
Global Capital, Local Animal

Some Notes on the Elephant Trade
in Colonial Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Studies of the wildlife trade often take a global ambit. In this essay I argue that, alongside this planetary scale, in order to better understand the colonial transformations that were attendant to the sale of animals, historians should pay close attention to the local contexts for the capture and sale of nonhuman creatures. Such a focus enables a keener analysis of the ways animals were commodified and the role of subordinated human labour in the trade. The case of the elephant trade in British dominated southeast Asia during the 1910s provides a rich example to explore these processes and through which to demonstrate the utility of a local focus.

Small Histories of the Colonial Animal Trade

The trade in wildlife, particularly in its illegal forms, is mostly framed in scholarship as being transnational and intercontinental in scope. There are compelling reasons for this geographic focus in our current moment. The capture, movement, and use of endangered animals is widely understood as a threat to conservation efforts as well as a source of emergent new diseases for humans.¹ The former is underscored by the growing recognition that we are living through a socio-ecological crisis of biodiversity depletion amounting to a Sixth Extinction.² The latter has come into sharp focus following outbreaks of Ebola and swine flu, and particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. These are inherently planetary problems. In addition to these contemporary imperatives, the global focus of studies may also be due to the wide spatial framing of research into the history of particular commodities. Historical examinations of certain goods – perhaps most famously cotton, tea, and sugar – have drawn out the world-spanning networks of activities entailed in cultivating, commercialising, and consuming them; arrangements that were overseen and orchestrated by modern imperial formations that were themselves sustained by the resulting practices and profits.³ Animals have started to be included among the histories of goods enrolled in the making and expansion of imperialism.⁴ In the light of this it may seem counterintuitive to encourage a focus on local contexts and the movement of animals over comparatively short distances. But, in this essay, this is precisely my intention.

To understand the relationship between colonialism and the traffic in animals fully, it is necessary to first uncover how it was that certain species of nonhuman creatures came to be tradeable at all. In other words, we need to be alert to the material and imaginative processes through which sentient beings became rendered into commodities. We also need to be attentive to the political economic arrangements that fostered markets where these captive living commodities could be bought and sold. Only then can we appreciate the foundational arrangements that made the trade in wildlife possible.

Much of the focus of historical studies on the capture or killing of animals under auspices of the British Empire is on the movement and eventual use of their bodies, particularly when their destination was located in the metropole. The appearance of living exhibits of Asian and African fauna in

Europe and North America, in zoos or travelling shows, or more banally as pets, has attracted a considerable scholarship.⁵ So, too, has the history of hunting and the subsequent circulation of 'exotic' animal remains often incorporated into new commodities, such as ivory piano keys or macabre furniture, and sometimes transformed into scientific specimens, artefacts that now crowd the storage rooms of museums.⁶ At their best, these studies reveal the cultural roles played by animals as they contributed to novel discourses and dispositions in imperial societies.⁷ More mundanely, perhaps, historians of empire have also examined the movement of livestock animals, whose flesh sated imperial hungers and whose rearing sometimes wrought ecological transformations.⁸ Less work delves into the knotty histories of animals' commodification and sale, save for some literature on the intermediary oceanic entrepôts where creatures from colonised hinterlands passed through, such as Singapore.⁹

Without wanting to diminish the importance of such studies, which are demonstrably valuable in themselves, the primacy accorded to circulation and consumption in the field makes it difficult to discern the deeper changes that are attributable to colonial rule. There are several unanswered, or perhaps unasked, questions when it comes to colonial animal trading. What continuities existed between pre-colonial and colonial trading practices and animal knowledges?¹⁰ To what extent did the animal trade necessitate new or altered relations between colonised humans and animals? To what extent were practices of capturing and selling animals for an imperial market 'embedded' in colonised society? And how sustained and sustainable were these relations and practices? In some ways, these questions challenge historians to get closer to the lives of the subaltern peoples who worked closely in the trade. This has been a longer challenge in the historiography, where there has been something of a tendency to focus on the experience of the animal at the expense of the humans they lived alongside.¹¹ This is a tendency that is being redressed by historians, particularly where colonised humans and large predator creatures have been placed in greater proximity and antagonism.¹² In the context of British India, excellent work has been done exploring how the physical vulnerabilities of animals contributed to the economic precarity of human livelihoods.¹³ These studies are of particular value for our discussion, as they draw attention to the forms of subaltern dependence on animals that either emerged or were embedded by the experience of colonialism. But as intrinsically valuable recovering the lives of marginalised peoples is, the redirection of attention to local contexts has useful additional implications

for shedding more light on both the lives of the animals involved in the animal trade, as well as for expanding the ambit of the activities we consider to have been a part of the animal trade.

To start with the animals, focusing on the capture and *in situ* sale of wildlife over its long-distance transportation and imperial consumption reminds us that most of these animals were not born commodities but became commoditised through the work of others. Nicole Shukin's now classic work, *Animal Capital*, makes precisely this point amongst its many generative theoretical contributions to Animal Studies. The deceptive appearance of animals as naturally occurring beings can mask the often-complex material arrangements that made their reproduction for human use possible, at the same time hiding the cultural work necessary to cast creatures in an anthropocentric naturalism.¹⁴ These processes of naturalisation might be even further heightened with undomesticated or rare creatures not subject to mass-scale breeding or marketing. It might seem self-evident that, as apparently 'wild' creatures, lions or parrots are ahistorical animals, in spite of their accelerating historical entanglement in human affairs during the last century and a half.¹⁵ Focusing on the labour involved in turning wildlife into commodities reminds us that living, sentient beings are unique forms of commodity with often species-specific needs and individual capabilities. A wild animal is never a readymade product. Often, capturing is not enough to prepare the creatures for the market. Factors such as docility, health, size, gender, and familiarity with humans might all shape the price of a captured creature, or even determine whether they could be sold at all. The bodily characteristics, abilities and capacities of animals were salient factors in shaping how they were commoditised, and focusing on the local contexts of capture and sale enables historians to keep these factors in their sights.

As well as centring subaltern human labour and encouraging an attunement to the commoditisation of animals, the focus on the local can also expand the ambit of what is encompassed by the animal trade. In some cases, the trade in certain species was ancillary to a wider economic activity. A commonly occurring example across the colonial world was the trade of oxen and buffalo to work in agricultural production, an essential part of peasant production even during the accelerated subsumption of cultivators to capitalism.¹⁶ In other words, the trade of animals was not always to meet an imperial desire for the creatures *in and of themselves*, but for their utility in the making of other commodities. This might include their deployment as workers in labour processes (such as elephants in the timber industry) – what I have termed

elsewhere “undead capital” (of which more below) –, or the use of their bodily processes to produce raw materials (such as silk worms) – what has been described by others as “metabolic capital”.¹⁷ Including the trade in animals to service other imperial enterprises enables us to understand the multifarious drives behind the commoditisation of animals and to think about the animal trade not as a distinct and discreet activity, but as one integrated into a multitude of labour processes, commercial activities, and supply-chains.

By grounding our studies in local particularities, the complexity of colonial change can be better apprehended. It was not always unidirectional or intentional. While undoubtedly an important agent for change, imperial powers were rarely juggernauts capable of transforming the world to their whims. Notwithstanding the ways that colonialism frequently facilitated the expansion of capitalist extractivism and monocultural plantations – all hallmarks of so-called “primitive accumulation” through which places were coercively brought into capitalist relations¹⁸ – the requirements for animals in service of these industries exposed imperial commercial firms’ reliance on subaltern peoples and their relations with nonhuman creatures. Colonised humans and animals contributed to what the anthropologist Anna Tsing has aptly called the “frictions” of global capitalism: the ubiquitous, uneven, asymmetrical contestations to the establishment of hegemonic social relations.¹⁹ To illustrate the ways that, at times, the “dog” of global capital could be wagged by the “tail” of local animals – to borrow an Anglophone animal idiom – this essay looks at the case of working elephants in colonial southeast Asia.

Gentlemanly Capitalists, Animal Capital, Primitive Accumulation

The history of the trade in elephants in southeast Asia during the colonial era is one intimately connected to the timber industry. Across south and southeast Asia, Asian elephants have been captured from the wild and used for labour, transportation, military power, pageantry, and religious ceremonies for over a millennium. Thomas Trautmann has argued that the continuing utility of these powerful large mammals to pre-colonial polities was a significant factor in the survival of the species in the region, in contrast to their diminishing numbers in east Asia. As this suggests, living and working alongside captive elephants was already well established for significant populations in

pre-colonial southeast Asia.²⁰ The growing influence of imperially financed timber companies in both 19th century Myanmar and Thailand, ruled respectively by the Konbaung and Chakri dynasties, both built on and expanded these pre-existing relationships between humans and elephants. There are three concepts that are helpful to think through these changes: gentlemanly capitalism; animal capital; and primitive accumulation. In this section, I set out the emergence of a market for elephants as an aspect of British imperialism by examining these key concepts.

Tectona grandis, commonly known as teak, was the plant species that enticed British entrepreneurs into the forests of Myanmar and Thailand during the second half of the 19th century. This tropical hardwood was desired for its remarkable strength and durability, characteristics that lent it to shipbuilding, railway sleepers, and luxury furniture. The strategies through which imperial-financed firms, most prominently the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation run by the Scottish Wallace family, sought to get access to the tree have been productively characterised as “gentlemanly capitalism”, following the work of Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins.²¹ The term draws attention to the informal and kinship ties between British politicians and financiers that shaped imperial policies from London.²² As Anthony Webster has shown, the manner through which British timber-firm owners with operations in Myanmar mobilised their connections in Parliament and the press to encourage the Government of India to colonise the remaining territory of the Konbaung regime is, in many ways, a quintessential example of gentlemanly capitalism.²³ The independent Burmese empire had already been significantly eaten away by the East India Company as a result of two expensive and, in the case of the second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852, controversial wars. The Third and final Anglo-Burmese War was brought about in no small part due to the machinations of the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation who took advantage of fines levelled against them by the Konbaung court for harvesting teak in excess of the terms of their leases to create a scandal about the oppression of the Burmese state – claims whose questionable veracity became something of a minor imperial scandal itself. While there was no such formal imperial expansion over the border with Thailand, the Bombay Burma Trading Corporation used its contacts in Westminster and the Government of India to facilitate structures that provided them with preferential access to the country’s upland forests.²⁴ By the end of the 19th century, British timber firms had gained extensive long-term leases over swathes of forests in mainland southeast Asia.²⁵

But getting favourable access to work the forests through upper-class political connections that linked the financial industry with parliament was only part of the job. The logistical arrangements for harvesting, transporting, and cutting the teak trees – then turning them into timbers – required animal capital: especially, elephant workers.²⁶ There was no better technology than elephants for extracting teak from the harder to reach forests of Myanmar and Thailand. Indeed, having the amounts of capital necessary to purchase substantial herds of elephants was one of the key factors that gave British timber firms a competitive advantage over smaller Burmese and Thai outfits. Elephants were deployed in almost all aspects of the teak industry. They were used to help fell the trees, to remove the logs from the forest, to transport the logs to the ports along the coast, and to manoeuvre the timbers in the firms' dockyards.²⁷ The elephants' strength, stamina, dexterity, and aptitude for working alongside humans made them irreplaceable and essential elements in the labour process. But as well as being vital assets (vital both in a sense of their importance and in the sense that they were living beings), elephants' biological needs placed constraints on the operations of the timber firms. They required access to adequate fodder and clean water for their consumption. They needed water to wash themselves. In addition, these highly social and intelligent creatures also had psychological needs that needed to be met, or at a minimum accounted for. This was most apparent in their training during which, through a regimen of privation and violence tempered by reward and care, these powerful creatures forged interspecies relationships with their drivers. Throughout elephants' lives the timber firms documented their behaviours to be able to manage them as individuals.²⁸ Within all this monitoring and control, a degree of freedom was permitted for these conscripted workers. When residing in the jungle camps where great teak trees were being felled, the elephant workforce was allowed to roam in the forests at night, albeit limited in their wanderings by fetters.²⁹ In these ways, working timber elephants represented a particular form of animal capital. Their value was found in the particular physical and mental characteristics and capabilities of their species, and, on this basis, they might be considered "lively capital".³⁰ However, they would not produce surplus capital of their own volition. They needed to be coerced and corralled into the labour process, and as such they required near constant attendant human labour to control and direct their activities. The working elephant was, in this sense, the product of spent labour that demanded ongoing labour to be productive, a status that Karl Marx described as being "constant capital", or occasionally, "dead

labour".³¹ As both lively and dead capital, we might conceive of working elephants as "undead capital" – valued for their living traits but requiring the labour of others to tether their lives to commodity production.³²

Bringing elephants and teak into market relations was not a simple process. Gentlemanly capitalists were not able to acquire their necessary animal capital easily. There were essential imaginative shifts and material arrangements to be made for this to occur,³³ and these shifts and arrangements required the firms to build connections with communities in the border-worlds of eastern Myanmar, western Thailand, and southwest China.³⁴ This was a border where the movement of commodities, both legal sales and illicit smuggling, brought increasingly bureaucratic states into diplomatic dialogue to demarcate and police borders, albeit without always establishing effective control.³⁵ The movement of elephants across these border-worlds can be thought of as part of this history. In this sense, the trade in elephants did not just cross borders, but contributed to the making of imperial borders. Attempts to monitor and restrict the movement of elephants entailed new border controls and technologies, such as track laws and elephant passports, which were introduced on the Myanmar-Thai border in the 1920s.³⁶

This was a region that, due to its mountainous topography, was historically a space of resistance to the intrusion of powerful imperial polities, being a zone of refuge for some folks fleeing lowland dynastic authorities' demands for manpower.³⁷ These border-worlds were characterised by a patchwork of different ethno-linguistic groups, varying degrees of social stratification with and between groups (from monarchical Shan Sawbwa rulers to the more egalitarian forest Karen communities), and degrees of wider economic connections. Historians of the pre-colonial period in Myanmar have tended to view ethnic difference as a fluid category entangled with notions of political belonging.³⁸ The extent to which British rule altered this in terms of people's identities remains a point of debate,³⁹ but the encroachment of European timber firms into the border-worlds from the late-19th century marked an important shift in the political economy and ecology for some communities. The extensive leases to forests in these upland regions on either side of the embryonic border between Myanmar and Thailand brought about a growing conflict over resources between the timber firms' large-scale extractive activities and the indigenous communities longstanding use of the forest as a site of shifting agriculture, hunting, and the collection of natural materials; a clash between property and commons. This was compounded by the development of state forestry departments that sought to manage forest access and

use on self-consciously scientific principles, although these were marked by pejorative perceptions of local forest communities. In this process, some Karen communities were being alienated from their forests with the support of state power.⁴⁰ At the same time, the activities of the timber firms had developed a demand for wage labour in elephant camps to drive their animals and extract teak, a demand met by (mostly) men from those same displaced communities. This was “primitive accumulation”: the expansion of capitalist relations through the acquisition of formerly commonly held resources through, in part, “extra-economic means”.⁴¹

The juxtaposition of the adjectives “gentlemanly”, “animal”, and “primitive” *itself* reveals some of the tensions and apparent contradictions of the colonial teak industry in southeast Asia. The polite conversations in the rarefied atmosphere of London’s clubs were entangled with the punitive raids of the Indian army on recalcitrant Shan rulers and unruly Karen villages, as well as the violent methods through which wild elephants were caught and conscripted. This was the context in which elephants became commodities and in which a local market for them was formed. Ritu Birla has argued with regards to the economic behaviours of Indian capitalists, following Karl Polanyi’s foundational work, that the British Raj had to deploy its legal and material power in its attempts to inculcate the rationality of a market society – that is, a society governed and structured by market logics.⁴² The same insight helps us to elucidate the arrangements for trading elephants in colonial southeast Asia. Even though a demand for elephants existed in the labour processes of the timber firms, a market for elephants did not spontaneously spring forth in response to it. In the next section of this paper, I look closely at the arrangements for the capture, buying, and selling of elephants between the 1910s and 1920s.

Purchasing an Elephant

The details of how timber firms acquired elephants is difficult to glean. For the period before 1914, the internal records of the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation are incomplete and sparse when it comes to elephants. The official archives of the colonial state pick up on aspects of how the firms managed their elephants, albeit mostly where the firms’ ownership of elephants

was either legally contested or directly challenged through theft. As a result of this paucity, this section focuses on the arrangements that were established during the 1910s, through which the Corporation built up a substantial herd of working elephants that it directly owned (although the previously prevalent practice of contracting a smaller number of elephants and foresters continued throughout the period, albeit significantly reduced). I contextualise this snapshot of the arrangements for purchasing elephants in the difficulties faced by the state and the firms in acquiring and keeping elephant workers that preceded this period. I then briefly sketch out the continuing challenges posed to the firms by the shifting local arrangements for capturing and selling elephants. The purpose of this case study is not to make a grand empirical claim regarding the elephant trade across time, but it is instead to illustrate the methodological utility of a focus on the local. In this case, it reveals the ways that colonised actors were able to successfully exert their own will on the considerably more wealthy and connected timber firms. At the same time, it shows the continued fragility of the arrangements for securing an elephant workforce, a fragility created in no small part due to the needs and capabilities of elephants themselves: namely, the changes across their life cycles and their ability to traverse long distances over difficult terrain.

During the 1870s and 1880s, the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation and others found themselves in jurisdictional disputes with the landlocked rump of the once great Konbaung Dynasty over elephants that it claimed had been stolen. On at least one occasion, a timber firm claimed that Burmese ministers were conniving with the thefts.⁴³ When the monarchy was deposed and the country annexed to British India in 1885–1886, these difficulties did not disappear. During the rebellions that broke out across Myanmar following annexation, elephants were frequently being stolen from the Corporation's herds and taken over the border with Thailand. Often, the elephants were taken over the restive Shan territories. The Corporation appealed to the Government of Burma to support their attempts to recover their lost animal capital over the border, mostly with little effect.⁴⁴ They also courted local powerbrokers, and their own agents, on occasion, installed themselves as representatives of Karen communities in the Corporation's attempts to secure its property rights in the border-worlds.⁴⁵ It is hard to be certain in the absence of documents but based on the patterns of growth within the industry and the numbers of elephants employed from the 1910s, it is possible that the Corporation's own herd was somewhere between five hundred and nine hundred elephants at around 1900. The centrality of what the

Corporation termed its “elephant power” to the firm’s productivity, in addition to the value of the animal itself, meant that these thefts were keenly felt and a point of significant disquiet – particularly as the numbers of stolen elephants could be as many as 150, as it was in one case located in Karen-majority border regions.⁴⁶ Over the early-20th century greater controls on the movement of elephants between Myanmar and Thailand were established, although these were not well enforced and smuggling continued to be a perennial, if reduced, concern into the interwar years.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the porosity of the border with Thailand was also beneficial to the Corporation, enabling them to frequently transfer elephants across from their Thai forests to work in their Burmese leases. While the centre of gravity for the Corporations’ activities was Myanmar, the border-world that straddled the imperial boundary between Myanmar and Thailand was the nexus for the legal and illicit acquisition and movement of elephants by the start of the 20th century.

Documents from 1915 suggest that in the preceding years elephants had been purchased by the Corporation directly from local capturing firms. This arrangement was superseded in the 1910s by a growing reliance, even dependency, on an intermediary – for reasons that will be unpacked shortly. The teak trade was undergoing an acceleration during these opening decades of the century, creating a greater demand for elephants, a demand that was recognised by the colonial state which had hitherto been pessimistic about prospects of systematically capturing elephants for sale itself.⁴⁸ Building on the practices of the Konbaung Dynasty, the colonial regime claimed the right to all wild elephants in the territory.⁴⁹ There was thought to be such an abundance that the population was inexhaustible and that there was no need to enact elephant protection legislation that had been promulgated across the rest of British India, although this was eventually extended to British Burma, too.⁵⁰ In practice, the state delegated its right to capture wild elephants to local outfits through licences. But in the 1900s, the Government of India was so impressed by the opportunities to sell captive elephants to the teak industry in Myanmar as to move its entire elephant capturing operations to the colony. This was, however, an unmitigated failure that ended in a drawn out and embarrassing corruption scandal as the head of operation, one Ian Dalrymple-Clark, was found to have been faking the deaths of elephants in order to sell them to firms through his alter ego, Mr Green, thereby embezzling the profits. Nevertheless, even without these extensive and costly frauds, there was little benefit to the experiment. Crucially, the elephants that were captured by the state-run enterprise – some four hundred plus

animals, if the fraudulent documents can be trusted at all – when sold to timber firms had mortality rates of over fifty percent within the first two years after purchase. The kheddah method of capturing, which entails corraling the wild elephants into a wooden stockade, resulted in large numbers of captured animals being kept in inadequate conditions and with no arrangements for enabling them to acculturate to their new lives. They were weakened by outbreaks of disease, violence (both from being captured and from being captive among unfamiliar conspecifics), and listlessness.⁵¹ It was unsurprising that the Corporation should turn to local actors to supply its growing demand for elephants, given this disastrous attempt by the state to commodify elephants and the logistical challenges of acquiring them in large numbers that it exposed.

This was an important moment in the development of the firm's elephant power and, consequently, in the scale of their teak extraction. The Corporation's early historians suggest that it was the firm's ability to corner the elephant market that provided it with a dominant position in the industry and enabled it to move away from relying on contracted foresters in its leased forests, instead employing its own staff and owning its own elephants.⁵² Although I have not found an exact figure in the records, based on the numbers of purchases made between 1907 and 1918, by which time more reliable figures on the size of the herd are available, in 1906 they had no fewer than 1,084 elephants. By the end of 1918, they now owned approximately 1,900, not including those in Thailand. Factoring in mortality rates of an estimated five percent, this was a period of intensive elephant purchasing.⁵³ By the time of the Japanese occupation in 1942, the Corporation's elephant work force was not much higher than this figure, at 1,972.⁵⁴ Evidently, the early 1910s were a transitory phase of building up elephant power that remained fairly stable, with continued purchases amounting to roughly five hundred individuals throughout the 1920s and 1930s to maintain this strength.⁵⁵ Given that elephants live long lives, even in semi-captivity and despite the demanding conditions of timber extraction operations, that the 1910s purchases set the Corporation up for the next twenty years is perhaps not so surprising. According to the Corporation's accounts for its Burmese operations, excluding teak held as stock-in-trade, elephants represented the largest assets they owned for at least the period between 1919 and 1924. During this same period, they exported over half a million tons of teak from Myanmar alone.⁵⁶ Their elephant capital was evidently being exploited fully.

The early history of the elephant trade that supplied the teak industry – a history that, as we have seen, was marked by theft, smuggling, and corruption – reveals two important aspects of elephants that needed to be accommodated in the process of capturing them for sale. Elephants had physical and psychological needs that had to be met, requiring a degree of care in the unavoidably violent and traumatic process of capture. They were also highly mobile animal commodities, and securing possession of them in the febrile context of the Myanmar-Thailand border-worlds proved to be a perpetual challenge. The arrangements that the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation adopted for purchasing elephants during the 1910s allowed for the newly captured elephants' needs and was embedded in local communities, mitigating the risk of theft.

These arrangements hinged on one enterprising Burmese man called U Bah Oh. His ability to acquire batches of working elephants with docile temperaments and strong constitutions was looked upon with some wonder by the Corporation's in-country management. The extent to which the Corporation came to rely upon U Bah Oh for their elephants was a growing cause for concern during the late 1910s, particularly from managers located in Britain. There was also some worry that his operations had the effect of inflating prices in Thailand, as well as reorientating the local market to the Myanmar side of the border. But his elephant purchasing prowess was such that it overrode these concerns. He was engaged by the Corporation through a series of contracts during the 1910s, culminating in a contract to supply them with 120 elephants in 1917, with a further separate engagement with him to purchase up to fifty elephants from Assam in northeast India. U Bah Oh was evidently a capable negotiator, possibly aware of the strength of his position, and able to sell these animals to the Corporation for around 1,500 to 2,000 rupees above the estimated market price of around 6,000 rupees per animal. In addition, the Corporation provided him with capital for him to invest in his own elephant herd to enable him to meet the demands of the contract – a sign of their reliance on U Bah Oh's operations. As we shall see, U Bah Oh's own capital formation has its own wider historical effects.⁵⁷

To persuade their managers in Britain of the efficacy and even the necessity of working with U Bah Oh, the Rangoon office of the Corporation wrote a detailed description of how his operation worked in May 1915. Their intention was to show the cost and complexity of U Bah Oh's operations so as to reassure their more remotely located colleagues that in agreeing to a contract for 140 elephants with him they were getting good value.

Nevertheless, they were still compelled to acknowledge that U Bah Oh, “makes a very fine profit” (emphasis in the original) and to concede that ultimately, “we cannot get him to do it for less.”⁵⁸ This letter revealed the near monopoly that U Bah Oh held on knowledge of and networks for elephant care, and is perhaps also indicative of his monopoly on connections to the Corporation for Karen villagers. Having purchased elephants directly from elephant capturing firms from as far as Thailand and Assam, U Bah Oh would arrange for them to be looked after by Karen communities. He used the advances from the Corporation to pay 100 rupees annually to the village headmen of Karen villages in the borders to look after elephants, with similar payments being made to key villagers charged with looking after individual creatures. These payments were made after it was confirmed that the elephants were thriving. To oversee these arrangements, U Bah Oh also employed a man reportedly known as Hla Baw of Shwigin at a rate of 50 rupees a month. U Bah Oh’s operation worked, in effect, by tapping into the expertise of local communities with long experience of working alongside elephants and practiced in training them.⁵⁹ If contemporary elephant keeping practices among Karen mahouts are a guide to past practices, then a high degree of attenuated care and of freedom to roam were afforded to their charges.⁶⁰ At the same time, U Bah Oh’s monetary incentives were commodifying these practices, revealing another route through which a cash economy was penetrating the border-worlds. But the key point is that this subtle further incorporation of Karen communities into capitalist relationships was not directly driven by the timber firms themselves. Instead, it was a result of the firm’s inability, or at least unwillingness, to replicate U Bah Oh’s network for looking after procured elephants themselves.

It was briefly mentioned in the letter that U Bah Oh’s scheme and operations had recently expanded and were diversifying, and through this he moved out of the elephant capturing business. During the year he had acquired an elephant capturing operation from a man who had recently gone bankrupt.⁶¹ While the details behind the failure of the previous operator’s concern were not given, there were some self-evident risks in running elephant capturing operations. Kheddah operations required a team of trained elephants, which as we have seen could represent a significant outlay of capital. Nevertheless, this was an enterprise that some were able to make profitable. An example of this would be San Durmay Po, who during the interwar years had been able to acquire enough financial and social capital from capturing elephants to be considered a Karen man of some fame and

consequence. He became an advocate for Karen loyalist nationalism, a position perhaps best embodied in the gesture of sending a supposedly auspicious white elephant that his firm had captured to London, where the elephant took part in the British Empire exhibition in Wembley in 1924.⁶² U Bah Oh's own trajectory was not dissimilar to this. At the end of the 1910s, he decided to move into the teak industry himself. While never rivalling the tight grip that British firms had on the sector, he was successful in establishing himself as a person of considerable means. Like San Durmay Po, he, too, used the position that he had established to finance a political advocacy group, in his case called the Burma Moslem Society, U Bah Oh being himself Muslim. His generous backing of this group, among the first to claim to represent this constituency in the colony, resulted in his being elected president for life in the mid-1930s, a time when anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence was on the rise in some urban centres.⁶³ U Bah Oh would have been all too familiar with these threats to personal security, as his timber operations had been attacked during the Hsaya San peasant rebellion in 1930 and dozens of his elephants seized.⁶⁴ These two brief biographies of people who were able to successfully accumulate capital from the ancillary economic activity of providing elephants for the teak industry indicate how funds could support a range of wider social and political movements.

With U Bah Oh out of the elephant purchasing business by 1920, the Corporation found itself intermittently entering the elephant market directly throughout the interwar years. Transfers of elephants from Thailand were frequently made, and there was some use of contracted foresters, although this, too, was difficult. Replenishing the working herds through captive-born calves was explored as a method of meeting some of the demand, but was deemed unprofitable, as it took other female elephants out of the labour process to care for the young animals in their juvenile years. Instead, calves were often sold or loaned out until they were old enough to work themselves. Even if the Corporation had been willing to absorb the gendered costs of what we might term 'social reproduction', these births would not have been sufficient to make up the losses of elephants through mortality. While their semi-captive state meant that working females did fall pregnant from wild elephants, research into contemporary Burmese timber elephants shows that the strenuous labour regime results in faster reproductive aging. And it was not just aging that reduced their elephant power. It is likely that the elephants were stressed by the labour regime, particularly in the hot season when natural fodder was

less available. Their strength and vulnerability to disease was heightened as a result. Bouts of anthrax were a recurring concern until a vaccine was successfully trialled and rolled out during the 1930s, the result of years of delicate negotiations. Discipline among the elephant herds was also a problem, particularly with male elephants in musth. In this often-frenzied state, even once docile individuals could become dangerous to their riders and other elephants. Maintaining an elephant work force was a constant challenge for the Corporation.⁶⁵

The connection with Karen communities remained central to the Corporation's working practices, echoing the connections that were formed by U Bah Oh's network of Karen villagers. When confronted with the Hsaya San rebellion, the Corporation raised its own levies of Karen fighters to protect themselves.⁶⁶ But things were not always harmonious. There were tensions within the labour force, and at times the Corporation struggled to recruit Karen foresters.⁶⁷ The Corporation's arrangements for replenishing and keeping their herds fell apart dramatically as a result of the Japanese occupation in early 1942. The fleeing British managers left much of their nearly 2,000 elephants in the care of their drivers, but on return with the British reoccupation in 1944, fewer than half could be recovered. Approximately 200 had been taken over the border with Thailand and were being owned by villagers reluctant to return them, a situation that the Corporation and its fellow teak firms found intractable. Without being able to recover their working herds, their timber operations did not find anything close to their pre-War levels of productivity, in spite of some considerable support from the returning colonial state. Shortly after Myanmar attained its independence in 1948, the British timber firms – including the elephants – were nationalised.⁶⁸ Set in this longer sweep, the period during which the Corporation held its relationship with U Bah Oh represents the highwater mark of the teak industry's power to intervene and shape the economic context it operated within. Secure in its leases and replete in elephant power, they were able to extract teak at levels not previously witnessed. But even in this period, they found themselves dependent on a Burmese intermediary capable of mobilising local community connections to meet the needs of elephants in ways that they could not themselves, in order to supply them with their vital animal workers.

Tricks of the Trade

In a lively and vivid contribution to *The English Illustrated Magazine* in the summer of 1900, Charles Makin described the Kheddah method of capturing elephants and their subsequent training for a metropolitan audience. Passing quickly over the periodic sales where timber firms could purchase elephants, he nevertheless drew attention to the “tricks and subterfuges” that were apparently common to elephant-dealers. He noted that, “A vicious elephant, that by its very nature baffles all attempts to subdue it, is frequently heavily dosed with drugs before attempting to sell it.”⁶⁹ This concern over the doping of elephants was echoed in imperial veterinarian George Evans’ *Elephants and their Diseases*, published a decade later.⁷⁰ Regardless of the veracity of these claims – certainly, the use of opium to manage restive elephants was not unheard of in the period – these anxieties over purchasing elephants suggest broader unease at the firms’ dependence on colonised peoples and the uncertainty of animal behaviours. The elephant trade, in one of its most active periods in southeast Asia, revealed an interdependence between colonised intermediaries able to acquire elephants to meet the timber firms’ growing demand for animal capital. The arrangement put in place by the elephant-buyer U Bah Oh drew upon the skill and culture of Karen communities to ensure that his purchases were properly cared for and trained before they were sold on to work in forest camps. But this interdependence does not negate the asymmetries of colonial rule. Nor should it obscure the transformative role colonial interventions had on societies in the border-worlds of Myanmar and Thailand. The domination of the timber firms over forestry, as well as the resulting encroachment of market economics into the borders, were operating through these attenuated interconnections.

The trade in animals inevitably takes many forms, often entailing species-specific arrangements. In colonial contexts, this diversity is compounded by the nuances of the local intercultural dynamics to the trade, as well as the particulars of labour processes. But this complexity and contingency does not mean that historians are unable to identify deeper processes that may prove to be common across different contexts. There are two such insights that might be gleaned from this short history of the elephant trade in colonial southeast Asia. This first is that, although it was driven by the extractivist operations of imperial firms, the animal trade was one that generated

'friction' through the behaviours and needs of the creatures being traded and an unavoidable reliance on colonised peoples. The second is that the transformations brought about by the animal trade could be subtle and insidious rather than dramatic and overt. In this case, the effect was to introduce cash-incentives into practices of caring for elephants, furthering the commodification of the animals beyond the immediate spaces where they were bought, sold, and worked.



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