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Elephants are people, people are elephants: Human–proboscideans similarities as a case for cross cultural animal humanization in recent and Paleolithic times



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ABSTRACT

Human and elephants shared habitats and interacted from Paleolithic times to the present day. It appears that pre-historic hunter–gatherers were wise enough to understand that elephants are cohabiters of the human race and not a product to be exploited in an uncontrolled way. The understanding of the long tradition of human and elephant relationship and kinship may change the mind-set of modern humans to lead to carry on the important relationship between man and elephant in particular, and man and nature in general, and prevent future extinctions of all species involved.

This study is conducted in the spirit of the newly developed multidisciplinary study field of 'Ethno-elephantology' that studies human and elephant relationships and strives to protect the endangered species. In order to have better understanding of this unique relationship we will explore it through the study of food taboos in modern hunter–gatherers societies. More so, in this study we detected multiple striking similarities between elephant and man in several fields, such as physical, behavioral/social and conceptual. The importance of this study is in providing a new and better perspective about human and animal relationship, specifically elephants. We suggest that the physical and social uniqueness of the elephant, and its unique resemblance to man in so many aspects, alongside its pivotal role as a major food source, is what makes it appropriate for serving as a cosmological and conceptual beacon, mostly conceived in recent hunter–gatherers societies by the concept of taboo. Although detecting food taboos in the deep past are not possible, we believe that the archaeological evidence presented in this paper could indicate that human–elephant interactions in the past were complex, and were not based solely on human perception of the elephant as a food and raw material source.

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“The elephant is the largest of them all, and in intelligence approaches the nearest to man”

(Bostock, J., & Riley, H. T., 1855. *The Natural History*. Pliny the Elder. Taylor and Francis, London)

1. Introduction

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 (e.g. Goren-Inbar et al., 1994; Yravedra et al., 2010; Rabinovich et al., 2012; Boschian and Saccà, 2014). The

exploitation of elephants is evident in elephant bones bearing cut-marks and breakage signs, clear signs of butchery and marrow extraction that were documented in several Lower Paleolithic Acheulian sites (e.g., Goren-Inbar et al., 1994; Wenban-Smith et al., 2006; Yravedra et al., 2010; Rabinovich et al., 2012) as well as Post-Acheulian and Mousterian sites (e.g. Ben-Dor et al. 2011; Blasco and Fernández Peris, 2012; Yravedra et al., 2012). Elephants and other megafauna, such as mammoths, were also excavated in Middle Paleolithic sites occupied by Neanderthals, which highlights their role in Neanderthal diet and subsistence (e.g.: Germonpré et al., 2014; Panera et al., 2014a,b; Yravedra et al., 2012, but see Smith (2015) for a different perspective). While clear evidence of Mammoth hunting is rather rare in Middle Paleolithic context (e.g. Germonpré et al., 2014; Smith 2015), several Upper Paleolithic sites such as Yudinovo (Germonpré et al., 2008) and Yana (Nikolskiy and Pitulko, 2013) provide ample archaeological evidence for

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proboscideans hunting. Interestingly, at the Gravettian site of Predmostří it is evident that while the human population of the site consumed large quantities of mammoth meat, the Paleolithic dogs at the site relied heavily on reindeer and muskoxen rather than mammoth (Bocherens et al., 2015).

More so, there is extraordinary evidence for additional use of elephant bones for the production of items similar to the typical stone Acheulian handaxes (e.g. Biddittu et al., 1979; Dobosi, 2001, 2003; Bruhl, 2003; Boschian and Sacca, 2010; Rabinovich et al., 2012; Beyene et al., 2013; Zutovski and Barkai, 2015) as well as the use of mammoth bones for the construction of Middle and Upper Paleolithic dwellings (Oliva, 1988; Pidoplichko, 1998; Iakovleva and Djindjian, 2005; Svoboda et al., 2005; Demay et al., 2012; Iakovleva, 2014).

Furthermore, mammoth and elephant ivory was used in the Upper Paleolithic for symbolic imagery items, such as figurines and statuettes. (Conard, 2003, 2009, 2011; Hoffecker, 2005; Pettitt, 2008; Basilyan et al., 2011).

Attention is mostly focused on subsistence and the nutritional value of elephant carcasses. Since in our opinion elephants and mammoths played a major role in the successful survival of Paleolithic hominins (Ben-Dor et al., 2011; Barkai and Gopher 2013), we would like to put forward the hypothesis that proboscideans were central elements not only within the nutritional realm of human groups dependent on them for their survival, but were also central in the cosmological perceptions of these groups (e.g. Zutovsky and Barkai, in this volume). The cosmological and symbolic basis of proboscideans conception by humans, we will argue, was twofold: first as a major mean of nutrition and survival and second as a “sister-species”, resembling humans in physical, social, behavioral and perceptual aspects. We believe that these sets of resemblance were not alien to prehistoric groups sharing habitats with elephants and mammoths throughout time, and that both the dependence as well as the resemblance played a central role in the complex relationships between humans and elephants in Paleolithic times. Hence, we suggest viewing elephants as more than a source of calories and bone raw material, but as a medium for taboos and restrictions that reflects the interplay between the practical and cosmological conception of elephants in human worldviews, as demonstrated by the study of recent hunter–gatherers. This two-fold conception, we will show, existed whenever these two species coexisted, today as in the past as well. In this study we explore the relationship between the humanization of elephants and taboos related to elephants through reviewing taboo and meat taboo among contemporary hunter–gatherers as well as human–elephant similarities (as it is manifested in ethnographic studies). We suggest that the physical and social uniqueness of the elephant, and its unique resemblance to man in so many aspects, alongside its pivotal role as a major food source, is what makes it appropriate for serving as a cosmological and conceptual beacon at all times. Such a beacon is mostly conceived in recent hunter–gatherers societies by the concept of taboo. It is our contention that the data-set presented in this paper, although based on modern-day societies, is applicable to prehistoric times as well as the human–elephant bond lasted for hundreds of thousands of years throughout the old world. These striking similarities coupled with the central significance of elephant-based calories could not go unnoticed, in our opinion, in Paleolithic times.

2. Methodology

The origin of food taboo in recent hunter–gatherer societies, specifically prohibitions regarding the elephant, will be explored in this study through literary review regarding taboo and meat taboo. The similarities between man and elephant are divided into three

central fields: Physiological, Behavioral/Social and Conceptual. In order to have a better understanding of the relationship between man and elephant we will explore it through the study of food taboos in modern hunter–gatherers societies (Tambiah, 1973; Gadd, 2005; Kideghesho, 2008) and by analyzing ethnographic case-studies to comprehend the human–elephant relationship among pre-industrial societies and hunter–gatherers bands that shared habitats and interacted with elephants. We are strongly aware of the fact that the comparison between modern hunter–gatherers ethnographic studies and Paleolithic hunter–gatherers is not a direct one however, as stated recently by Endicott and Endicott, it is most relevant “*Although contemporary and recent nomadic hunting and gathering societies are not living fossils from the stone age, as they are sometimes depicted in popular media, they do provide the closest analogy we have to the way of life our ancestors followed before the advent of agriculture...*” (Endicott and Endicott, 2014:108). More so, this study will be a part of a newly developed multidisciplinary study field of ‘Ethnoelephantology’ (Locke, 2013) that studies human and elephant relationships and strives to protect the endangered species.

3. Taboo

The origin of the term taboo is derived from the late eighteenth century Polynesian word tabu ‘to forbid’, ‘forbidden’. The word can be applied to any sort of prohibition (Radcliffe-Brown, 2014). Taboo is a concept that can either be sacred or profane. It may be restricted to a specific individual or group and forbidden to the general population or to specific groups within it, most commonly women. Taboo is a system of unwritten rules, which perhaps predated the concept of god and religion (Freud, 1955).

Taboo is a behavioral code that instructs the population what activities they are to avoid, a restriction of an action that is defined and controlled by the population itself. It is a non-formal institute, and as such it is defined as a behavioral norm and social conventions that are imposed by the individual as a group member. It is enforced by the community without an external authority.

Taboo may be permanent or set to a specific situation; such as menstruation, child birth, previous to, and following combat. Furthermore, taboo can be restricted to a specific action such as hunting or fishing, and it has several objectives such as the protection of important members of the community such as chiefs and priests, the protection of vulnerable groups or individuals, protection from certain dangerous foods and the protection of meaningful life events and rites of passage (Freud, 1953).

Furthermore, taboo has an affinity to Animism, the belief that anything whether an animal, plant or inanimate object, has a spirit. Animism is “...the attribution by humans of an interiority identical to their own” (Descola, 2013:129) meaning the humanization of plants, animals and inanimate object. Humans impose their own culture and cultural laws and social interaction on natural elements. It is mostly applied on animals, more so than plants and inanimate object. Animism attributes the animal with a soul that allow them to behave according to the human cultural system and values, however animals are not considered ‘humans’ but ‘humans in disguise’ thank to their outer attire of fur, feathers and so forth that can be summarized as “...a combination of resemblance in interiorities and difference in physicalities...” (Descola, 2013: 144). According to this belief there is a link between the animal and the human populations (Frazer, 1922; Katona-Apte, 1977), as expressed by one of the leading experts on the subject: “...these animals can sometimes be regarded as persons, no different from human persons except in their outer garb” (Ingold, 1986:13).

Animism is most commonly associated to a specific kind of taboo that was defined by Colding and Folke (2001) as Specific-

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