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Elephants in Southeast Asia

I. Introduction: The Elephant as a "Key Symbol" (Ortner 1973)

Anthropologists have long made use of "key symbols" as a means of understanding the different cultures in which they study. As explained by the first anthropologist to coin this term, Sherry Ortner, the identification and interpretation of a culture's "key symbols" are central to the anthropological project because key symbols can be said to encapsulate or "summarize" the system of beliefs and values of any given society. By interpreting key symbols, one can uncover a kind of structural blueprint of a society's norms and values. But as a newcomer to a culture, how can we learn to distinguish a key symbol from the myriad signs and symbols that suffuse popular media and public spaces? Ortner offers several criteria for determining whether a symbol can be classified as a key symbol. We know if something is a key symbol if:

1. Local people tell us X is important.

2. Local people are positively or negatively aroused by X, rather than being indifferent to it.

3. We find X in many contexts in the culture—it seems to be represented over and over again in many different domains, including art, ritual, and formal rhetoric.

4. Relatedly, cultural elaboration surrounds X; there is a rich vocabulary available to talk about it and lots of images associated with it.

5. There may be rules surrounding X—taboos about its use or representation.

As we shall see in the discussion that follows, all of these criteria can be applied to the figure of the elephant in Southeast Asia. By undertaking an interpretive study of the elephant as a key symbol in this presentation, our goal is to show how the elephant offers insights into many facets of Southeast Asian culture and society, including mythology, religion, politics, arts, and the changing relations between human populations and their natural environments in the modern era.

In terms of my presentation today, the majority of my discussion will focus on the elephant in Thailand, as this is where I have spent most of my time as a student and researcher. My own interest in elephants stems from fourteen months of field research in Surin between 2000-2003—a province of approximately 1.3 million inhabitants located in Thailand's Northeast. Surin is widely known for its annual Elephant Round-up and its long history of elephant catching by the region's ethnic Kui, who traveled to Cambodia to capture elephants in the wild before the closure of the border

in 1960. As we shall see, the myths, rituals, and taboos surrounding the figure of the elephant in Surin are indicative of the symbolic meanings of elephants in Thailand and Southeast Asia at-large.

II. The Elephant in Hindu-Buddhist Myth, Religion, and Art

As stated previously, one of the means of distinguishing a key symbol is to pay attention to the context and frequency of its appearance. In the case of Thailand, it would not take the first-time visitor very long to realize that the elephant is a key symbol, as its symbolic representation is virtually ubiquitous in both official and public spaces, such as the Buddhist temple, government buildings, and public monuments. For example, walking around the capital city of Bangkok, you would see that an image of an elephant ridden by the Hindu god Indra features on the logo of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, and also figures in the sculpture that adorns the entrance to the National Stadium. Lord Indra seated on an elephant-headed pedestal was also the official insignia and seal for the province of Surin, where I conducted my fieldwork [IMAGE of Surin's provincial seal]. If you took a tour of a Fine Arts University or college campus anywhere in Thailand, you would be greeted on your way in by the image of another elephant—this one called Phra Phi Kanet, the Thai name for the Hindu deity Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of Lord Siva who is revered as the god of wisdom and the arts and the remover of obstacles [IMAGE of Ganesha]. Visiting the Buddhist temple complexes in Bangkok, you would find that elephants of myriad colors and sizes appear in statuary as well as mural paintings. By delving into the meaning behind these images, we can learn a great deal about the transmission of Hinduism and Buddhism into this region.

A. Lord Indra, Airavata, and the transmission of Hinduism to Southeast Asia

Many of the images just described are representations of the elephant as the divine vehicle of the Hindu Lord Indra, the god of rain and fertility. Although elephants are indigenous to Thailand and other countries of mainland Southeast Asia, they probably did not acquire the status of deities until the arrival of Hinduism in the region beginning circa the first century B.C. Indeed, some of the oldest artifacts indicating a reverence for elephants come from the archaeological sites of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa in the Indus Valley of northwestern India, dating to circa 2,500 B.C., where likenesses of elephants engraved onto intaglio seals were discovered. Ceremonial images associated with the elephant have also been found in China, where excavations of the royal Shang tombs (1750-1045 B.C.) uncovered ivory objects as well as bronze vessels in the shape of elephants.

As merchants and Brahmin priests made their way from India to Southeast Asia via the monsoon winds, they brought their Hindu pantheon with them. Apart from the central triumvirate of Lord Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva, (who represent the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe respectively) this pantheon included a reverence for the Lord Indra and his celestial vehicle: the white elephant named

Airavata. In Hindu cosmology, the Lord Indra is both the God of Storms and God of War. Flying through the cosmos on the back of his elephant and wielding his thunderbolt, Lord Indra was believed to bring the rains that destroyed the demon of drought. Airavata aided Lord Indra in this task of rain-making, inasmuch as in Hindu mythology, elephants are associated with the rains and frequently described as the "cousins of clouds" (Zimmer 1960: 61). Given the importance of the rains to the annual rice cycle in Southeast Asia, it is hardly surprising that the local populace chose to adopt propitiation of the Hindu Lord Indra and Airavata from Indian priests and merchants as a means of ensuring the rains and thus the fertility of their rice crops.

An early example of Lord Indra riding atop Airavata can be found in the temple sanctuaries of Angkor—the 9th-13th century ruins located in northwestern Cambodia. [IMAGE of Banteai Srei lintel] This image is taken from a temple lintel at Banteay Srei, a sanctuary built by the Khmer king Jayavarman V who ruled the Angkorian Empire from 968-1001 A.D.

In Thailand, we also find this image of Lord Indra on his elephant, but in the Thai case, he has the name of Erawan, and sometimes appears with thirty three heads. [IMAGE of Lord Indra and Erawan at Wat Arun, & IMAGE of Lord Indra and Erawan at Wat Rajaburana]. It is important to call attention to the fact that these images of Hindu deities appear in Theravada Buddhist temples rather than in Hindu shrines, because what this illustrates is the syncretic relationship between Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism. That is, even as Theravada Buddhism became the dominant religion in the region of mainland SEA from the 13th century forward, Hinduism was not eclipsed but rather incorporated into a new religious hierarchy with the figure of the Lord Buddha at the apex. Within this new order, Hindu gods became guardians of the Lord Buddha, and they continued to serve as important symbols of divine kingship.

B. The Elephant in Buddhism—The Dream of Queen Mahamaya & The Subjugation of Mara and his Elephant Army

Apart from its Hindu associations, the elephant also features centrally in Theravada Buddhist art and legends known throughout the region. For instance, one story widely represented in temple murals is that of the Dream of Queen Mahamaya, the mother of Gautama, the Buddha-to-be. In the story, which is depicted in this contemporary mural painting in Bangkok's Chanasongkram temple [IMAGE of mural painting from Wat Chanasongkram], the Queen Mahamaya dreams that she is approached by a white elephant carrying a lotus. Touching the lotus to her stomach, the white elephant impregnates the Queen with the future Buddha.

A second central narrative found in temple murals is that of the subjugation of Mara [IMAGE of subjugation of Mara, or Calling Earth to Witness]. In this critical episode of the Buddha's life, the evil Mara, Lord of Worldly desires, attempts to distract the Buddha from his path to enlightenment. In his efforts, he presents the Buddha-to-be

with a range of earthly delights and distractions, such as his beautiful daughters. Finally Mara attacks the Buddha with his army of elephants, but instead of defeating the Buddha, the elephants themselves are conquered by his steadfast display of meditative focus and merit. The Buddha-to-be is aided in this critical moment by the figure of Phra Mae Thoranee, the goddess of the earth who wrings her hair to bring forth a flood of waters that wash away Mara's evil army. Following this event, the elephants of Mara's army return, now to serve as devout supplicants of the Enlightened Buddha. This image of the elephant as a devotee of the Buddha appears widely in Buddhist sculpture and statuary throughout the region of Southeast Asia. [IMAGE of kneeling bronze elephant figurine, Ringis 125].

III. The White Elephant and Conceptions of Kingship

In the annals of European dignitaries and travelers, Thailand—or Siam as it was called until 1939—was often described as the "Land of the White Elephant." This was because Siam's kings were known for keeping white elephants in their courts as symbols of the power and legitimacy of their reign. As the name suggests, white elephants are albino elephants, but typically they are not as pale-skinned as other albino animals or humans. The distinguishing features of a white elephant are its pale, bluish eyes, its light grey, mottled skin (as opposed to darker grey), and its pinkish fingernails. Its trunk also tends to be longer, and its tail has long white hairs which may reach the ground.

In the 17th century, a Dutch traveler to the Siamese court of Ayuthaya named Jeremias Van Vliet noted that monarchs of the region revered the white elephant as 'a prince of the elephants.' Reflecting this place of sacred honor, the king's white elephants lived in the royal quarters, had their own retinue of attendants, and were fed upon plates of gold. Van Vliet also suggested that the elephants were valued not only because of their color, but because of what was regarded as their superior intelligence and sensitivity (Van Vliet 1692: 100).

The white elephant gained its symbolic importance in the Siamese courts of Sukhothai, Ayuthaya, and Bangkok in part because of its association with the celestial three-headed elephant named Airavata or Erawan, already described above. In an important religious text entitled the *Trai Phum Phra Ruang*, or the Three Worlds of Phra Ruang, the cosmos is described as having thirty-three levels of existence, with the Lord Indra and his divine elephant governing the cosmos from the highest heavenly plane. Mirroring this cosmological order of the universe, it was believed that an earthly king who possessed a white elephant would have the godlike powers of Lord Indra to bring power, harmony, wealth and well-being to the kingdom. The Three Worlds of Phra Ruang also contains a detailed description of the seven attributes that a righteous Buddhist king must possess if he is to be recognized as a universal monarch, or Chakravartin. Among these seven attributes, which include a perfect queen, a loyal adviser, an excellent general, a bejeweled wheel, a precious gem, and a prized horse is the most noble of elephants—the white elephant. As the

text explains, acquisition of the white elephant would allow the universal ruler to ride through the universe like Lord Indra mounted on Erawan.
It should also be noted that white elephants were often a source of conflict and rivalry between proximate kingdoms, and the historical archives tell us that in the mid-16th century, a war between the Siamese and Burmese kingdoms was started when the Burmese king Bayinnaung's requested two of the Siamese King Maha Chakraphat's white elephants. Angered by the Siamese king's refusal, King Bayinnaung attacked the city of Ayuthaya in 1563 A.D. and forced King Maha Chakraphat to yield four of his white elephants along with nobles and other royal palladia in a bid for peace.

For all these reasons, in the past, as today, whenever a white elephant was found in the wild or born to domesticated elephants, it was offered to the king with great pomp and ritual pageantry. Even today, the king of Thailand is in possession of seven white elephants, who dwell in an area of the royal complex called the Chitralada Palace.

IV. Elephants in Popular Belief and Practice—Shrines, Offerings and Pageantry

Thus far, we have focused primarily on the symbolism of elephants in myth, history, and kingship in Thailand and SE Asia. But this raises the question of whether the elephant represents a key symbol in contemporary society. While much has undoubtedly changed in Thailand during the modern era, the elephant continues to have a prominent symbolic place among the Thai populace as a symbol of wealth, fertility, kingship, and Thai national identity.

A. Elephants and popular beliefs about wealth and fertility

At the many shrines which have sculptures of elephants, one finds ample evidence of popular reverence for the elephant. People regularly go to elephant shrines such as Phra Phi Kanet to make offerings and pay homage to these revered figures, also in the hopes of securing good luck. Another expression of popular belief is the practice of walking under the belly of a living elephant, which is believed to bring good luck and also fertility to a couple who hope to bear children.

B. Surin and the Elephant Round-up

I observed another example of popular beliefs about the sanctity of the elephant during my fieldwork in Surin. There, the local populace believes that the ancient capital of Surin was founded at the end of the 18th century by an elephant hunter named Chiang Pum, who was bestowed royal title by the king of Ayuthaya for his noble and brave deed of capturing the king's escaped white elephant. To commemorate this act of their forefather and founder, the people of Surin organize an annual Elephant pageant, which is attended by hundreds of elephants and their mahouts. Together the people of Surin make a spectacular offering of food, dance and

pageantry to the memory of Chiang Pum and the King of Ayuthaya's white elephant. [IMAGES of elephant pageantry]

C. Elephants and Ordination Rites

A final example also observed in Surin of how the elephant figures in contemporary belief and practice is a ritual called the Elephant Procession and Ordination Ceremony, or *Ngaan Buad Chang*. Every year, at the beginning of the Buddhist Lenten period (months) young men around Thailand prepare to emulate the Buddha in his retreat from the world to Tavitamsa heaven, the celestial abode of Lord Indra and Erawan. The Buddha withdrew to Tavitamsa heaven so that he may preach to his mother, Queen Mahamaya, who had died only seven days after his birth, and who was now residing in this heavenly abode. By renouncing their worldly lives to enter the monkshood during the Lenten period, young men add to the store of merit (*bun*) of themselves and their families, thereby contributing to hope for a better life in a future reincarnation.

In certain communities of Surin, this ceremony of renunciation was accompanied by a grand procession of the novices on elephant back. Wearing the white robes and golden adornments symbolizing the princely Gautama, the novices re-enact the story of the Buddha-to-be's departure from the palace and abandonment of his worldly possessions to don the yellow robes of the austere monk. [IMAGE of Elephant procession]

VI. A Changing Economy and Ecology—Asian Elephants under Threat

A. The Disappearing of the Elephant

In spite of the continuing symbolic importance of the elephant in Thai culture, much has changed for the real elephant in the past century. One hundred years ago, Thailand was home to an estimated 300,000 elephants, of which about 100,000 were domesticated. In the 1960s, this number had slipped to 40,000, of which about 11,000 were domesticated. Today in Thailand, there are circa 2000 wild, and about 3000 domesticated elephants. This number is falling 2-5% a year owing to various causes, including:

a) Destruction of their habitat & increase in farmland; as humans encroach upon the elephants homelands, they encroach on those of humans and are often shot at.

b) Logging - the work with which the elephant has long been most associated in Thailand - was declared illegal in 1989; each year, many animals are lost by sickness or injury during the rainy season during which illegal logging continues, as the chances of being caught are less. They often slip in the mud; they are drugged, overworked, often abandoned by mahouts who cannot afford to have them cured or

can no longer afford to keep them. These elephants nowadays frequently change hands which leads to instability/insecurity of the animal.

c) Poaching continues for their tusks/ ivory and increasingly for the females to sell the babies for tourism.

B. Alternate Means of Survival—From Draft Animals to Artists & Performers

Furthermore, now that domesticated elephants no longer function as draft animals or animals of war as they did in the past, their once highly-valued function in society has rapidly diminished, and as a consequence both they and their keepers have been forced to find other means of survival, including begging in the city and tourism. [IMAGES of Kui mahouts in Bangkok as well as tourist camps]. Indeed it is tragic that today, elephants and their mahouts are in a sense dependent on the popular memory and consciousness of the important functional and symbolic place that they held in the past, and there is no question that Thais do their best to support the displaced elephants because of their revered place as symbols of the Thai nation and kingship. And yet, respect alone is not enough to save the Asian elephant. The urban context of Bangkok may have its elephant icons, but it is no place for a living elephant to roam. Contrary to appearances, their feet are very sensitive to walking on concrete and tarmac, and many elephants have died or have been seriously injured in the city. What then, can be done to save their dwindling populations?

1. National Parks—wild populations—efforts being made to use domesticated elephants as "mediators" with wild elephants who have begun to threaten crops and farmers
2. Elephants as "Artists"
3. Tourism—Ayuthaya, Work Camps, Surin, Jungle Treks

VII. Some Asian Elephant Facts (From Friends of the Asian Elephant Foundation, http://www.elephant.tnet.co.th/index_29.1.html)

A. Distribution of Asian Elephant

Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Indonesia, China, Laos, Cambodia, Nepal, Bhu-tan, Bangladesh, Vietnam. May have formerly ranged from Iraq / Syria - Yangtze River, China

The worldwide figure for maximus elephants remaining is 38,000-51,000, of which circa 16,000 are domesticated.

B. Birth / Maturity / Reproduction

Females are mature at between 9-15 yrs, males at 15 yrs. Males are potent to the age of 60. The Asian elephant usually lives 70-80 yrs, although they can live to 100 years. Females are pregnant for 18-22 months, giving birth to 1 calf (rarely twins) weighing about 220 lbs, (100 kg.) whom they suckle for up to 2-3 yrs.

C. Trunk

An elephant uses his trunk as a human uses his hands, arms and nose. It is divided into 2 nostrils, and used for breathing, smelling, touching, caressing, attacking, defense, and getting water and food into his mouth. It is used to spray themselves down with water (whether salt or sweet) or with dust. Newborns and young elephants use their mouth to suckle.

D. Tusks

Not all males have tusks, (which start to become visible outside the skin at around 4 yrs.) Only some females grow them, and they are never more than a few inches long. The tip of the elephant' s tusk is solid, becoming hollow towards his mouth, where nerves connect it to the brain. (Sawing off the tusks at their root would be similar to removing a human' s tooth without anesthesia.)

E. Teeth

All elephants are born with teeth which are located far to the rear of their mouth.

F. Alimentation

They eat 10% of their body weight, as adults between 170 - 200 kilos of food per day - grasses, bamboo, creepers, ficus, leaves, bark, mangoes, tamarind, some cultivated crops such as corn, pineapple, rice grass, and fruits.

They drink between 80 - 200 litres of water a day and of course use more for bathing. Some are inquisitive, and given the opportunity will eat food and drink meant for humans, which ends up making them sick with diarrhea.

G. Senses

They can see up to 40 metres in daylight, however their sense of smell is excellent.

H. Sounds and body language

They make ultrasonic sounds to communicate with each other up to 5 kilometres' distance. When they are annoyed they make a rumbling sound. When they are happy they make a sharp high cry and a distinct low rumble. When they are angry they make a loud roaring, when in pain they whimper, and they are known to weep when in great distress.

They will use their ears, tail and eyes when excited - or as a warning: the eyes widen, ears flap, and tail extends upwards. They will roll their trunks when they want to attack. Swinging one leg and / or their head can denote nervousness, or to overcome the stress they suffer from being kept chained overlong.

I. Feet

The soles of their feet are soft, and sensitive to heat; they do not enjoy walking for long on hot surfaces such as tarmac or sand.

J. Rest

Elephants rest during the hottest periods of the day. At night (11 pm. to 3 or 4 am.) They sleep lying down and often snore. During the day they do not lie down ; if they do, it means they are unwell. Some will sleep standing during the day especially when the weather is hot.

K. Swimming

They enjoy bathing to cool and clean themselves, also to frolic ; they can also swim. They have been known to swim in the sea beyond 10 kilometres, holding their trunk above the water much like a periscope, and diving / surfacing like a very slow dolphin.

L. Preferences

They prefer shade to sun, frequently spray dirt on themselves to keep away insects. They are shy of bright lights and flashes, motor traffic, and loud noises.

M. Temperament

Elephants are individuals with different temperaments. Some are timid, some bold, some more peaceable, and some prone to attacks of anger. They are steadfast workers, some who are less willing, and some who will make a fuss.

N. Memory

Elephants never forget the people who have cared for them, nor do they forget the people who have mistreated them. When driven by unbearable abuse to killing their tormentor, some have stood by the body and cried from remorse. Other have been seen to roar from hatred, refusing to let anyone near.

O. Social animals

In their natural state, the elephant is part of a herd of 10-30 closely related animals, led by an elderly female. They are playful and social animals. Domesticated / trained from an early age, the elephant will respond to a fair-minded mahout and learn a large variety of work or play-related behaviors. (35-40 commands and up to 200 in the circus)

P. Captivity

Zoo keepers report that captive elephants who are separated from their social group and placed on their own often die of "sudden death syndrome" or "broken hearted syndrome". One captive elephant routinely put aside a little of its grain for a mouse to eat. They do not like being mocked ; another zoo keeper reported that elephants who were laughed at frequently filled their trunks with water and sprayed those who were laughing at them. Bored with captivity some have been seen drawing with a pebble on the cement floor of their enclosure. Given a pencil and drawing pad, they have produced many drawings without reward. Some enjoy painting. One painting elephant in San Diego Zoo gets excited at the mere mention of "paint".

American biologist / scientist Douglas Chadwick wrote : "If I learned anything from my time among the elephants, it is the extent to which we are kin. The warmth of their families makes me feel warm. Their capacity for delight gives me joy. Their ability to learn and understand things is a continuing revelation to me. If a person cannot see these qualities when looking at elephants, it can only be because he or she does not want to." (The Fate of the Elephant, Sierra Club Books 1992)

Selected References and Resources

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*http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/megryan/
This is an excellent website with links to more sources, websites, photos, and a Teacher's Lesson Plan.