. At last she swelled to such proportions that she could no longer squeeze herself through the door of her home. She called her people together and said to them, “The time has come for me to leave you. I must go to the forest and live there, for there only can I find sufficient food to feed me.” Then she took her sleeping skins and attached them to her ears and straightway they became part of her body. “ I am now different to you, “ she said, “and my descendants will live in the forest apart from mankind. Men will want to kill me because of my huge teeth and because my flesh is fat and sweet. You also my people will want to kill me and you may do so with impunity only if you obey my words: you shall never throw the first spear, and when I am dead you shall cut flesh from off my back and eat it raw.” She went off to the forest with her child, and has remained there ever since (Howell 1945).*

In this story the elephant is born within the existing Nuer family. Nonetheless she is ‘monstrous’ – marked as an outsider by her long teeth and her insatiable appetite. There is no transgression; rather Nyalou’s separation from her birth family is seen as an inevitable result of her individual nature. However, just as in the Karen origin story, the elephant Nyalou is the active agent. It is she who purposefully gives up her bodily association with humanity by marking herself with huge ears (African elephant ears are larger and more prominent than those of Asian elephants). And it is she who offers herself to the people, just as in the Karen story, although here the utility she offers is meat and ivory rather than labour.

In all three stories, the separation of the elephant from their human kin is effected through the loss of a human body. In none of the stories, however,

is there any implication that the elephant has lost their human mind. In fact, in the Nuer and Karen stories the elephant's continuing to speak after losing their human semblance clearly implies that they continue to think like a person. This observation is key, because it explains why in all three cultures, a degree of personhood is still ascribed to elephants today. Nuer people, for instance, consider the killing of an elephant to be identical to the killing of a human, and the killer must undergo the same ritual purification to safeguard themselves from ill effects (Howell 1945). Among the Karen, elephants are symbolically equated to people through a variety of rituals performed at their birth, throughout their lives, and at their death. The exact status of elephants remains ambiguous, as all of these stories indicate. Are they human? No longer. Are they people? Possibly. Are they like other animals? No. In considering human-elephant culture, it is important to recognize this ambiguity as well as the possibility that rather than dealing with a multispecies culture constituted between humans and animals, we may in fact be dealing with a culture constituted from two different kinds of people (Lev & Barkai 2016).

### *Birth*

One way elephant personhood is acknowledged is when an elephant is born, through a ceremony held on the same day of the birth. The ceremony is a variation of the *giju* ritual, which is the Karen form of a widespread soul-calling rite performed throughout northern Thailand and Laos (*soukhuan* in Lanna Thai; *baci* in Lao). The *giju* is premised on the Karen belief that a human body is composed of numerous *kla*, or souls (Paul 2018), associated with different body parts (37 is commonly reported, although the number varies). Some of these *kla*, not the highest one residing in the head, but those associated with lower body parts, can leave the body at will and travel in other realms. In particular they may leave the body during times of sickness, shock or excitement, or stay behind when a person takes a long journey. The *giju* ritual is performed during all kinds of liminal states such as sickness, birth, after long journeys, etc. in order to call the missing souls back to the body, thus returning the

person's (or elephant's) full vitality and power (Rajadhon 1962).

During the ritual, offerings are made, prayers are sung, and chicken or pig sacrifices were once performed (although this has been discontinued in many, particularly Buddhist communities) to entice the *kla* back to the body. White cotton threads are tied around the wrists of the people (or the tusks or ears of elephants) to bind the souls back into the body. This ritual is essential to the social fabric of Karen communities (and many other peoples of Thailand and Laos (Rajadhon 1962; Chai 2006)), so it is particularly indicative that it is also performed for elephants. No other animal receives this kind of welcome at its birth. In celebrating a version of the *giju* for elephants, the elephants are tacitly being acknowledged as members of the community.

It is common to save the umbilical cord of a newborn elephant, which is dried and used in a ritualistic manner to promote fertility. When a woman is pregnant, if her mother or mother-in-law possesses some of this dried elephant umbilical cord, she can secretly prepare a dish of food with it and feed it to her daughter/daughter-in-law in such a way that the pregnant woman is unaware of what she is eating. If this is accomplished, the birth will be easy and safe, and the child will be healthy and strong. In this practice the association between elephants and fertility, as well as the function of Ganesh as the remover of obstacles, are combined. It also shows how intimate the link is between humans and elephants, as part of the mother/baby elephant's body literally comes to constitute the mother/baby human's body.

The umbilical cord is of particular significance to Karen people. When a child is born, the umbilical cord was traditionally cut with a ritual bamboo knife specifically made for this purpose. Then it was placed in a bamboo container and hung in a large, healthy tree, usually one which bears fruit or has beautiful flowers (Maniratanavongsiri 1999; Paul 2018). Through this act, a deep connection between the tree and individual was created. Karen people believe that when a person's *kla* become lost, particularly when they are still a

baby or very young, the *kla* will return to this tree due to the link with the umbilical cord. So whenever a child took ill, the parents would go to that child's tree and pray for the *kla* to return to their body (Omori *et al.* 1999). Because of the importance of these *pga dei pau*, or umbilical cord trees, it was forbidden to cut, peel the bark or harm them in any way (Maniratanavongsiri 1999; Paul 2018).

In light of this belief, the use of the elephant's umbilical cord is far from random. The link established between the newborn elephant and the unborn human child can be compared to the protective relationship between a newborn child and their tree. By ritually feeding the elephant's umbilical cord to an unborn child's mother, a link is created that places the elephant firmly within the human family, and protected by its members. Indeed, elephants are considered members of the family in Karen villages (Schliesinger 2010). It is particularly interesting that although the hanging of umbilical cords in *pga dei pau* is no longer practiced in many villages, the use of the elephant umbilical cord is still widespread. This could be an indication that the deep link between elephants and Sgaw Karen people is even stronger and more resilient than the embeddedness of Karen people within their traditional sacred landscape.

The last practice relating to baby elephants is the naming ceremony. Traditionally, an elder or spiritual leader would choose three beautiful, powerful or auspicious names and write each name on a separate piece of sugarcane. After placing the three pieces on the ground in a row, the baby elephant would be led up to the line of sugarcanes. The name written on whichever piece the baby first picked up would become their name. This ritual is remarkable in that it instantiates the elephant's agency by allowing them to participate in the process of attaining status and individuality within the community, even to a greater extent than that allowed to human children (who do not choose their own names). This naming ritual continues to be practiced in two of the villages, and its use has responded dynamically to changing circumstances. In one village, which is now Christian, the local pastor is the one who chooses the names rather than

the traditional animistic spiritual leader. This demonstrates once again that the elephant-human multispecies culture is dynamic and persistent in the face of significant cultural transformations.

### *Training*

Baby elephants are left in the care of their mother for at least the first three years of their life. They follow their mother everywhere, often in close bodily contact, as they begin to supplement milk with forage and slowly learn the ways of their world. Karen people take care not to hinder this process of natural rearing; their interactions with baby elephants in these first years are restricted to playful exchanges and expressing affection physically, verbally and through the gift of treats like bananas and sugarcane. When elephants are between 3–5 years old, they begin to develop greater independence; in free-roaming populations, young males will eventually leave the maternal herd entirely. It is at this point that the process of elephant training occurs.

Elephant training is perhaps the most contentious issue between traditional elephant peoples and outsiders such as international tourists who have limited knowledge about elephant traditions. Numerous allegations of cruelty and abuse during elephant training have been levelled at elephant-keeping cultures, particularly by animal-rights groups like PETA (Laohachaiboon 2010). Alternately, others claim that these charges are inflated, inaccurate, or sometimes even falsified. Undoubtedly, there are many different techniques for training young elephants, ranging from unnecessarily cruel to painstakingly gentle. Here I discuss contemporary Karen elephant training methods in the communities where we worked, while acknowledging that it is difficult to obtain detailed information about this issue from many knowledge holders. The heated international debate around elephant training has made many mahouts fearful of allegations of cruelty and thus wary of sharing information freely.

Among the Karen, elephant training is the most critical period in the entire life of the elephant, as it will define the relationship between that individual and its human caretakers. As such,



it is undertaken with extreme care. Only a few individuals with a specific spiritual capacity are considered authorized to initiate the training process, and this capacity is often inherited along family lines (Schliesinger 2010; Lainé 2017a). In one village there was only a single community member with this capacity, and although he no longer dwelled in his natal village, he would travel back to perform the necessary rituals when any of the community's elephants were ready to be trained.

The basic process involves separating the baby elephant from its mother. To facilitate this, a wooden corral is constructed in the forest. The person overseeing the process constructs a small altar beside the corral and makes offerings and prayers to the elephant's guardian spirits, the local landscape spirits and the ancestor spirits of those involved to assist the training process. Then the young elephant is placed in the corral and the mother is led away.

In the absence of their mother, the young elephant is now able to begin forming emotional bonds with the humans who will care for them throughout their life. This is a difficult process, fraught with stress and anxiety for both the elephant and the humans. It may be several days before the young elephant develops enough trust to accept food from human hands. During this period the mahouts and the elephant trainer stay close to the elephant continuously, to familiarize the elephant with them and allow trust to begin to grow. In Lainé's (2016) analysis of the training ritual among the Khamti, he found that they use chants and songs during this process, such as "Stop! Leave your jungle heart and adopt man heart. Learn the words from man, listen to them."

Indeed, learning to respond to the human voice is critical to the training process. Once the elephants allow themselves to be fed and begin to trust their human caretakers, they are released from the corral and taught the basic elephant commands, such as 'stop', 'go', 'sit', 'stand', 'left', 'right', etc. The young elephant is slowly integrated back into the rest of the human-elephant community after having undergone this difficult rite of passage (Locke 2016) and begun the forging of

an emotional bond with the mahouts who have trained them.

### *Working with humans*

As the elephant origin story indicates, shared work is at the core of the relationship between Karen people and elephants. For centuries, before industrialization largely minimized their utility, elephants were indispensable for certain tasks, particularly the transportation of extremely heavy objects like hardwood logs. Lainé (2017b) has argued that among the Khamti people of northeast India, shared work between elephants and humans is what creates, sustains and in fact constitutes the complex of emotional, psychological, physical and economic bonds that tie the two species together. His observations of human-elephant labour teams indicate that elephants participate directly in the work, understanding their tasks and showing initiative and sometimes ingenuity in accomplishing them. The situation is very much the same for the traditional connection between Karen people and elephants. In Thailand today, the tides of culture and policy have turned against this form of interspecies work, and elephants rarely take part in any kind of useful practical labour. However, human-elephant labour is still common in Myanmar, parts of Laos and other areas.

Historically, the main work done by elephants involved agricultural labour and occasional selective logging for the construction of new houses in the village (Schliesinger 2010). This work was fairly limited and episodic, and during other times the elephants might remain in the village or be released into the forest. However, this changed during the colonial era, when European nations initiated extensive logging operations throughout their Asian colonial states. Thailand is one of only a handful of countries in the world that avoided colonization, although it came under intensive pressure from the U.K. to the west (from its colony Burma) and France to the east (from its colony Indochina).

One of the ways Thailand avoided being colonized was through a clever diplomatic process of offering, in a series of generous treaties with

colonial powers, exactly the resources that those powers wished to extract (Pupphavesa 2002). This resulted in the near wholesale logging of Thailand's teak and hardwood forests, which was implemented throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by human-elephant logging teams. The Karen, known for their elephant skills and knowledge, were recruited en masse to participate in the logging industry, not only in Thailand but also in Myanmar (Bryant 1997; Schliesinger 2010). This extractive process continued until nearly every corner of Thailand had been logged, at which point the Thai government implemented a ban on commercial logging in 1989 (Godfrey & Kongmuang 2009).

Without the opportunity to work in logging, nearly the entire population of village elephants in Thailand has been slowly transitioned into a new economic activity: elephant tourism. This history is clearly evident in the Karen villages visited during this study. Among the younger generation of Karen mahouts, aged 40 or younger, the only way of working with elephants that they know is through elephant tourism. Each of the four villages has initiated different forms, two starting traditional 'elephant camps', while the other two have partnered with foreign NGOs to develop alternative elephant tourism models.

The older generation of Karen mahouts, in their 50s–80s, universally participated in the logging industry, and this is the primary means by which their elephant knowledge and skills were developed. In the logging era, human-



**Figure 2.** A Karen mahout resting beside his elephant.

elephant teams would normally leave their home village for 3–6 months each year during the dry and winter seasons. They would often travel great distances to other parts of Thailand, or to Laos or Myanmar, to find employment. During these periods the elephant-human teams were completely dependent on each other, immersed in a world of constant multispecies companionship and labour. It is likely through the interdependence engendered by the logging world that the intensity of Karen-elephant multispecies culture was most deeply articulated and affirmed (Fig. 2).

Upon the end of the logging season and the return to the village, elephants would be let loose into the surrounding forests, where their mahouts would check on them once or several times a week (Schliesinger 2010). As during other times of transition during an elephant's life, it was typical to hold a ceremony during this seasonal release. After the elephant walked into the forest, a small bowl with offerings of salt, chilli and rice would be placed on the footprint of the departing elephant, and prayers would be offered that the elephant would stay safe and away from people, neither hurting them nor disturbing their homes or crops. This ritual shows that despite the intensity of forced labour in the logging industry and the imbalance of power between humans and elephants needed to sustain that labour, elephants were still recognized as maintaining a degree of agency. They were respected as beings able to disrupt the lives of humans outside of the carefully curated boundaries of the multispecies relationship, and were not only given space within which to manifest their own lives, but trusted in the belief that they would use that space responsibly.

In today's world, where forests are fast disappearing in the Thai highlands and violent human-elephant conflict is all too common in other parts of Asia, this practice seems remarkable. Although it has largely been discontinued due to the changing nature of elephant-human politics and culture, it is still standard to bring elephants to the forest at night, usually restrained by a 20–30 m chain. This chain is long enough to allow them sufficient forage during the night,

and although elephants can break a chain of this length in anger or fear, they are unlikely to do so under ordinary circumstances. In only one study village is there still sufficient forest (the same village that has banned corn agriculture) to allow elephants to be left unchained and unattended for days at a time.

The *giju* ceremony performed at the birth of an elephant is also held for elephants throughout their lives (Lainé 2017a). During the logging era this would usually be done at the end of the dry season when the elephant-human teams would return home from the logging camps. Some villages celebrate this ritual on a family basis, with each family holding an elephant *giju* annually or every 2–3 years. Other communities hold an annual festival, which combines community-wide celebrations with family elephant *gijus*. Traditionally, a pig would be raised specifically to be sacrificed during the ritual, although in some communities this is being discontinued due to the influence of Buddhist teachings of non-harm. Food, rice wine, flowers, candles, certain plants and other objects are arranged in elaborate banana-leaf structures in a ritual altar. The *giju* leader, usually the family head, offers these objects to the spirits and makes prayers which apologize to the *kla* of the elephants for forcing them to work, thanks them for working and asks the spirits to help more elephants to be born. Cotton threads are tied around the elephants' ears and the wrists of the human participants, and then the elephants and people are fed. This ritual, which is not performed for any other animal, recognizes and re-enacts the unique bond between humans and elephants.

### *Protection*

The release ritual is only one element of a complex set of practices and beliefs Karen people have developed in order to ensure their protection within the elephant-human relationship. With their enormous size and strength, elephants can easily squash a human companion with an unexpected movement or in a burst of anger. During musth, an annual period of elevated testosterone levels, adult male elephants become notoriously savage and violent and can

attack humans as well as other elephants. Musth elephants are not safe to be around under any circumstances, and in all the various forms of human-elephant coexistence – villages, logging, elephant camps – they are always separated from people until the musth period has passed.

The respect that Karen people feel toward elephants and the care they take in working with them is partly in response to the ever-present danger of living and working in intimate contact with such powerful beings. Traditionally, a variety of spiritual objects were believed to confer protection from elephants on their human owners. A special kind of stone is said to grant protection from musth elephants as well as other dangerous animals. Similarly, some Karen people believe that if they put one female and one male of a certain kind of a farm snail (*klu tho*) in their pocket, this will both protect the bearer from elephants and lend him a certain degree of authority, making the elephant obey his directions more readily. It was also recounted that in the past, there were some people who possessed powerful *khatha* (Pali mantras or spells) that could be said over a piece of limestone and then fed to an elephant to exert power over them.

On the other hand, the power of elephants is also leveraged by Karen people to provide protection from strong or malevolent ghosts and spirits. Elephants themselves also possess *khatha*, and they have stronger *khatha* than the few other highly respected animals that are known to possess them. Tusks are particularly valued for protection, so they are often saved after an elephant passes away. Rings can be carved out of the tusk and worn for protection, or a miniature tusk can be carved out of the ivory and worn around the neck for the same purpose. If malevolent spirits have possessed someone and made them sick or crazy, tusks can be used as a tool in exorcism by pointing them at the person's body in a threatening manner while demanding that the spirit abandon the possessed (a practice also reported to me previously by Akha knowledge holders). If hairs fall from the tuft at the end of an elephant's tail (they must not be plucked) and these are collected, they can be woven into a ring, which is worn on the finger

(Fig. 3). This elephant-hair ring, which is also used in Myanmar (Shepherd 2002), conveys protection when travelling in areas with strong local spirits.

All of these latter beliefs relate to the Karen understanding that just as the human body is inhabited by *kla*, the local landscape is also inhabited by a host of spiritual beings, of differing levels of power and inclinations in relation to humans (Paul 2018). Some of these spirits actively assist people, and their dwellings – caves, springs or mountains – often become sacred natural sites that are visited and venerated for specific purposes. Other spirits, often those which are particularly powerful, can meddle in human affairs and even maliciously attack, causing some of a person's *kla* to flee their body, leaving the person listless, emotionally drained, sick or confused.

Wearing the ivory or elephant-skin rings or necklaces catalyzes the spiritual power of the elephant, in the capacity of Ganesh the remover of obstacles, to protect the bearer from any kind of spiritual harm. These beliefs indicate the degree of respect Karen people hold for elephants, which have spiritual capacities different from, and in some respects superior to those of humans. These practices also show that in considering multispecies culture, we must recognize the spiritual as well as the material level of entanglement between humans and elephants.

### *Death*

Karen people say that when an elephant knows they are going to die, they will go alone into the forest. Today, of course, when most elephants are unable to go to the forest at will, elephants do sometimes pass away in the village. After an elephant's death, a funeral ceremony is held. This ceremony is always performed for elephants and humans and generally not for any other animal, although occasionally it is done for a very old and respected water buffalo. Candles are lit, offerings are made, and the ritual leader prays that the elephant's spirit will undertake a smooth journey to its destination, not remaining behind to bother people. This ritual has the same



**Figure 3.** A protective ring woven of blond elephant tail hairs.

purpose as the human funeral, to help guide the elephant's *kla* successfully to the next world (the original world; the word for death in Pakinyaw is 'return').

After this ritual is concluded and the elephant's *kla* have departed, people harvest the tusks and then dig a massive grave in the forest and bury the elephant. The only part of the body which should not be touched after death is the single 'finger' at the end of the trunk, which is believed to have particularly strong *kla* residing in it which could drive away the *kla* of any human who touches it. For Karen people, as elsewhere in Thailand, under no circumstance are elephants eaten. The only parts of their bodies that are utilized are the tusks and the hair from the tip of the tail.

### **Conclusion**

The growth of multispecies ethnography has led to a reappraisal of the human as anthropological subject. If anthropology is founded on the person as a single unit of being and meaning, an *individual*, how do we account for our bodies being ecosystems teeming with life, our minds populated with non-human beings, and our emotional bonds being sometimes stronger with dogs, cats, horses and elephants than with other humans? Lestel *et al.* (2006) have argued that a recognition of our shared life with non-human beings necessitates combining the studies of human and animal behaviour into a new field of eth(n)ology. Elephants are more than the companion species of humans (Lorimer 2010),

with whom we have ambivalent intimacies (Münster 2016) and affective encounters (Locke 2017). These are accurate ways of speaking about human-elephant relations, but they do not go far enough in recognizing the depth of human-elephant coexistence. In relation to the Karen, I argue that there is evidence of a long-standing multispecies culture in which humans and elephants are both defining agents, shaping each other's lives on spiritual, emotional and material planes.

In the Karen elephant origin story and the rituals performed throughout an elephant's life, elephants are equated to people – not exactly human people, but beings who once were human, and still have more human qualities than other animals. There is no illusion of equality in this relationship; humans are the dominant party, and it is they who maintain the continuing captivity of elephants. But elephants also play a part in shaping the relationship: the lives of Karen people, at least in the villages in which this study took place, are significantly determined by elephants, spatially, financially, emotionally and spiritually. Elephants are appealed to for protection against the unpredictability of local spirits, and spiritual forces in turn are appealed to for protection against elephants' own agentive powers of destruction. In every interaction between a mahout and an elephant, a subtle level of negotiation is present whereby both beings assert their will, recognize the will of the other, and arrive at a compromise of action. Too large, strong and powerful to be entirely dominated, elephants are granted a degree of determinative power in the human-elephant relationship, which is recognized in the ritual of release once performed at the end of the logging season, in the naming ceremony, and in the rituals of protection.

Mahout lives are shaped by their relationships with elephants, who may at any moment play the role of companion, captive, partner, child, or enemy, and often rotate between these roles. In negotiating the ambiguity of their position, mahouts call upon spiritual forces and use cultural rituals to define and reinforce the nature of their multispecies relationship. But elephants are also participants in these rituals, and their

participation influences the possibilities of the human members of their community. Lederach (2017) has argued that “The *Campesino* was born for the *Campo*”, and in the same way, the *caballo* makes the *caballero*, the cow makes the cowboy, and the elephant makes the mahout. In a human culture where most men are mahouts, the study of culture must enlarge its scope to embrace the multispecies nature of its subject.

The genderedness of this multispecies culture is important; with Karen people, as with most Asian elephant cultures, mahoutship is a masculine domain, inaccessible to the direct involvement of women (Sadashige 2015). Yet although Karen women may not ride on, command or physically work with elephants, they participate in most of the rituals of the human-elephant family. In their use of the elephant umbilical cord, women physically affirm the relationship of protection between themselves, their children and elephants. On another level, the rotational farming of Karen people, which is a female domain (Trakansuphakorn 2008), is also linked to elephants, who are partners in the culturally co-evolved process of landscape management.

However, the human-elephant landscape is not only a setting for culture, or the result of the practice of that culture. It is itself embodied, a living matrix populated with a variety of material and immaterial beings (Paul 2018). Karen people say that elephants in some regions are angrier and more aggressive, and in other areas more docile, because of the influence of the spirits that dwell in those regions. In the same way that spirits populate and influence the landscape, the *kla* animating human and elephant bodies provide many of the capacities and tendencies ascribed to individuals. These *kla* have the qualities of different animals, so a person's inner nature is understood to be a composite of human and animal qualities provided by the unique set of *kla* they possess. A mahout may be a man, but his stealth is the product of a tiger *kla*, his urge to travel due to the *kla* of migratory birds, and his strength and wisdom to the presence of elephant *kla*. Calling upon the capacities of different *kla* is one way of negotiating with the forces that shape a person's life.

In this way, human-elephant culture is not only constituted by two ‘species’ in the Darwinian sense. The multispecies culture of elephants and the Karen extends both within and without to embrace the spiritscape, the whole complex of consciousness within which people live. It is a composite culture, and cannot be separated from the lifeways through which it flows. Elephants, humans and spirits are caught up in an act of becoming, dynamically inhabiting each other’s bodies and minds. The stories, rituals and practices of elephants and the Karen people are not only evidence of a multispecies culture, they are the means by which this culture is negotiated and enacted in the face of unpredictable spiritual and material forces.

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