‘If you have an elephant, you do not want to walk on the ground’: the Thai elephant as a nexus between culture and nature

Jane Harrington

The above Thai proverb is one of many reflections on the inseparable relationship between people and elephants in Thai life. It is an enduring relationship that reflects the close connection between the natural and cultural elements of a lived, experienced and imagined landscape, imbued with traditions and practices, beliefs and lifeways, and social processes that serve to create identity, community and a sense of ‘being in place’.

Introduction

Together with the opposition of human and animal, the nature/culture dichotomy has emerged from the Enlightenment to become central to contemporary human sciences and used to legitimise their existence as autonomous disciplines. In this process, culture has been marked out as ‘a self-enclosed and unified realm of phenomena, set apart from, and opposed to, natural/biological phenomena: a separate “level” of reality’ (Horigan 1988: 4). One effect has been a reification of nature and culture as scientific concepts, and the emergence in biology (and later anthropology) of a tradition of objective knowledge that led to the apprehension that our knowledge of nature was independent of our relationships with it (Ellen 1996: 13). Another has been the establishment of a global heritage practice that has separated the two realms into often opposed sets of interest.

This is not to suggest that nature and culture are necessarily categorically meaningless. Nature-culture, as with other dichotomies, can be useful or misleading. Although remaining a simplifying model for organising thought, it can not be considered to represent a ‘way of the world’. As Moore (1994: 12) asserts – together with other binary categorisations dominated by ‘a Western folk model’ – the nature/culture opposition does not withstand cross-cultural examination: the distinction between nature and culture will culturally vary. In short, the difference between nature and culture is not well served by positing it as a universally conceived opposition. A more constructive approach lies in understanding the interaction between human individuals and communities and the ‘natural’ environment (Ellen 1996: 17). Maintaining a distinction between nature and culture when considering ‘heritage’ is becoming increasingly difficult, leading to the recognition of the strong influence of the cultural on the natural.

In the most basic ways cultural elements can regulate not only categorically meaningless. Nature-culture, as with other dichotomies, can be useful or misleading. Although remaining a simplifying model for organising thought, it can not be considered to represent a ‘way of the world’. As Moore (1994: 12) asserts – together with other binary categorisations dominated by ‘a Western folk model’ – the nature/culture opposition does not withstand cross-cultural examination: the distinction between nature and culture will culturally vary. In short, the difference between nature and culture is not well served by positing it as a universally conceived opposition. A more constructive approach lies in understanding the interaction between human individuals and communities and the ‘natural’ environment (Ellen 1996: 17). Maintaining a distinction between nature and culture when considering ‘heritage’ is becoming increasingly difficult, leading to the recognition of the strong influence of the cultural on the natural. In the most basic ways cultural elements can regulate not only the use of the environment but also the relationships held with it. The challenge is to overcome approaches to heritage management that not only divide natural and cultural heritage, but fail in either realm to engage with the experiential interaction between people and their environment.

We are faced today with multiple challenges to the validity of maintaining the nature/culture separation. These come from a range of sources: contributions from non-Western, holistic philosophies; advances in environmental biology; a growing awareness of the detrimental impacts of environmentally damaging practices, and a growth in anthropological studies of ecology (Casey 1996: 33–36). The result has been an increased emphasis on the integration of people as parts of larger, more complex systems, on culture in nature and the cultural construction of nature. There is a global recognition that both biological and cultural diversity are being depleted, which poses a very real threat to humanity: our long term existence is dependent on a sustainable and interwoven relationship between nature and culture.

The recognition that nature is culturally, ideologically and morally constructed is commonplace in anthropology and the history of ideas. Hence a number of the issues above have been addressed in various research approaches and literature, to include broader epistemological debates that grapple with cultural relativity and the nature of knowledge systems. This literature also discusses specific lifeways that interweave nature and culture in a rich web of relationships.

This paper explores the significance of these relationships in the formation and affirmation of identity and community and the creation of place and landscapes, through a discussion of a village community in the Thai city of Ayutthaya. Inherent in these processes are understandings of heritage that incorporate traditional practices that transmit ideas, beliefs, values and emotions. The lived experience of the elephant riders of Ayutthaya illustrate how these understandings are inseparable from environment and nature, enmeshed in an enduring relationship with elephants. The lives of the elephant-rider community at the Ayutthaya village of Ban Chang reflect the continuation of ancient traditions, enshrined in a multifaceted system of practices and values. It is closely interwoven with a way of life, ritual and traditional training and the maintenance of a community identity that is passed down through generations.

Ayutthaya

Khrueng Si Ayutthaya (the city of Ayutthaya) is a place of contrasts. It is a major city in contemporary Thailand displaying all the trappings of modernity. It is also a Buddhist pilgrimage centre, with the stupa of its many temples piercing the skyline. Barges transporting goods along the river network disturb the tranquil sunset endeavours of fisherman laying their nets from simple wooden boats. Newly constructed concrete monoliths sit side by side with the ruins of the once glorious kingdom of ancient Ayutthaya, which in its prime conquered the rulers of Sukhothai and Angkor. More than 200 years after its destruction at the hands of the Burmese, Ayutthaya has arisen phoenix-like from the ashes of destruction as a landscape that commemorates its past glory in the embrace of a modern history of redemption. Nationalistic narratives that perpetuate and celebrate the splendour and hegemony of Ayutthaya are
given physical presence in the ruins of ancient monuments that enshrine the memory of the destroyed capital. These monuments were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1991. Today a consistently greater dependence is associated with income from tourism. One of the more distinctive tourist activities is the opportunity to take a tour of the Ayutthaya Historical Park on elephant back. The elephants and their riders (mahouts or khwam chang) who earn a living from this pastime travel daily between their residence in the village of Ban Chang, and the Ayutthaya Elephant Camp in the Ayutthaya Historical Park. Ban Chang is located some 3 kilometres north of the island, on the eastern bank of Khlong Meanam Lopburi. Local tourist maps label it as the historic site of the ‘Elephant Kraal’. Tourist literature tends to mention the presence of the historical kraal structure (an enclosure of large wooden posts). However, there is scant mention of the thriving village of families and elephants that live there today, much less an attempt to correlate their presence with the former elephant and human occupants who contributed to the past might of the ancient Ayutthayan kingdom.

A heritage of elephants

The relationship between humans and elephants in Thailand is permeated by tradition, ritual and myth, much of which reflects earlier Hindu influences and ancient Indian customs related to aspects such as the capture and training of elephants. The elephant, and more particularly the white elephant, has been an enduring symbol of Thai identity. The respect for the elephant as a part of Thai life has continued into the present, and is manifest in forms as diverse as religion, royal patronage, art, tourism, nature conservation, and more general aspects of national identity. The role of the elephant has changed dramatically over the past 100 or so years. Although threatened with redundancy in a day-to-day practical sense, its symbolism and tradition is so embedded in Thai culture that the elephant remains inseparable from many aspects of Thai life and culture. The human/elephant relationship in Thailand is based on a long and complex history and tradition, and is a valuable component of the heritage of Thailand. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was replaced as a common form of transport and a ‘fighting machine’, the elephant was probably an animal regularly encountered in the everyday life of many residents of the kingdom that was then Siam.

Certain aspects of physical beauty and grace are synonymous with elephant characteristics. Similar metaphor is found in traditional folk sayings, such as: ‘in a marriage or partnership, the woman is said to be like the hind legs of an elephant’. In addition, the elephant has left its mark on architecture, not only as a commonly represented symbol and motif in art and sculptural features, but also in a functional sense with the presence of elephant-mounting platforms and specially shaped elephant-access gates at temples and palaces.

In various Jataka stories an association is made between elephants and the Buddhist faith. The elephant often symbolises the rain cloud or water, and there are several stories in which Bodhisattvas are presented in the form of an elephant. One version describes Buddha as the Supreme Elephant or Gajottama (Majupuria 1987: 111-112). White elephants have contributed conspicuously to the symbolic role of elephants in Thai culture. The Thai term is chang phuak, which translates as ‘strange coloured elephant’. White elephants are considered extremely auspicious, and accrue status on the basis of a series of characteristics ranging from skin hue, to eye colour to toenail shape. In Hindu mythology, the celestial white elephant Erawan serves as the mount of the Hindu god Indra. The mythology creates links between Erawan and the origins of ‘earthly’ white elephants, and there are clear associations between the godly attributes of Indra and the powers of the earthly king. The correlation between this power and the ownership of white elephants – the manifestation of Erawan in the human world – is clear. Hence the elaborate preparations and rites associated with the ‘arrival’ of a new white elephant, and the sumptuousness of the surroundings in which the creatures were, and still are, stabled.

The Hindu pantheon has contributed a second and significant elephant figure that is ubiquitous in Thai cultural imagery: the elephant-headed god Ganesha (sometimes referred to as Phra Phignan). Ganesha, the son of Shiva and his consort Uma (or Parvati), is considered to be the God of Knowledge and Literature, the God of Opportunity and the Remover of Obstacles. Images of the four-armed Ganesha appear with various objects clasped in his hands: Shiva’s trident, Vishnu’s conch shell, Indra’s elephant goad, the broken tip of Ganesha’s tusk, and a noose (associated with the cord used in capturing wild elephants). As well as the traditional association between elephants and wisdom, it is not surprising to find that Ganesha is closely associated with people who live and work with elephants: there is a shrine to Ganesha at both Ban Chang and the Elephant Camp within the Ayutthaya Historical Park.
The elephant symbol has been appropriated and 'logoised' in Thai bureaucratic life. Ganesh appears as the symbol of the Thai Fine Arts Department (the government agency with responsibility for cultural heritage), and a statue to the elephant god is a prominent feature in the forecourt of the National School of Dance and Dramatic Arts in Bangkok. A sculpture of Erawan graces the façade of the offices of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, and has been referred to as 'the true emblem of Bangkok' (France 2 et al. 2002). These examples serve as reinforcements of the multifarious ways in which the nation and religion are symbolically linked in the repeating motifs of everyday life, and endorse the significant contribution of the symbol of the elephant in the maintenance of a complex web of national meanings and narratives.

There appear to be only around 5000 elephants in Thailand today, of which more than half are 'domestic' elephants. Their decline is not primarily due to poaching (as with the African elephant) as centuries of protection have been afforded to the animal through taboos grounded in traditional and religious beliefs. North is auspicious and associated with the elephant. The animal is also auspicious due to its size, natural strength and association with royalty and mythology. Its attributes have strong metaphorical significance for Thai people. Elephants provide the imagery for the uncommon man, for royalty and bandits, and for social and anti-social heroes. They are considered inedible, theirs to eat and survive.

Beyond traditional sanctions, the value of the elephant was also in its ability to re-establish a livelihood and maintain a fast disappearing way of life. The emergence of elephant camps in response to the problems of out-of-work mahouts and elephants has been accompanied by rhetoric from certain arenas that attempts to broadly differentiate conservation practices; the more undesirable activities are seen to be those associated with commercial ventures such as those at Ayutthaya. It is interesting that carrying tourists on their backs is deemed by some to be potentially demeaning and unnatural for elephants; in contrast, elephant 'performances' that include displays of logging expertise, painting and playing musical instruments are considered more acceptable. These, for example, form the core of the public elephant displays at the government-sponsored Thai Elephant Conservation Centre at Lampang (northern Thailand).

My point is not to argue the relative merits of one over the other, but rather to highlight the attempts to privilege one suite of practices as being purer, more authentic and more desirable. Ultimately all such elephant camps, while most certainly implicated with economic interests, serve as a means by which mahouts and elephants can simply continue to eat and survive.

Many of these criticisms of the commercial nature of these elephants and communities who earned a living through logging. It has also threatened the traditional way of elephant breeding and care.

It cannot be denied that there is a valid concern from groups both inside Thailand and internationally that the methods used in 'domesticating' and training elephants have been, and at times still are, cruel and barbaric. The debates tie into broader issues relating to elephant conservation, most of which are addressed in terms of the elephant as a feature of the natural environment, and the desire to return domestic elephants to where they 'belong'. This reflects a nature conservation ideology that seeks to place elephants properly in the natural world. The sad plight of many elephants today arose out of a decision to ban logging that, although correct from a timber conservation point of view, took little account of the impact on either elephants or loggers. However, any belief that one option is to simply return these elephants to the wild takes no account of the survival difficulties for elephants not brought up in the natural environment, or the lack of habitat into which to introduce them. It also ignores the cultural significance of the traditions and way of life of Thai village communities that have an enduring relationship with elephants.

The cost of feeding and caring for elephants has become beyond the reach of numerous owners, who in many circumstances have been forced to become indigent. One of the saddest outcomes of a need to find alternative means of livelihood has been the drift by many mahouts and their charges into the larger towns and cities, some to be employed in construction activities, others simply begging on the streets. The sight of elephants with their mahouts tawling the main tourist streets of Bangkok after dark has encouraged strong comment from both international visitors and Thais. However, the answer is not as simple as banning them from the city streets. They must have somewhere else to go. The increasing emphasis on tourism in the country has provided an alternative, and this appears to be the preferred option in that there are opportunities to earn a living in less oppressive and more suitable environments. The Ayutthaya Elephant Camp is one of several centres where mahouts and their elephants have been able to re-establish a livelihood and maintain a fast disappearing way of life.
work to do to earn a living. Ban Chang is a modern assertion of the integral role of elephants in the heritage of Ayutthaya and of Thailand, and an exemplary juxtaposition of contemporary practice and historical site.

The relatively recent re-occupation of the Ayutthaya elephant village, and the activities in the Historical Park Elephant Camp, have given a living and more meaningful dimension to the physical landscape of the ancient city. Simply, the elephants and mahouts, and their families, contribute to and enhance the heritage values of the Kraal and of Ayutthaya. The elephants are trained through the precepts of a centuries-old elephant training manual, and associated traditions and rituals are an important part of life in the village. The village provides a context for the confirmation of the community's identity, with a shared notion of knowledge, and the transmission and diversification of this knowledge and practice related to living with elephants. The identity of the villagers, most of whom have come from other places, brings a set of social and individual memories that act to inject and immerse time in place.

Ban Chang, the village at the kraal, is not a 'reinventing of tradition' but the re-establishment of an authentic life-world and practice. The traditions that give life and meaning to the daily experiences of the village community are not museum ventures are countered by the sorts of everyday realities that have been recognised by recent UNESCO forums that encourage communities living in heritage places to engage in responsible tourist-related enterprises (ACCU 2000a, 2000b). These regional meetings have discussed the need for a holistic approach to heritage that incorporates an understanding of traditional practices and lifestyles, that encourages and facilitates community participation, and recognises the necessity to incorporate cultural heritage in the consideration of sustainable economic practices. There is also an understanding that while tourism can be problematic, it can be utilised by local communities in conjunction with heritage appreciation and promotion as a way of achieving financial benefits. One outcome is a more equitable balancing of the distribution of income from tourism projects.

Ayutthaya and elephants

One of the physical features of the Ayutthaya historical landscape is the Elephant Kraal. The physical remains of the Kraal stand as a significant and tangible reminder of the history of the ancient Kingdom, and of the re-establishment of Ayutthaya as an important regional centre. Although references in tourist literature tend to suggest a deserted archaeological and historical site, on visiting the site one finds not only impressive physical remains, but also the village that is the home of the mahouts and their families, and upwards of 70 elephants. The elephants and their mahouts have come from various places, but mostly from Surin or Buri Ram (a small town to the west of Surin). The village was re-occupied about nine years ago as a way of giving out-of-work, orphaned, abandoned and sick elephants and their mahouts a home and

Figure 2 UNESCO World Heritage Plinth, Ayutthaya.
tableaux of a past way of life. They are active and modern continuations of beliefs, practices and understandings that reach back to ancient origins and connect contemporary mahout/elephant relationships with their early Hindu influences. This exemplifies a process in which new and old are synthesised into an idiom that remains consonant with cultural practices, although there has been a transformation of practice through the importation of new activities and externally imposed change, including the impact of tourism. At Ban Chang a distinctive community is maintained through the meaning and symbolism reinforced by tradition, myth and ritual, and a strong association with nature through the relationship with elephants.

This contemporary relationship of the villagers of Ban Chang with the landscape of Ayutthaya not only gives life to the past, but it imbues the physical remains of the kraal with contemporary meanings that create space and landscape as a product of social processes. The resulting landscape is a nexus of natural and cultural elements, and of the physical, the emotional and the cognitive that is contextually constituted by differing human experiences, attachment and involvement (Tilley 1994: 10). For example, a mahout at Ban Chang explained that ‘there are very powerful spirits [phi] at the kraal’. He believes that the power in the kraal posts must have been necessary to keep the elephants in, otherwise how could such flimsy structures have contained the much stronger elephants? ‘This is why no new posts are made and the old ones are just repaired and looked after, because they have their own power’. He also recounted the story that several years ago one of the posts was sold for a huge amount of money: both the seller and the buyer subsequently had much bad luck and illness in their families. Such tales are indicative of the local narratives of place and landscape that imbue physical features with life and meanings and connect them into a wider understanding of social processes, experiences and stories (Harrington 2004: 292).

Elephants and water

One of the most important resources for healthy elephants is proximity to water. Asian elephants require regular immersion in water for a healthy existence, so domestic elephant communities and their minds are best located near a suitable source of regular running water. The attraction of the extensive network of waterways at Ayutthaya is obvious, both for past and present elephant villages. The daily life of the elephants, their mahouts and many of the village children revolve around morning and evening processions to the rivers of the nearby klong (or canal) for washing and playing in a process that strengthens the relationship between the elephants and their riders.

The connection with water life and the environment is, however, one that is embodied in a greater set of social processes and spiritual meanings that reach out to link the village community with their Ayutthaya neighbours and more national narratives. One of the divine attributes of elephants is their auspicious relationship with the arrival of rains: rains mean good rice harvests, full rivers, happy people and a contented kingdom. Clouds are often considered to be the ‘elephants of the sky’ (Majupuria 1987: 113). As water is the source of life, elephants are closely associated with the productive power of nature in both Buddhist and Hindu tradition. It is not surprising, therefore, to find elephants playing a significant part in local Songkran celebrations that juxtapose water, purity and the desire for a rich, happy, propitious and benevolent new year.

The traditional practice enshrined in the living elephant/mahout relationship cannot be considered a less important component of the cultural heritage of Ayutthaya than the physical evidence of the elephant kraal and other aspects of the ancient city. Although stabled and trained at the kraal, the elephants of earlier times were to be found in the city, often performing similar duties to those of the elephants today – moving people from one place to another. Thus the presence of the elephants in the ancient city today can be seen as the continuation of a historical and traditional practice. The elephants and the Ban Chang community contribute to the historic landscape of Ayutthaya through daily experiences and practice that add a significant layer of meaning to the physical remains of the ancient city, and create a link with nature.

Unfortunately, the elephants of Ayutthaya have been under threat of being banned from the Historical Park, due to charges of traffic disruption, safety risks and complaints of unpleasant smells associated with their droppings. The removal of the elephants from the park is supported by the local office of the Fine Arts Department. The public objections relate to the presence of the elephants in the Historical Park, not to their ongoing habitation at the site of the Ayutthaya Elephant Kraal. There are solid arguments against the complaints, which have been addressed elsewhere (Harrington 2002). They include the incongruity of elephant traffic being considered a traffic hazard, when the potential for injury is much more likely to occur in a collision between the fast moving vehicles that use the roads of the park. Banning the vehicles would in fact make greater
heart to the elephants. Another asserted that ‘a good mahout must love and understand elephants and vice versa and not be afraid... yes, the most important thing is to have elephants in your heart and not be afraid’ (Harrington 2004: 286).

In the passing on of knowledge and in a process of education, the particular heritage and collective memory of the mahout community at Ban Chang – as with all communities – is proving that it is an irreplaceable asset, for both today and the future. The young people who are training as mahouts today – and those mahouts who are older – have as genuine a relationship with their elephants as did those who earned a living in the logging industry. Attempts to describe a new generation of mahouts as not being genuine serve to effectively disenfranchise a set of meanings and a life-world that are reliant on the experience and praxis of working and living with elephants, whether that is warfare, transport, logging or the tourist industry. It reiterates the negative connotations associated with the engagement of elephants in tourist enterprises, without understanding the broader significance and contribution of modern-day elephants and their riders to the cultural heritage of both Ayutthaya and Thailand. The irony is that one of the major roles of elephants in their centuries of history as domestic animals has been that of people carrier. Travelling on elephant back was a dominant mode of ‘commuter’ and visitor transport – long before the buses and vehicles that now pollute the Ayutthaya Historical Park with their emissions. As one of the villagers of Ban Chang has commented: ‘It used to be kings – today the tourists ride elephants’.

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Endnote

1 The Centre not only acts as a documentary and information repository, but also as a refuge for domestic elephants who have need of medical support and care. Prior to its establishment as such in 1992, the Conservation Centre was run by the Thai Forest Industry Organisation as the Young Elephant Training School and a 'retirement' home for its elephants (Corvanich 1999: 33; Rings 1998: 55).