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Of shared knowledge between humans and animals

Nicolas LAINÉ

The scholarship offered by IRASEC (2018) allowed me to deepen the processing and analysis of a corpus of data collected during two stays in Laos. Wishing to bring to light the relationship to nature and the relationship to others among the Tai-Lue in Laos, I led broader reflections on the links between environment and health, biodiversity and cultural diversity, as well as on the co-construction of shared knowledge between humans and animals. The approach undertaken could prove fruitful in preventing the emergence or re-emergence of diseases such as we are currently experiencing with SARS Covid-19. The study was primarily based on village elephants and their working relations for and with local populations.

In Laos, village elephants and buffaloes benefit from a management and care system that first involves the *mahouts* and the owners of the animals. In terms of health, the *mahouts* and the owners have a crucial knowledge which is attentive to the various signs they give off. For daily care, they have at their disposal a set of preparations transmitted informally from generation to generation by the members of their families. Moreover, depending on the nature of the problem encountered in the animals, they call upon specialists: the *mo*. Some of these specialists treat the *mo phi* by incantations, others by the use of plants, the *mo ya*. In order to distinguish between these two aspects, I relied on

the distinction made by Pottier (2007) between ritual medicine (the *mo phi*) and medicine of remedies (the *mo ya*).



My interest is in the rituals that mark the main episodes of the animals' life in the village, and that keep their bond of mutual attachment to humans alive. In Laos, on the occasion of the New Year (*pi mai*), elephants celebrate the *baci* ceremony. For buffaloes, the same ceremony takes place at harvest time, in November–December. During these ceremonies, the animals are acknowledged for their agricultural services and then released into the surrounding forests. When the buffaloes are released, the pachyderms are called back to work to skid woods. This ceremony aims to gather in each of these animals their life force (*kwaan*), which they have in common with other large mammals (*sat*), including humans (Zago, 1972). The *baci* ceremony requires a set of offerings, consisting of rice, chicken, but also alcohol or cigarettes. Beforehand, the specialist

purifies the elephant with holy water. This takes place in three stages, and is usually held in the enclosure of the household. The first step is to chase away evil spirits from the elephant's body, then to call back and gather the *kwaan*, which is done using white thread, tied on to the animal's legs, ears and trunk. Each member of the household is then invited to go and attach a piece of wire to the elephant. These wires are connected to each other and held by the *mo* who will first ask the *kwaan* to remain in the body, and then to feed them. He does this by blowing and whispering on the wires. Finally, it is a matter of making wishes and wishing the animal good health. At the end, a whole buffet is shared by the men while the animals are offered pieces of sugar cane.

Mo phi intervene throughout the life of the animals. At a time when elephant capture was still in practice, these specialists were indispensable for the smooth running of operations. According to the pit trap method (*khoum xang*) used in the northwestern part of the country, *mo phi* were responsible for bringing the captured animal back to the village, ensuring that it was not followed by the animal's mother or by malicious spirits.

Likewise, when animals no longer wanted to work or listen, the *mo* would be brought to engage with them. Animal owners also call upon these specialists at the time of a sale, and when their death occurs. In this case, the *mo phi* carries out the ritual of detachment to assure the buffalo or elephant family that their spirit will not return to disturb them, and that any bad omens are discarded.

In the village, each elephant is considered to belong to its owner's household, of which it is a full member in the same way as all the other members. Thus, each animal lives under the protection of the spirit of the home of its belonging, the *phi huean*. Whenever an owner leaves his home for several days, especially to work with the animal in the forest, he informs his *phi huean* and asks for protection for him and his elephant in the form of prayer. In addition to its protective role, the *phi huean* has the ability to act directly on the health or behaviour of the pachyderms, depending on the social relations between people.

A second aspect of my research has focused more directly on medical care on animals. For that, *mo ya* use therapeutic codexes called *tamla ya*, literally "treatise on plants". The recipes mentioned in some manuscripts may apply to several animals such as horses, elephants or buffaloes. Each treatise describes a

set of compositions for daily care with generally one or more variants if the first does not work properly. There are, for example, compositions to combat constipation; others for if the animals have sore legs, a blocked jaw, skin irritations, loss of appetite, sore throat, or when the animals show signs of weakness or low blood pressure. For example, to treat abscesses caused by the rubbing together of the different ropes needed to work in the elephant forest, it is prescribed to first boil some *nam hanh* (*Acacia concinna*) roots and then wash the elephant's skin with it. Then, the abscesses are rubbed with mango bark, *mak kok* (*Spondias pinnata*), and left to dry. This operation must be repeated daily until the abscess deflates and heals.



Drawing from their immediate surroundings, and taking into account the state of health of the animals, local communities have developed unique forms of medical knowledge. However, while the information presented so far points

to a complex knowledge and care system concerning the main daily care of village elephants, the fact remains that all the informants met during the fieldwork (*mo phi*, *mo ya*, *mahouts* or owners) insisted on testifying to the fact that elephants have a rich knowledge of the forest world, which they express by looking for specific plant specimens (which may include bark, leaves or roots) for food and care. Also, in the Tai-Lue villages to the north-west of the country, the health and care of these animals is based on local ethno-veterinary practices using local plants, to which must be added an essential element: respect for the knowledge of the elephants themselves, who are seen as capable of self-medicating. In other words, if the *mahouts* provide them with the plants necessary for a healthy diet, they are aware that the elephants are able to supplement them if necessary, thanks to the abundant diversity of the spaces they pass through in their company.

Specifically, with regard to village elephants, this aspect of animal management is seen as an integral part of the system of care. Unlike tourist parks or conservation centres, *mahouts* and owners do not claim to control all aspects of animal feeding and care. According to them, the forest is the equivalent of a pharmacy (*hank ka ya*) for the animals, finding medicines there. Again, according to the people in charge of the animals, when they are sick, the elephants would prefer to remain alone, without seeing any human, their owner or the veterinarian. Finally, the forest is the place where the animal is *sabai* ("healthy"). This relates to variations in morphology. For example, it happens that one can see a tired or thinned out elephant, especially after several days of work in the forest. When this happens, the consensus remains that once the task is achieved, when they leave their elephants at rest, free to roam in the forest, it only takes a few days for them to regain their weight and health. This aspect prompted me to expand the body of data to look at the diet of the elephants living in the village and to look for converging uses of plants shared between humans and animals. Here, relying on the mediation of *mahouts* to access data on the elephant diet, the survey allowed me to highlight general information on the elephant diet and document the high variability of it. For example, during the dry season (*ladou leng*) elephants consume more bamboo shoots (*nor mai bon*) and bananas. Interpretations provided by *mahouts* suggest that these are ingredients that contain a large amount of water.

During the survey, some of the *mahouts* were able to distinguish between plants taken as part of their diet, called *ahan xang*, and those indicated as part of their medical diet, i.e. plants that treat *ya pua xang*. Among the essences that came back repeatedly, two in particular caught my attention because they afford a hypothesis of a practice of self-medication for the first, and for the second of a potential sharing of knowledge with humans.

The analysis has revealed a similarity in the ritual treatment of humans and animals (protection by the same domestic spirit of the household, collective *baci* ceremony). On the other hand, the collection of information on the diet of elephants revealed a possible convergence between human and animal health. This convergence, which deserves to be deepened and extended to the entire animal diet, reminds us of what Hubert Gillet wrote in 1969 in his ethnobotany course at the Museum of Natural History in Paris about human-animal cohabitation and the feeding behaviour of wild animals: "*It is possible that the observation, made by some natives, of the occasional removal of certain bark from trees in the African savannah may have drawn their attention to these trees as medicinal plants*" (Gillet 1969: 19-20).

In the light of the current SARS Covid-19 pandemic, the epidemiological role of animals today obliges us to develop new approaches, allowing us to recover disrupted socio-environmental balances, particularly in the field of animal husbandry. Here, ethnographic surveys focused on the study of the relations between breeders and animals could provide the necessary insight for better disease surveillance. Extended to the collection of information on local pharmacopoeia, as well as to plants consumed by animals for prophylactic or curative purposes, such surveys aim at (re)constructing local veterinary pharmacopoeia by taking into account veterinary scientific knowledge, local knowledge and knowledge possessed by animals capable of self-medication. This is what the current example in Laos underlines. The approach undertaken, combining anthropology of nature, medical anthropology and anthropology of human-animal relations, recalls the necessary holistic approach to research on health and infectious diseases. Firstly, this is because it allows the mediation of knowledge and thus the dialogue of local or international specialists. Secondly, because it offers a much more dynamic and inter-relational vision of the transmission of viruses or pathogens between humans, between animals, and crucially between

humans and animals. Finally, it gives the possibility to decentralise the human point of view on the world and its diseases, integrating the animal point of view in relation to the virus. Such a perspective extends the prevention and management of health crises to other forms of knowledge (human and non-human). The aim is to promote an original approach articulating expert, local and animal knowledge and to link them in a relationship with living communities.

All the results led to an article published in June 2020 in the journal of Ethnoecologie.

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