

Book Review

Nicolas Lainé's *Living and Working with Giants: A Multispecies Ethnography of the Khamti and Elephants in Northeast India*

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Living and Working with Giants: A Multispecies Ethnography of the Khamti and Elephants in Northeast India explores the relationship between Asian elephants and the Tai-Khamti of northeast India. The Khamti are one of several 'tribal' ethnic groups in the region, a Buddhist community who maintain a culturally unique and non-institutional form of elephant keeping.

Living and Working with Giants' ethnographic research draws on Nicolas Lainé's extensive fieldwork conducted from 2008–2010, where he spoke with past and present elephant owners and catchers and observed their interspecies practices. As an anthropologist, Lainé's analysis is informed by the cultural perspectives of the Khamti, valuing how context-specific local knowledge can offer new insights into the human-elephant relationship. The core of the book is detailed descriptions of Khamti belief systems and the embodied interactions of both species, analysing in three distinct sections the activities of capturing, training and working with elephants.

The first section examines the practice of capturing wild elephants. Lainé offers a rare, 21st century documentation and analysis of *melah shikar*. This analysis includes a description of the role of *phandi* in Khamti society, how the *kunki* elephant skilfully collaborates when catching a wild elephant, and the practicalities of organizing and performing the capture, including ritual objects and negotiation with local forest and village spirits. Interestingly, the deities worshipped during *melah shikar* have connections both to accounts from the Ahom period and mahout culture in Myanmar.

The book's second section focuses on the transformative process in which the forest elephant becomes a village elephant. Lainé conceptualizes this process as more than mere 'training' or behavioural reinforcement but one of socialization: where the elephant learns to live and act within the norms of the human society and among other working elephants. The ethnographic accounts are nuanced, sensitive to both the violence and care essential to the task of socialisation. One chapter offers a fascinating analysis of the elephant training songs performed by the Khamti and explores the centrality of sound to the development of the mahout-elephant bond.

Section three analyses human and elephant entanglement through the task of logging; a practice given context within a broader political and environmental history of the northeast region. Lainé's ethnography stands out for its detailed accounts of the reciprocating interaction and shared labour of human and elephant. This is a cognitive ethology that rightfully situates elephant thinking, action, and initiative as part of an interspecies team – an intelligent collaboration and complementary performance of human and elephant bodies and minds solving common tasks and problems.

The fourth and concluding section offers an extended reflection on the book's conceptual concerns, such as: the elephant as a nonhuman labourer, the interconnection between forest and village elephants in the Khamti worldview, and – fittingly for an anthropological analysis – the need to consider the existence of elephantine culture. Lainé argues that an elephant caught learns the skills of the trade and the norms of

the Khamti human-elephant community through social transmission from other working elephants. Further, the skills learnt by the elephant as free-roaming juvenile are also necessary to the task of being a *kunki*.

Lainé explores how the cultural and economic aspects of Khamti life are organised through this interspecies relationship. However, Lainé's ethnography goes beyond a community composed of two labouring animals. The social world depicted in the book includes vital interconnections with local wild elephant herds, spirits of the forest and the village, as well the trees and plant-life which both sustain and are modified by the economic and biological needs of both human and elephant. This is an ethnography of a more-than-human community, a culturally specific, multi-species socio-ecology, and one that has evolved and continues to persist despite the dramatic political and environmental shifts in the region over the last two hundred years.

Living and Working with Giants is an exciting and unique book, documenting practices and beliefs surrounding working elephant practices in India that are dwindling in the 21st century. For that reason alone, this book is worth reading. The language and ethnographic descriptions are clear and not overburdened with jargon, and Lainé's terminology and supporting references draw on both ethnological and ethological research. The text is valuable for anyone interested in working elephant cultures beyond the problems of management. The ethnographic description of training is a welcome reprieve from sensationalized and biased accounts that dominate popular discourse on captive elephants.

And for those open to alternative worldviews, the perspectives of the Khamti represented in this book can serve to challenge accepted ideas about who elephants are in society and the kinds of relationships that we can have with them.

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