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ABSTRACT BOOK

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Elephant food taboos: cross-cultural animal humanization?

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The Paleolithic archeological record depicts complex relationship between humans and elephants, as elephants were exploited for their meat, fat and bone over hundreds of thousands of years across the old world. Attention is focused on subsistence and the nutritional value of elephant carcasses. Another perspective is to view elephants as more than a food source, as a medium of taboos and restrictions that provide interplay between the practical and cosmological conception of elephants in human life today, and possibly in the past as well.

Food taboos are common in traditional societies. Meat, despite being a main food source, is also perceived ambivalently as potentially dangerous and an object of disgust. This is reflected in a dominance of animals in taboos.

Hunting and taboo are connected to ritual, world-views and values and as such, depend directly on social context. A hunter does not only hunt what is available, but operates according to norms including taboo that restrict access to certain animals, or even forbids access altogether.

Potential food sources are forbidden due to the perception of an animal as the owner of spiritual powers and/or due to its status in a cosmological hierarchy. The perception of those animals as totemic entities and their personification gives the animal attributes beyond what can be seen in the physical world. The magical concept, a common belief in traditional societies, can humanize certain animals and give them attributes that are parallel to humans, thus their consumption is linked to cannibalism or animalism (Fessler and Navarrete 2003).

In this study we explore the relationship between the humanization of elephants and elephant taboos. We suggest that the physical and social uniqueness of the elephant is what makes it appropriate for taboo. The role of taboo is sometimes as important as the nutritional values of elephant meat, and both have a central place in human-elephant relationship. Today's unique relationship between humans and elephants might reflect, to a degree, such possible relationship in the Past. We are strongly aware that modern hunter-gatherers cannot serve as a direct analogy to the past. However, we believe that since elephants and people have shared habitats for hundreds of thousands of years, there has probably always been an awareness of the special characteristics of these mighty mammals and their resemblance to humans, both in physical and social terms. The fact that in many cases elephant bones were shaped similarly to the characteristic stone handaxes might serve as a clue towards this long-lasting symbolic-cosmologic bond. We thus tend to believe that elephants were always conceived of as special creatures by humans.

Ethnographic studies see the humanization of elephants as the core of food restrictions and taboos. Among the Ikomain of Tanzania, the elephant is feared by the whole tribe for it is believed to be the reincarnation of the dead chiefs. The killing of an elephant requires a mourning period of seven days, the same as the mourning period for a member of the tribe. The members of this tribe have almost completely humanized the elephant (Kidghesho 2008).

The Nuer view elephant hunting in the same way as they view warfare between humans, hence there are certain restrictions that make the hunting process a complex action. The Nuer

believes there is a mystical connection between man and elephant, observed in a popular myth that describes the common ancestor of both elephant and man (Howell 1945).

In a study conducted among local hunter-gatherers of Laikipia Kenya, of 33 people who claim they do not eat elephant meat, about half said they avoid it due to the resemblance between humans and elephants with regards to their social behavior, intelligence and external anatomy. This is also the case for Kikuyu, Maasai and Turkana groups (Gadd 2005).

The behavioral resemblance to humans can be seen in the 'family unit' of elephants which is composed of related adult females and their offspring. The family unit share daily activities such as bathing, eating and playing and it is a rare event when a member distances itself from the group. Elephants have a highly complex social structure, composed of multiple family relationships. The connection is reaffirmed daily by physical touch. Other behavioral similarities are the protection of young members and the treatment of the dead. Similar physical attributes such as a relatively late sexual maturity, few offspring and long birth intervals (Moss 2000) are also of note. Elephants are also considered to have the capacity for reasoning that is similar to humans (Brown and Alkemeyer 2013).

In addition to the physical and social attributes, humans recognize certain behavioral aspects that are considered to be 'human like' in elephants. Some traditional societies therefore enforce rules and restrictions on hunting and the consumption of elephant meat, even at times considering it equivalent to cannibalism. We claim that the very special connection between elephants and people in modern times is deeply embedded in what is considered as "being" human and "being" an elephant, and that the two share many similar characters that were observed not only today but also in the past when people and elephants interacted. Therefore we believe that the evidence presented in our study may well be of relevance to the human-elephant relationship in Paleolithic times as well.

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