

9

OF ELEPHANTS AND MEN

Identity, Traditional Practice and Heritage

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Plate 19: Elephants and riders bathing,
Ban Chang, Ayutthaya

9

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*Come and see us, but don't just look
 Think about our past
 Ayutthaya – this home, this city
 We painted with our blood to protect Thailand
 Come and see us, do you know us?
 Come and see us, do you miss us?
 Come and see us, for a moment and then leave
 We are the same as before
 Come and see us, love us for a moment
 When you are gone you will forget to look back
 You will forget tail, trunk and ivory
 And not even say good-bye
 Come and see us, but please don't just look
 Come and think about the past
 People and elephants built Thailand
 Why do you now abandon us?*
 (Translation of the poem inscribed at the entrance to the Ayutthaya Elephant Camp)

The nexus between the local and the global and the importance of traditional practice in the construction of identity and heritage is considered in this chapter. I explore the relationship of one particular Ayutthaya community, *Ban Chang* (Village of Elephants), with the remains of the ancient city. The discussion that follows seeks to highlight the complementarity of the physical remains of the past with the heritage of lived experience and practice that creates and reaffirms identity. It also illustrates the hegemony of sanctioned interpretations of the past and of what is 'cultural heritage' that give precedence to physical manifestations over less tangible aspects, such as traditional practice and contemporary lifeways.

At Ayutthaya today, a consistently greater dependence is associated with income from tourist activity. This was briefly discussed in the previous chapter in terms of the potential for commodification and loss of meaning. One of the more distinctive tourist activities is the opportunity to take a tour of the Ayutthaya Historical Park on elephant

back. The elephants and their riders (*mahouts* or *khvam chang*) who earn a living from this past-time travel daily between their residence in the village of Ban Chang, and the Ayutthaya Elephant Camp in the Ayutthaya Historical Park. Ban Chang is located some 3 kilometres north of the island, on the eastern bank of Khlong Meanam Lopburi (Figure 3). Local tourist maps label it as the historic site of the 'Elephant Kraal'. Tourist literature tends to mention the presence of the historical kraal structure (an enclosure of large wooden posts: plate 20). However, there is scant mention of the thriving village of families and elephants who live there today, much less an attempt to correlate their presence with the former elephant and human occupants who contributed to the past might of the ancient Ayutthayan kingdom. I suggest that not only do the practices of 'being a mahout' reinforce the character and identity of the contemporary village community, but the association of the mahouts and their elephants with the Ayutthaya Historical Park is an integral part of the heritage landscape of the ancient city and of the cultural heritage of Ayutthaya.

A Heritage of Elephants

The association between people and elephants is one of long standing in the Southeast Asia region. The relationship between humans and elephants in Thailand is permeated by tradition, ritual and myth, much of which reflects earlier Hindu influences and ancient Indian customs related to aspects such as the capture and training of elephants. The elephant, and more particularly the white elephant, has been an enduring symbol of Thai identity. There is a plethora of literature that reinforces the significant and traditional role played by the elephant in the history and heritage of the country, and elephants feature prolifically in the writings by European visitors from the 17th century on. The respect for the elephant as a part of Thai life has continued into the present, and is manifest in forms as diverse as religion, royal patronage, art, tourism, nature conservation, and more general aspects of national identity that create a strong and enduring link with the elephant as a national symbol.

The role of the elephant has changed dramatically over the past 100 or so years. Although threatened with redundancy in a day-to-day practical sense, its symbolism and tradition is so embedded in Thai culture that the elephant remains inseparable

from many aspects of Thai life and culture. The human/elephant relationship in Thailand is based on a long and complex history and tradition, and it is a valuable component of the heritage of Thailand. Until the beginning of the 20th century, when it was replaced as a common form of transport and a 'fighting machine', the elephant was probably a creature regularly encountered in the everyday life of many residents of Siam (plate 3). Khun Somphat Meephan, of the Ayutthaya Elephant Camp, makes the interesting point that for most of the last century very few Thai people would have seen elephants, because they were predominantly occupied in logging activities in the north of the country. However, elephant symbolism endures in myth, ritual, and religious practices, and its enshrinement in folkloric reference.

Certain aspects of physical beauty and grace are synonymous with elephant characteristics (for example, see Leonowens 1870: 145). Similar metaphor is found in traditional folk sayings, such as: 'in a marriage or partnership, the woman is said to be like the hind legs of an elephant'. The inscription on the Ramkamhaeng Stele (found at Sukhothai in 1833 and dated to 1292)¹¹⁸ extols the virtues of living in a time of abundance and just kingship, both the bounteous nature and justness of life being contained in the understanding that 'whoever wants to trade in elephants does so' (quoted in Ringis 1996: 62). The elephant has left its mark on architecture, not only as a commonly represented symbol and motif in art and sculptural features, but also in a functional sense with the presence of elephant mounting platforms and specially shaped elephant access gates at temples and palaces (plate 23).

In various *Jataka* stories an association is made between elephants and the Buddhist faith. The elephant often symbolises the rain cloud or water, and there are several stories in which Bodhisattvas are presented in the form of an elephant. One version describes Buddha as the Supreme Elephant or *Gajottama* (Majupuria 1987: 111–112). White elephants have contributed conspicuously to the symbolic role of elephants in Thai culture. The Thai term is *chang phuak* which translates as 'strange coloured elephant'. White elephants are considered extremely auspicious, and accrue status on the basis of a series of characteristics ranging from skin hue, to eye colour to toenail

¹¹⁸ Although there is continuing academic controversy as to the date and contents of the inscription on the stele.

shape. In Hindu mythology, the celestial white elephant Erawan serves as the mount of the Hindu god Indra.¹¹⁹ The mythology creates links between Erawan and the origins of 'earthly' white elephants, and there are clear associations between the godly attributes of Indra and the powers of the earthly king. The correlation between this power and the ownership of white elephants – the manifestation of Erawan in the human world – is clear. Hence the elaborate preparations and rites associated with the 'arrival' of a new white elephant, and the sumptuousness of the surroundings in which the creatures were, and still are, stabled. In 1959, His Majesty King Bhumipol Adulyadej was presented with a baby white elephant of the highest order, one of at least 20 white elephants with which he has been presented during his reign. This elephant, Pra Sawate, lives in a sumptuous stable in the grounds of the Chitlada Royal Palace in Bangkok. Although he does not eat off gold-plate as did his predecessors, he is attended by six mahouts and takes his exercise in a specially constructed swimming pool. Each morning, he is led to the home of the King to make a ritual greeting, reinforcing the divine connection between heavenly beings and the earthly king.

The treatment and respect afforded white elephants proved to be enigmatic to many foreigners and has been discussed in some detail, often disparagingly, in many European accounts of their experiences in Siam (for example, see Bowring 1857, de La Loubère 1693). The disparity in values and worldviews between Thai and Western understandings are well illustrated in the differing attitudes to this creature. In Thai consciousness, a white elephant is extremely auspicious, symbolic of royalty and to be valued highly. The Western world has interpreted the esteem shown to these special creatures as misplaced, bordering on ludicrous, and in its disparagement has created an (unsympathetic) association between 'white elephants' and useless oddities. Terminology such as 'White Elephant Sale' for an exercise in getting rid of odds and sods has become common-place in the English vernacular. The disrespectful approach to white elephants commonly found in the West was and is insulting to most Thais. As

¹¹⁹ See Majupuria (1987). In representations Erawan is depicted as multi-headed – commonly with three or four heads, but with as many as 33. One of the most well known representations of the divine pair is found in the niches of the magnificent *prang* at Wat Arun (the Temple of the Dawn) across the Chao Phraya River from the Grand Palace in Bangkok.

Ringis (1996: 101) is concerned to show in her analysis of the traditional role of elephants in Thailand:

[Elephants as] symbols of legitimacy cannot be inherited, but must accrue 'spontaneously' in each reign. Indeed not every Siamese ruler possessed white elephants. Thus, while in the West a white elephant was perceived as just a highly indulged mere elephant or pale pachyderm, in realms that differed from those of the West, specifically, in Siam, the possession of a white elephant was perceived as a sacred sign of celestial approval of the earthly state and its ruler.

The Hindu pantheon has contributed a second and significant elephant figure that is ubiquitous in Thai cultural imagery: the elephant-headed god Ganesha (sometimes referred to as *Phra Phiganet*). Ganesha, the son of Shiva and his consort Uma (or Parvati), is considered to be the God of Knowledge and Literature, the God of Opportunity and the Remover of Obstacles. Images of the four-armed Ganesha appear with various objects clasped in his hands: Shiva's trident, Vishnu's conch shell, Indra's elephant goad, the broken tip of Ganesha's tusk, and a noose (associated with the cord used in capturing wild elephants). As well as the traditional association between elephants and wisdom, it is not surprising to find that Ganesha is closely associated with people who live and work with elephants: there is a shrine to Ganesha at both Ban Chang and the Elephant Camp within the Ayutthaya Historical Park.

The elephant symbol has been appropriated and 'logoised' in Thai bureaucratic life. Ganesha appears as the symbol of the Thai Fine Arts Department, and a statue to the elephant god is also a prominent feature in the forecourt of the National School of Dance and Dramatic Arts in Bangkok. A sculpture of Erawan graces the façade of the offices of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, and has been referred to as 'the true emblem of Bangkok' (France 2 et al. 2002). These examples serve as reinforcements of the multifarious ways in which the nation and religion are symbolically linked in the repeating motifs of everyday life, and endorse the significant contribution of the symbol of the elephant in the maintenance of a complex web of national meanings and narratives.

There appear to be only around 5000 elephants in Thailand today, of which approximately 3000 are 'domestic' elephants (Corvanich 1999). Its decline is not

primarily due to poaching (as with the African elephant) with centuries of protection being afforded to the animal through taboos grounded in traditional and religious beliefs. North is auspicious and associated with the elephant. The animal is also auspicious due to its size, natural strength and association with royalty and mythology. Its attributes have strong metaphorical significance for Thai people. As do tigers, elephants provide the imagery for the uncommon man, for royalty and bandits, and for social and anti-social heroes. They are considered inedible, which is a statement of their extreme distance and difference from man (Tambiah 1969). Wild elephants can be tamed. However, the mahouts I spoke with are careful to reinforce that elephants remain unpredictable and unsafe. They are not pets.

Until relatively recently, there has been a strong practical and economic argument for not killing elephants as they could be trained for working purposes, either as a beast of burden or as a war machine. They have historically been objects of commercial value, in terms of wealth and trade, and of political value in the arena of power relationships, status and authentication. The value of this argument is enshrined in the Thai proverb that disparages the waste of a lot for the gain of a little: *Kah chang ao nga* – ‘kill an elephant for its tusks’. The elephant in Thailand has been a far more valuable commodity alive.

The life of elephants, and oral history as to methods of capturing and training wild elephants, have been collected into a series of ancient illustrated manuscripts, the most well known are the *Gajasastra* and *Kotchalakshana* (Ringis 1996: 34). These documents include treatises as to the divine origin of elephants, closely associated with Hindu belief and mythology. The deployment of elephants in warfare is further outlined in *Tamra Pichai Songkram* (The Treatise on War Strategy) compiled in 1518. A more modern collation of material resulted from the efforts of Francis Giles, an adviser to the Siamese government, who was president of the Siam Society¹²⁰ from

¹²⁰ The Siam Society was founded in 1904, under the Royal Patronage of the future King Rama VI. The Society was founded with the objective of researching and gathering information on the arts and sciences of Thailand and neighbouring countries. Based in Bangkok, today the Society continues to operate as a non-profit organisation dedicated to its founding cause. See <http://www.siam-society.org/about.asp>.

1930–1938. He published his observations and interpretations in the *Journal of the Siam Society* (Giles 1930 & 1932; see also Hongvivat 1980: 8).

Beyond traditional sanctions, the value of the elephant was recognised in the early 20th century with legislation that prohibited unauthorised killing, hunting or wounding of elephants in the wild. The *Elephant Conservation Act* served to formalise many traditional practices and supported the established status of elephants as distinct from game animals. The legislation was administered by the Royal Thai Forest Department, and allowed for the issuing of permits to capture elephants to be used in transportation and logging. It is a sad fact that the elephant in Thailand has been instrumental in the process that has ultimately led to the threat to its existence, through years of sanctioned deforestation of Thai lands. The forests have been so depleted that wild elephants are threatened through loss of habitat. With the banning of logging activities many elephants in captivity are without a *raison d'être* and their owners without a means of supporting either themselves or their elephants. The *Forest Reserve Act 1990* prohibits the logging of timber in Thailand. While this has positive connotations for the protection of elephants in the wild, it has seriously disadvantaged working elephants and communities who earned a living through logging. It has also threatened the traditional way of elephant breeding and care.

I acknowledge there is a valid concern from groups both inside Thailand and internationally that the methods used in 'domesticating' and training elephants have been, and at times still are, cruel and barbaric. The debates surrounding such concerns, albeit encompassing numerous arenas of interest, are beyond the present discussion. These discussions tie into broader issues relating to elephant conservation, most of which are addressed in terms of the elephant as a feature of the natural environment, and the desire to return domestic elephants to where they 'belong'. The sad plight of many elephants today arose out of a decision to ban logging that, although correct from a timber conservation point of view, took little account of the impact on either elephants or loggers. However, any belief that one option is to simply return these elephants to the wild takes no account of the survival difficulties for elephants not brought up in the natural environment, or the lack of habitat into which to introduce

them. It also ignores the significance of the traditions and way of life of Thai village communities that have an enduring relationship with elephants.

The cost of feeding and caring for elephants has become beyond the reach of numerous owners, who in many circumstances have been forced to become indigent. One of the sadder outcomes of a need to find alternative means of livelihood has been the drift by many mahouts and their charges into the larger towns and cities, some to be employed in construction activities, others simply begging on the streets. The sight of elephants with their mahouts trolling the main tourist streets of Bangkok after dark has precipitated strong comment from both international visitors and Thais. However, the answer is not as simple as banning them from the city streets. They must have somewhere else to go. The increasing emphasis on tourism in the country has provided an alternative, and this appears to be the preferred option in that there are opportunities to earn a living in less oppressive and more suitable environments. The Ayutthaya Elephant Camp is one of several centres where mahouts and their elephants have been able to re-establish a livelihood and maintain a fast disappearing way of life.

The Surin Elephant Roundup

As well as the localised centres, elephants and mahouts gather as a community at a range of traditional seasonal performances, the largest being the annual Surin Elephant Roundup. Surin is a provincial capital in north-east Thailand and hosts the Centre for Elephant Studies. The Roundup is held in the second week in November and consists of a three-day event that can include up to 300 elephants and their riders. Although the displays are intended to highlight the attributes of a good elephant-mahout working relationship – obedience, dexterity and skill – they also include traditional religious and propitiatory ceremonies (see Chadchaidee 1994: 22). They are effectively a re-enactment, and a singular event in what would have otherwise been the culmination of an extensive period of elephant hunting and training, celebrated in a pageant that included the whole community. The Surin Elephant Roundup is today a tourist highlight, but given the diaspora of Surin mahouts to other centres to find work, it is an important opportunity for many riders to reassert their origins and participate in activities that reinforce identity and membership of a community in which ‘images of

the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by (more or less) ritual performances' (Connerton 1987: 38). Henry (2000: 322) emphasises that performance can provide a bodily means of connection with others in (and through) time and space. Collective memory can be otherwise considered as the 'facts of communications' (and hence transference) between individuals. Connerton argues that it is these acts of transfer that make memory in common possible, hence commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices are of crucial importance. Rites are important as they have significance with respect to a set of further non-ritual actions that claim a continuity with the past through commemoration. There is a celebration of recurrence, and importance of certain types of repetition, some of which are more formal than others. Furthermore, Bhabha (1994: 2) reinforces the relationship between tradition and cultural identity, and the possibility of introducing additional cultural temporalities that can act to confound the differences between tradition and modernity.

As with other traditional events, the minimisation of context raises the question of practice becoming performance and the role of theatrical recreation in the perpetuation of tradition (see, for example, Peterson 1996). However, it is simplistic to relegate the Surin Elephant Roundup to mere tourist spectacle:

Surin is an elephant town. We have lots of elephants, lots of mahouts. Lots of elephant training. So the elephant Roundup at Surin is to show that, in the whole nation, this is where everything started. Surin's elephants were once used in war, now elephants play important roles in tourism all over the country ... For these mahouts who bring their elephants to the Round-Up their real purpose is not the money making. In fact, they want to visit their home town, their families. That is the main thing ... having a strong bond with their home town. Once very year they can come home. (Professor Charoen Wajanakoon, Surin Elephant Research Centre, in France 2 et al. 2002)

The above quote comes from a video documentary: *The Fall of the Divine Elephant*.¹²¹ The commentary that introduces the discussion of the Surin Round-Up ignores that there may be any meaning to the event beyond spectacle or commodity: 'In this stadium, the elephant has been turned into a circus performer and this is also a

¹²¹ A combined French/Thai production, it was screened nationally in Australia on the SBS network in February 2004.

way for owners to make some money'. The program reflects nature conservation ideology that places elephants properly in the natural world and hence has little interest in the lives of the mahouts.¹²²

The emergence of elephant camps in response to the problems of out of work mahouts and elephants is described early in the documentary commentary as an exercise 'to give the mahouts a chance to profit from a new and booming financial sector: tourism'. More broadly, this is consistent with attempts to differentiate practices at various elephant camps; the more undesirable activities are seen to be those associated with commercial ventures such as those at Ayutthaya.

It is interesting that carrying tourists on their backs is deemed potentially demeaning and unnatural for elephants. In contrast, elephant 'performances' that include displays of logging expertise, painting and playing musical instruments are considered more acceptable. These, for example, form the core of the public elephant displays at the government-sponsored Thai Elephant Conservation Centre at Lampang (northern Thailand).¹²³ My point is not to argue the relative merits of one over the other, but rather to highlight the attempts to privilege one suite of practices as being purer, more authentic and more desirable. There are correlations with similar efforts to sanction an 'appropriate' interpretation of heritage at Avebury Manor (see Chapter 5). Ultimately all such elephant camps, while most certainly implicated with economic interests, serve as a means by which mahouts and elephants can simply continue to eat. It is only after such basic considerations of survival that it is possible to direct attention to the important concern of ensuring the continuation of traditions and cultural practice.

¹²² I am not suggesting that efforts to protect elephants (or other features of the natural environment) are misplaced, or that all mahouts and camp owners in Thailand treat their elephants properly (sadly, this is not the case). Rather, I reiterate the arguments presented in Chapter 2 concerning the separation between natural and cultural heritage approaches.

¹²³ The Centre not only acts as a documentary and information repository, but also as a refuge for domestic elephants who have need of medical support and care. Prior to its establishment as such in 1992, The Conservation Centre was run by the Thai Forest Industry Organisation as the Young Elephant Training School and a 'retirement' home for its elephants (Corvanich 1999: 33; Ringis 1996: 55).

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Plate 20: Mahout, children and elephants at Ban Chang. Note Kraal posts in the background.

Plate 21: Songkran street parade, Ayutthaya.

Thailand today hosts a valuable assemblage of domesticated elephants, with an inseparable association with a diverse community of Thai people who work with, care for, and love these animals. The relationship between people and elephants is embedded in processes that reaffirm a community and personal identity that has been, and continues to be, passed down through generations. Being a mahout is not a 'job': it is a way of being and believing, and it is dependent on a profound concern for – and love of – elephants. As one mahout I interviewed comments, it is only possible to be a mahout if you give your heart to the elephants. Another asserts that 'a good mahout must love and understand elephants and vice versa and not be afraid ... yes, the most important thing is to have elephants in your heart and not be afraid'.

Ayutthaya and Elephants

The contribution of elephants and the people who work with them to the cultural heritage of Ayutthaya is grounded in both historical and contemporary practice. The historical association of elephants with ancient Ayutthaya is well documented, as is the re-establishment of an elephant village at the Ayutthaya elephant kraal after the 1767-destruction of Ayutthaya (see, for example, Chadchaidee 1994; Bacon 1893; de la Loubère 1693; Kaempfer 1727; na Pombejra 2001; Ringis 1996). Much of the writing about Ayutthaya and the subsequent kingdom, and hence its elephants, comes from the diaries and memoirs of a coterie of European missionaries, diplomats, travellers and – from the late 19th century – from those working on the teak concessions owned by European trading firms. For example, de la Loubère, writing in the late 17th century, noted that the King of Ayutthaya had over 10,000 elephants, esteemed as the King's Principal Forces, and reiterated the respect accorded to these creatures, and that they were never killed for sport.

Along with regional agricultural and trading pursuits, the Bangkok Royal Palace retained an ongoing interest in the use of the Ayutthaya elephant kraal. It had been the duty of every king of Ayutthaya to oversee the annual roundup of wild elephants, and this was a tradition that continued into the modern Rattanakosin period. This lasted until the abandonment of the kraal, following the redundancy of the department responsible for elephants early last century, after 400 or so years of existence. Most of

the elephants at the time were sold to logging interests in the north of the country. The Royal Elephant Department (*krom kochabal*), in association with the court, had been a major participant in the capture and training of elephants in aspects to do most particularly with defence. The physical remains of the Ayutthaya Elephant Kraal at Ban Chang, which are an integral part of the landscape of ancient Ayutthaya, stand as a significant and tangible reminder of this history.

Several of the more momentous events in the history of Ayutthaya are related to battles and tales of violent clashes on elephant back. In 1424, two sons of the deceased king fought a dual, mounted on elephants, to establish who would rule as successor. Both were mortally wounded, and the crown went to a third prince, Chao Sam Phrya, who built Wat Ratburana (plate 23) as a memorial to his dead brothers. A sumptuous offering of golden ceremonial items was enclosed in the major prang of the temple. In the 1950s, following an attack by looters, the gold deposit was excavated by the Fine Arts Department. The majority of the artefacts currently form the signature display at the Chao Sam Phrya National Museum in Ayutthaya. The still magnificent remains of Wat Ratchaburana are a significant landmark in the Ayutthaya Historical Park, and feature on the route taken by elephant tours of the park.

Less than 100 years later, in 1549, King Maha Chakraphat was forced to defend Ayutthaya from a Burmese invasion. His queen and his daughter both accompanied the expedition disguised as soldiers. When her husband was put in a life threatening situation during an elephant duel, Queen Suriyothai, mounted on elephant back, interposed herself and was mortally wounded. Her selfless act of bravery to save her husband has been recognised in a memorial chedi in Ayutthaya, and she is also represented in a bronze statue at the Ayutthaya Elephant Kraal. In a more contemporary homage, the story of Queen Suriyothai has reached new audiences with the release in 2001 of a popularly attended Thai movie 'The Legend of Suriyothai', directed by Chatrichalerm Yokol.

A third famous elephant dual was fought in 1593, following a period of Burmese vassalage. In a fight between King Naresuen (1555–1605) and the Burmese Crown Prince, history recalls that, although on a smaller elephant, Naresuan prevailed and

mortally wounded the Burmese Prince, leading to the withdrawal of the latter's army. It is noted that King Naresuan constructed a commemorative chedi at Ayutthaya (probably Wat Yai Chai Mongkon). Naresuan's elephant-back victory is commemorated each year on 25 January, as Armed Forces Day (Chadchaidee 1994: 174–177).

King Narai, who reigned 1656–1688, is renowned for his interest in hunting and training elephants, and some of the earliest writings related to elephants are attributed to this period. The commentaries on the divine origin of elephants, desirable qualities, appearance and behaviour, and associated rituals have their origins in much earlier practices and beliefs. At the time of King Narai this literature and oral history was combined into the form of well-illustrated manuals, several of which are retained today in the collection of the National Library in Bangkok (Ringis 1996: 14). Another valuable repository of elephant related material is found in the White Elephant Museum in the grounds of the Bangkok Royal Palace. The museum is housed in two buildings that were originally part of the royal elephant stables. One of the additional devastations of the destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767 was the loss of many documents and archives in the conflagration, including the wealth of documentary material relating to elephants.

The Ayutthaya Elephant Kraal

If you have an elephant, you do not want to walk on the ground. (Thai proverb)

One of the physical features of the Ayutthaya historical landscape is the Elephant Kraal. The physical remains of the Kraal stand as a significant and tangible reminder of the history of the ancient Kingdom, and of the re-establishment of Ayutthaya as an important regional centre. References in tourist literature tend to suggest a deserted archaeological and historical site. However, on visiting the site one finds not only impressive physical remains, but also a village that is today the home of a community of mahouts and their families, and upwards of 50 elephants (plates 19 & 20). The elephants and their mahouts have come from various places, but mostly from Surin or Buri Ram (a small town to the west of Surin).

The village was (re)established about 8 years ago and is a modern assertion of the integral role of elephants in the heritage of Ayutthaya and of Thailand. Ban Chang is an exemplary juxtaposition of contemporary practice and historical site. The village was re-occupied by Khun Sompast Meephan as a way of giving out-of-work, orphaned, abandoned and sick elephants and their mahouts a home and work to do to earn a living. At the time, he received the support of the (then) Director of the Historical Park.¹²⁴ Khun Sompast lives in the village and operates the Elephant Camp in the Ayutthaya Historical Park as a tourist business.

In addition to our various conversations, Khun Sompast was an interviewee in the documentary mentioned above. He is recorded in the latter as commenting that for him the elephant camp is 'about money and power'. On one hand, such a reiteration of the commercial value of the enterprise sits well with attempts to categorise 'camp operators' as financial opportunists. On the other hand, it asserts the historical reality that the elephant/human relationship in the region has been exactly about wealth and power¹²⁵ – indeed about the rise and fall of kingdoms; it is only recently that this has become otherwise. As Khun Somphat points out, there was a wealth and power nexus associated with prior logging activities. Most elephants were involved with harvesting teak, a material that was rarely used by 'common' people as only the rich could afford it. The unhappy circumstance today is that owning elephants can be an economic liability. However, as is shown below, the relationship continues to be considerably more meaningful than one of social status, power and wealth.

Many of these criticisms of the commercial nature of this venture are countered by the sorts of everyday realities that have been recognised by recent UNESCO forums that encourage communities living in heritage places to engage in responsible tourist-related enterprises (ACCU 2000a, 2000b). These regional meetings have discussed the

¹²⁴ Such positions are commonly rotated and the current Director (who was previously the Director of the Sukhothai Historical Park) has several concerns about the continuing operation of the elephant business in the Historical Park. He is less concerned, however, about the village continuing as and where it is.

¹²⁵ It must also be reiterated that there are broader issues relating to wealth and status within Thai Buddhism and social processes. Wijeyewardene (1986: 15), for example, comments: 'Thai Buddhism has to do with power and wealth and status, but neither do the Thai need social scientists to bring this to their attention, nor is that all that Thai Buddhism is about'.

need for a holistic approach to heritage that incorporates an understanding of traditional practices and lifestyles, that encourages and facilitates community participation, and recognises the necessity to incorporate cultural heritage in the consideration of sustainable economic practices. There is also an understanding that while tourism can be problematic, it can be utilised by local communities in conjunction with heritage appreciation and promotion as a way of achieving financial benefits. One outcome is a more equitable balancing of the distribution of income from tourism projects.

Ban Chang

The relatively recent re-occupation of the Ayutthaya elephant village, and the activities in the Historical Park Elephant Camp, have given a living and more meaningful dimension to the physical landscape of the ancient city. Simply, the elephants and mahouts, and their families, contribute to and enhance the heritage values of the Kraal and of Ayutthaya. The elephants are trained through the precepts of a centuries-old elephant training manual, and associated traditions and rituals are an important part of life in the village. The village provides a context for the confirmation of the community's identity, with a shared notion of knowledge, and the transmission and diversification of this knowledge and practice related to living with elephants. The identity of the villagers, most of whom have come from other places, brings a set of social and individual memories that act to inject and immerse time in place. The link between memory and place is realised through the agency of the lived body. That is, while 'places do not inherently hold memory', they become empowered to do so by the sociality that defines a body as lived (Henry 1999: 66). Or, as Ingold (1993: 153) writes: 'Places are constituted and animated by the social and political engagement of human beings with one another ... It is in this sense that place is already pregnant with the past'. Following this analogy, the contemporary community at Ban Chang brings to life – 'gives birth to' – an experienced and continuing history that is authentically 'in place'. Memory, practice and the communality that is reinforced through events such as the Surin Roundup play a significant part in creating community and asserting an identity that is at the same time both local and extra-local.

Ban Chang, the village at the kraal, is not a 'reinventing of tradition' but the re-establishment of an authentic life-world and practice. The traditions that give life and meaning to the daily experiences of the village community are not museum tableaux of a past way of life. They are active and modern continuations of beliefs, practices and understandings that reach back to ancient origins and connect contemporary mahout/elephant relationships with their early Hindu influences. This exemplifies a process in which new and old are synthesised into an idiom that remains consonant with cultural practices, although there has been a transformation of practice through the importation of new activities and externally imposed change, including the impact of tourism. At Ban Chang a distinctive community is maintained through the meaning and symbolism reinforced by tradition, myth and ritual. As Hobsbawm (1987: 8) tells us, this is not to suppose that we are witnessing 'invented traditions', but rather a case in point of '[w]here the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived nor invented'.

This contemporary relationship of the villagers of Ban Chang with the landscape of Ayutthaya not only gives life to the past, but it imbues the physical remains of the kraal with contemporary meanings that create space and landscape as a product of social processes. These are centred in human agency, where that agency is experienced as both past and present. The resulting landscape is a combination of the physical, the emotional and the cognitive that is contextually constituted by differing human experiences, attachment and involvement (Tilley 1994: 10). For example, a mahout at Ban Chang explains that 'there are very powerful spirits [*phii*] at the kraal'. He believes that the power in the kraal posts must have been necessary to keep the elephants in, otherwise how could such flimsy structures have contained the much stronger elephants? 'This is why no new posts are made and the old ones are just repaired and looked after, because they have their own power'. He also recounts the story that several years ago one of the posts was sold for a huge amount of money: both the seller and the buyer subsequently had much bad luck and illness in their families. Such tales are indicative of the local narratives of place and landscape that imbue physical features with life and meanings and connect them into a wider understanding of social processes, experiences and stories. The megaliths at Avebury are implicated in local landscapes in a similar way (see Chapter 4). Unfortunately, as

with Avebury, local understandings and narratives are often muted by mainstream heritage paradigms. In such 'tournaments of power', the might wielded by local elephant spirits will always be vanquished by more powerful state-influenced conservation concerns.

As mentioned above, a number of the mahouts at Ban Chang come from Surin. An older mahout, in his 50s, told me he moved to Ayutthaya with a cousin because the man they worked for in Surin sold the elephants: 'I miss Surin but I have to stay here because elephants are more important ... I love elephants ... it is sad not to be able to work with elephants'. Although displacement from home is a factor of life for many mahouts in Thailand, this has often been a part of working with elephants. All the major activities historically associated with elephants in Thailand – warfare, transportation and logging – have necessitated that people who work with elephants travel from home and live either a semi-settled or nomadic life. In such cases, practices and activities that reassert community and identity – such as the annual Surin Round-Up – take on even greater significance in which 'belonging appears more closely defined by a shared identity with the group itself as a social entity, rather than by belonging to territory and landscape' (Ottino 1998: 103). The security that accrues through such belonging is given by a historical sense of continuity in practice, rather than attachment to a specific locality that accrues over a long period of 'being in place'. 'Being', in this sense, has greater relevance to identity – and to experiences of becoming and belonging – than to physical location. Identity and community hence are implicated in processes that act to create and re-create places.

The sentiment of belonging is reinforced through ritual participation and notions of origin, which for the mahouts affirm their identity within a broad community of people who live and work with elephants throughout Thailand. This community, in sharing a common threat to its existence from global politico-economic factors, is possibly further strengthened by this challenge. The exclusion and dispossession experienced by communities can serve to enhance feelings of belonging and 'rightness', and conviction of possessing a distinct identity (Caftanzoglou 2001: 31). One reaction is to see the adoption of an approach to tradition that emphasises the primacy of the community in its maintenance and transmission, embodied in a

communal and socially harmonious way of life that is passed down through generations.

It is continuation of this 'way of life', or 'being', that is essential to the maintenance of community, belonging and identity:

... people know *their* way of doing things; they know a customary mode of thought and of performance. They do not necessarily value it simply because it is traditional, but because it suits them ... in this regard, tradition can be seen to have a pragmatic rather than an intrinsic value: people may emphasise the long historical roots of some practice not simply to demonstrate its consequent sacredness but to exhibit its appropriateness to those particular social circumstances ... this experience occurs most frequently in the context of rather mundane circumstances [which] provide the dynamics in a community's social process ... People thus become aware of their culture and experience their distinctiveness not through the performance of elaborate and specialised ceremonial but through the evaluation of everyday practices. (A. Cohen 1982: 5–6)

Khun Somphat describes how he and his family became concerned about the plight of the elephants and decided to do something to help. He dedicates himself to the elephants 'because I love them':

It is fulfilling. It is hard to describe this feeling. It's like they ... people without kids won't get it. Mine are all grown up now. These little ones [the elephants] give me a big hug when we're together. Their love floods over me. We can feel this love ... knowledge about elephants hasn't disappeared altogether, it's just that it isn't widespread because there is no demand for elephants as working animals, so we must help to maintain this kind of knowledge. We must revive the knowledge or we will lose our elephants. (Khun Somphat Meephan in France 2 et al. 2002)

Khun Somphat is effusive about the importance of training and the ceremonial practices involved:

After much learning and experience and true understanding you are qualified, and ultimately after a special ceremony you can ride all elephants. Teachers are born with their elephants ... there are levels of mahouts, the most senior is *khwam sadaeng* who is able to ride all elephants and has considerable power and can use an elephant to catch wild elephants. The ceremony of becoming a mahout (*kod cha kam*) involves accepting all elephants and being willing to go to their help ... it means giving your life to elephants to serve however you can, and whatever you do ... there is an elephant manual to teach and control

elephants written by Phra Narai – it is an old royal book, around 400–500 years old ... it is written in Old Thai and includes how to catch elephants, training and ceremonies.

Other mahouts in the village assert the importance of the rituals associated with elephants, telling of the need to have a word of power to catch elephants – an ‘old’ word from Surin province – and of special ceremonies when an elephant is born, and on becoming accepted as a mahout. Recently Khun Somphat reached the rank of ‘Master’ and four senior ceremonial practitioners travelled from Surin to officiate. A visitor to the village with whom I spoke, a woman from Bangkok who does fundraising work for the camp, expressed her concern that ‘these [ceremonial masters] are the sort of people who will die and their skills with them...’. This acknowledgment of the significant place of ritual in the life of the village community reaffirms that ‘ritual confirms and strengthens social identity and people’s sense of social location: it is an important means through which people experience community’ (A. Cohen 1985: 50).

In ritual activities, values and structures become combined and legitimised and, when necessary, adapted. They provide a bridge between the past and the future, acting as social memory and prescription. Durkheim (1965) asserts that ritual is imperative to a group’s sense of being, and is essential to bind individuals to a group. Community unity is reinforced through the process of ritual while everyday life is characterised by friction and competitiveness (see Turner 1987). Bell (1992) urges an emphasis on ritual as contextualised in other areas of social practice; that is, it is the process of ritualisation in the overall experience of life that is as important as the ritual itself. Although rituals are formalised activities, with specialised power and potency, the degree of formality will depend on the context. Generally, however, rituals serve to create a sense of order by prescribing bodily actions in determined settings. Their effects are usually further reaching than these limitations, particularly as they can serve to bind people to wider group meanings that have relevance in broader aspects of life (Gosden 1999: 129).

In the years since the village was re-established at the Kraal, the children from neighbouring Ayutthaya village communities have become closely involved with the

elephants and several have become mahouts or are training as mahouts. Children generally start to learn the skills of being a mahout from the age of 6 or 7, although a young mahout with whom I shared a *howdah* (elephant saddle) on the trip between Ban Chang and the elephant camp acknowledged he didn't learn until he was 18. The involvement of the next generation is therefore important. Khun Somphat originally did not want to have the local children involved for safety reasons, but narrated the story of the children 'borrowing' an elephant to take to the forest. He quickly reconsidered as he thought it would be safer for them to have a proper familiarity and understanding of elephants:

I think the villagers around are very happy about what we do ... many are supportive, their children learn to ride the elephants and it is part of their culture ... the culture of all Thais ... unfortunately today we are at the bottom of the elephant history but one day they will be great again ... it is just a matter of waiting ... this village is not just for the elephants, it is for my son and daughter and for the next generation of Thai people.

The parents of two boys from neighbouring villages, both of whom are second generation Ayutthaya residents, believe the presence of the elephants is important, not just for their sons but for Ayutthaya more generally. A Muslim man from Ban Suan Prik speaks of his 10 year old son's involvement with the elephants:

The elephants are good because the children in Ayutthaya have work ... [the elephants] make money for Thailand ... my son is happy with the work ... sometimes he doesn't want to go home. He loves animals ... when he comes home from school he goes to work and comes back home about 7.00–8.00 p.m. ... if the elephants make problems and do bad things, then they should leave. But the elephants live here, they work to make money for Thai people and they have plenty of food so they should stay.

The mother of another boy from the same village, a Buddhist woman, notes that it might be better for the elephants to be returned to the wild, but that their relationship with the mahouts is too dependent for this to happen. She is equivocal about her support as the elephants sometimes cause motorcycle accidents and 'walk on the fields and destroy the plants and trees', but Khun Somphat is known to be fair with financial compensation in such instances. In concert with the above opinion, she believes the elephants are beneficial in terms of tourist income, and that it is important that they are cared for:

If the elephants are sick we must cure and take care of them because they are part of our history and of war. They should live with Thai people and Thailand forever and for our children.

She is less happy about the potential dangers for her son from working with the elephants and has tried to prevent him going, but he 'escapes' and goes anyway because he is proud of making some money and likes to be with the elephants. There is a sense from both parents that at least their children have employment and will be able to earn money as adults without having to leave Ayutthaya. As indicated in the previous chapter, this concern with continuity and for maintaining close ties with community is one that is commonly expressed.

Several of the mahouts note a concern that people do not care enough for elephants and lack knowledge of them. Yet they are somewhat bemused at the suggestion that young people may simply stop becoming mahouts. As one gently points out: 'this could not be the case as it is natural for young people who are around elephants to want to be mahouts so there will always be new mahouts'. Their worry is that children in other parts of Thailand will not know elephants and about elephants, hence Ban Chang is important as it provides a future for mahouts and for elephants. I was most interested, however, in the response from two mahouts with whom I spoke one evening, who think that World Heritage is good because it ensures the elephants have lots of food and therefore they remain healthy. They agree however, that the most important thing to keep for their children is the need to care for elephants: 'elephants are for the young. Children should have elephants and this should not be lost'.

This could indeed be lost in the struggle for mahouts to maintain an identity in a changing world. The Director of the Mae Sa Elephant Camp (northern Thailand) makes the following comment about the status of mahouts:

These days you can't find *genuine* mahouts in any camps. In the past mahouts came in from the logging industry. They were employed to do logging. They could be Karens or even local villagers, but these people have died or have left the industry. Now it is the new generation. They need to be trained. They need to stay with and be trained to be with the elephants. (Khun Chuchart Kanlamapit in France 2 et al. 2002; emphasis added)

In the passing on of knowledge and in a process of education, the particular heritage and collective memory of the mahout community at Ban Chang – as with all communities – is proving that it is an irreplaceable asset, for both today and the future. The young people who are training as mahouts today – and those mahouts who are older – have as genuine a relationship with their elephants as did those who earned a living in the logging industry. In seeking to attribute authenticity to mahouts as ‘loggers’, the Director of the Mae Sa Camp is emphasising a process of identity formation that is unnecessarily narrow in its approach. ‘Being’ a mahout is not determined by how one earns a living. Rather, it is implicated in a meaningful and tradition-laden association with elephants that permeates and informs daily life and practice. An integral component of this life world is the close association between family ties and training and living as a mahout. A number of the mahouts I spoke to at Ban Chang have relatives who are elephant riders, one acknowledging that both his father and grandfather worked with elephants: ‘It was in my blood since I was born as my whole family “knew” elephants ... now my brother works with elephants and also my two sons ... one of my sons is working in Japan as a mahout at the Osaka Zoo ... my daughter can ride elephants but she doesn’t work with them’. Another younger mahout, in his 30s, agrees with this, stating: ‘It is normal for young children to learn when the father is a mahout as elephants are in the blood’.¹²⁶

Attempts to describe a new generation of mahouts as not being genuine serve to effectively disenfranchise a set of meanings and a life-world that are reliant on the experience and praxis of working and living with elephants, whether that is warfare, transport, logging or the tourist industry. It reiterates the negative connotations associated with the engagement of elephants in tourist enterprises, without understanding the broader significance and contribution of modern-day elephants and their riders to the cultural heritage of both Ayutthaya and Thailand. The irony is that

¹²⁶ Although there appears to be no active discrimination against female mahouts, there is only one girl among the current group of trainees. The mahouts I spoke with found no problem with girls becoming mahouts, but were generally of the opinion that boys were ‘better’. There is a prominent role model of course in one of Thailand’s greatest heroines, Ayutthaya’s own Queen Suriyothai. During the time I was involved with the village, two of the three international volunteer ‘mahout’ trainees (all adult) were women: one from the Netherlands, the other from Japan. Prior to their arrival a Canadian woman had stayed there learning to be a mahout for several months. All are extremely positive about their experience.

one of the major roles of elephants in their centuries of history as domestic animals has been that of people carrier (frontispiece). Commuting on elephant back was a dominant mode of 'commuter' and visitor transport – long before the buses and vehicles that now pollute the Ayutthaya Historical Park with their emissions. As one of the male villagers of Ban Chang comments: 'It used to be kings – today the tourists ride elephants'.

For the residents of Ban Chang, as with the Muslim and Catholic communities discussed in the prior chapter, their heritage is not significantly informed by the monuments of the ancient city, but by the way they live within the modern town of Ayutthaya and their attachments to a multi-layered landscape. Even those physical features that are part of the fabric of the past, such as the posts of the kraal, have been incorporated into contemporary experiences and understandings. These more particularly include the practices that give meaning to their lives, and the maintenance of a specific identity and cohesion within a community, in this case one that is based on a traditional and continuing relationship between humans and elephants. It is not hard to see a correlation with Stewart's (1996:139) conundrum that 'the problem of considering "senses of place", then, is a problem of tracking the force of cultural practices subject to social use and thus filled with moments of tension, digression, displacement, excess, deferral, arrest, contradiction, immanence and desire'.

Elephants & Water

One of the most important resources for healthy elephants is proximity to water. Asian elephants require regular immersion in water for a healthy existence, so domestic elephant communities and their minders are best located near a suitable source of regular running water. The attractions of the extensive network of waterways at Ayutthaya is obvious, both for past and present elephant villages. The daily life of the elephants, their mahouts and many of the village children revolve around morning and evening processions to the rivers of the nearby khlong (or canal) for washing and playing in a process that strengthens the relationship between the elephants and their riders (plate 19).

The connection with the water life of Ayutthaya is, however, one that is embroiled in a greater set of social processes and spiritual meanings that reach out to link the village community with their Ayutthaya neighbours and more national narratives. One of the divine attributes of elephants is their auspicious relationship with the arrival of rains: rains mean good rice harvests, full rivers, happy people and a contented kingdom. Clouds are often considered to be the 'elephants of the sky' (Majupuria 1987: 113). As water is the source of life, elephants are closely associated with the productive power of nature in both Buddhist and Hindu tradition. It is not surprising, therefore, to find elephants playing a significant part in local Songkran celebrations that juxtapose water, purity and the desire for a rich, happy, propitious and benevolent new year. The Songkran procession at Ayutthaya is no exception, and the elephants and their riders participate in the ritual aspects of the ceremony and in the accompanying parade (plate 21). Those animals not carrying local dignitaries and monks join in the general water battle melee. Elephant trunks make excellent water canons. Such processions and celebrations are no mere tourist performance: the major actors in this particular drama are local people, and the ritual and ceremony that accompany the festival are part of the living traditions and celebrations of Thai community life. The involvement of the elephants in the ceremony is consequently a continuation of the traditional Thai life world – they are not participating in a tableau for tourists, but as an integral and enduring symbol of the role of elephants in Thai ritual and domestic life.

The broad landscape of Ayutthaya provides the setting for the creation of multiple meanings, which enmesh the community of Ban Chang and its spiritual and ritual life with the life ways and world view of Ayutthaya and Thai communities more generally. The meanings so constructed cannot be understood apart from the symbolically constructed lifeways of the social actors (Tilley 1994: 11): significance is found in the interdependent relation between people, practice, tradition and places where those relationships reach across time to link the past with the present. Through socially mediated spatial practices and experiences, the villagers make place and landscape and reaffirm ideas of community and identity.

The Ayutthaya Elephant Camp

The village and the ancient city are connected across space and time by a recurring journey in which the elephants and their riders travel from their home at the kraal to the centre of the city where they engage in the daily duties and tasks around which their working lives revolve. In Ayutthaya's past the kraal itself would have been the site of much greater ceremony and activity than today, with the population of all social strata surging in for the annual elephant catching festivities. In contemporary Ayutthaya, this influx of visitors is primarily represented by bus loads of tourists. The activities of the elephants and mahouts have hence become more centred on the Historical Park. The daily journey of elephants from the kraal and Ban Chang to the city, therefore, continues to weave the life of elephants and mahouts in a physical and experiential process of landscape creation. The journey physically and conceptually embraces the kraal, the island and the ancient city, creating a web of social meanings that sustains living culture, tradition and belief. The result is the affirmation of a routinised social practice in which people's temporal movements and interactions with others through both place and space re-create ways of being (Bender 1992), and negotiate meanings in which life is always a process of 'becoming'.

For the mahouts and their mounts, this process of becoming is implicated in a combination of lived practice and of consumption in the context of the construction of heritage tourism products. To some extent they participate in reinforcing the image of the historical park as a distinct iconography of a landscape where time has stood still, and as a space for tourist consumption. For many visitors, their only views of Ayutthaya are through a bus window or from an elephant howdah.¹²⁷ At the same time, the mahouts are engaging in a process of re-identification, in which they are taking advantage of the very globalising processes that have imposed external changes. The articulation of identity in and through place is, then, not simply a given

¹²⁷ My observations are that the majority of tourists who participate in the elephant experience of Ayutthaya are affiliated with Japanese tour groups. Their other 'hands-on' experience will include a visit to the nearby market area in the historical park, which is a modern facility constructed to cater to tourist interests. Without a greater exposure to the village communities, the diverse cultural practices of Ayutthaya are presented as homogenised and sanitised merchandise.

but also always a strategic, political fixing (Jacobs 1996: 35). Jacobs reminds us that an approach that interrogates the mobile nature of identity and difference:

... can be used productively in considering the relationship between identity and place. It unsettles the notion of a bounded, pre-given essence of place to which the identity of those who dwell there adheres. It attends instead to the constant interplay between positional and variable [histories] and the complex intermeshing of the global and the local. (ibid: 8)

At one level the tourist related activities could be perceived to be a staged performance. However, I argue that they are more closely a practice that leads to the reaffirmation of identity and the reality of lived experience, encompassing as it does the relationship between elephant and keeper that goes beyond economic imperatives. That is, it is neither a theatricalised performance nor an inappropriate task provoked by financial necessity. In this way the mahouts challenge 'the hegemony of a discourse which denies the significance of the contemporary reality of their lived experiences' (Henry 1999: 245). Through their work at the Elephant Camp, they are enabled to realign themselves from a potentially marginal existence. By taking a central position they gain control over their context and are able to contest or develop their own identity constructs (B. Kapferer 1995b: 76). They do this in a context which allows local concerns to merge with global interests arising from a combination of World Heritage listing and tourism.

Jacobs (1996: 40) discusses this nexus through Bhabha's analysis of the constant and mutual solicitation of the local and the global: 'The double geography of the global/local is not simply a matter of the global reaching into the local, it is also a matter of the local needing that which is not local in order to constitute itself. The quest for a sense of identity is not simply a calm return to an autochthonous essence.' Or, as Appadurai (1997: 6) comments, people 'move and must drag their imagination for new ways of living with them ... new mythographies are charters for new social projects, and not just a counterpoint to the certainties of daily life'. In reasserting their identities, the mahouts enter into the sphere of dominating ideologies and mold new definitions out of the challenges they are currently facing. Ironically, in the context of their activities in the Ayutthaya Historical Park, their new definitions are in fact re-

affirmations of identity and of being in place, and of the integral and enduring role of elephants in Thai culture.

The traditional practice enshrined in the living elephant/mahout relationship cannot be considered a less important component of the cultural heritage of Ayutthaya than the physical evidence of the elephant kraal and other aspects of the ancient city. Although stabled and trained at the kraal, the elephants of earlier times were to be found in the city, often performing similar duties to those of the elephants today – moving people from one place to another. Thus the presence of the elephants in the ancient city today can be seen as the continuation of a historical and traditional practice. The elephants and the Ban Chang community contribute to the historic landscape of Ayutthaya through daily experiences and practice that add a significant layer of meaning to the physical remains of the ancient city. However, the elephants of Ayutthaya are under threat of being banned from the Historical Park, due to charges of traffic disruption, safety risks and complaints of unpleasant smells associated with their droppings.¹²⁸

The removal of the elephants from the park is supported by the local office of the Fine Arts Department. The public objections relate to the presence of the elephants in the Historical Park, not to their ongoing habitation at the site of the Ayutthaya Elephant Kraal. There are solid arguments against the complaints, which have been addressed elsewhere (Harrington 2002). They include the incongruity of elephant traffic being considered a traffic hazard, when the potential for injury is much more likely to occur in a collision between the fast moving vehicles that use the roads of the park. Banning the vehicles would in fact make greater 'heritage' sense in terms of the use of the historical park landscape. A curtailment of activities in the historical park will potentially impact the income of the Ayutthaya Elephant Kraal Village. This will seriously compromise their financial resources and hence their mid- to long-term viability as a self-sustaining community. The result could have significant implications for both the well-being of the elephants and the people associated with the village. Apart from the financial considerations, there is an equal threat to an important aspect of Ayutthaya's intangible heritage, and to the community lifestyle,

¹²⁸ At the time of writing the matter was still waiting resolution.

structure and values found not only within the village, but now closely linked with neighbouring communities in the village landscape.

Conclusion

The challenges at Ayutthaya arise from an international heritage discourse that serves to define what is a 'proper' understanding of cultural heritage (see Byrne 1995). The monuments of the ancient city have become privileged as true expressions of the past and the rightful object of cultural heritage practice and protection. Contemporary practices, however 'traditional' they might be, have become tourist accoutrements that add colour and commercial value, but contribute little to state definitions of the significance of the Ancient City of Ayutthaya as a heritage place. The paradox is that the relationship between Thai people and elephants is more broadly acknowledged as an important aspect of Thai history and culture.

The Ayutthaya elephant camp and the village of Ban Chang are grounded in what Henry (1999: 234) refers to as 'a social situation in which, through particular spatial practices, people make place and contest categorical identities'. Feld (1996: 73–74) identifies one of the key issues in approaches that seek to theorise place is the way in which spaces are transformed to become 'placed' as a result of human actions. Equally, it is necessary to consider how places come to embody memories and hence become important for understanding the construction of social identities. For the mahouts and villagers of Ban Chang, Ayutthaya is made as a place through a practiced identity, that remains inseparable from their traditional relationship with elephants. It is also implicated in a broader understanding of community and belonging that embraces places of origin, such as Surin, and is reinforced in recurring traditional events. The cultural landscape of Ayutthaya is given meaning by, and gives meaning to, the practices of the mahouts and their elephants. This landscape is one that includes both the ancient monuments and the modern township, and reinforces a connectedness with place, community and the past.

The cultural heritage of the people of Ayutthaya is far more extensive than just the magnificent monuments of the ancient city. For the majority of the people I

interviewed, it is evident that the aspects of their lives that they most value and want to pass on to their children – their cultural heritage – are not the monuments of the ancient city, but the traditional and ongoing practices that give meaning to their lives, and the maintenance of a specific identity and cohesion within a community. This is not to say that the monuments and temples are not important to them, but it is not the monuments that most significantly create place, meaning and value within the various communities of Ayutthaya.