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Naisupap, P.

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# The Composite Elephant

## An Unseen History of Connected Asia and Beyond

Pichayapat Naisupap

Throughout history, the elephant has been employed to represent abstract, unseen ideas of royalty, sanctity, and morality. In Asia, elephant traditions that were passed down and spread out from ancient India formed a strand connecting various Asian cultures together, ranging at the very least from Persia to Southeast Asia. Histories of connected Asia have been written mainly by focusing on cross-cultural contacts but still lack in noticing what has been shared across cultures. This article will shed light on the iconography and iconology of the composite elephant, which helped create commensurability between Asian cultures and beyond in an age of globalization of the early modern period.

Asian elephants that we know today, *Elephas maximus*, live in the wilderness located in India, Sri Lanka, Sumatra, Borneo, and mainland Southeast Asia. In the past, the distribution of Asian elephants was vaster than in the present, spanning at least from Persia in the west to Southeast Asia and southern China in the east. Peoples in these wide areas must have encountered real elephants or at least known relatively well about them. These individuals incorporated iconography of the elephant into their everyday artifacts and rituals starting in pre-historic times.

Due to its great size and charismatic behavior, the elephant has been employed to emblemize kingship and religious ideas. As one elephant treatise found in India puts it, "The creation of elephants ... was holy, and for the profit of sacrifice to the gods, and especially for the welfare of kings."<sup>1</sup> This statement was believed to have been said by the sage Palakapya, the nominal founding father of Indic elephantology, or *gajaśāstra*. It also shows the two main qualities of the elephant: holy and kingly. A genre of the elephant treatise can be found across Asia, for example in Sri Lanka, mainland Southeast Asia, and the Malay world. From the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea, the mass of the elephant's body thus helped abstract, unseen ideas about royalty and holiness become visible and tangible for people living in the mundane world.

The composite elephant has been a prevalent motif in representing abstract ideas in human cultures. It is a figure of the elephant formed completely or partly by other elements such as other kinds of animals, humans, plants, etc. A figure of the composite elephant usually retains an easily recognizable outline of the elephant as the animal with the trunk. The earliest known motif of the composite elephant is a representation of the Indic elephant-headed god Ganesh. Throughout history, the composite elephant has been part of a grand concept of the internal unity of all beings and things in the cosmos.<sup>2</sup> This concept has been found through other philosophical equivalents across Eurasia such as Brahman in the Indic religions and Neoplatonism in the Abrahamic religions.

### The holy and kingly composite elephant

One elephant was brought into a town. A group of blind men who never knew about the elephant before came to inspect the animal, touching it on different parts of its body. When they gathered to discuss the nature of the animal in the end, they could never reach an agreement. This story originated in India and became a parable in the Buddhist scripture *Sūtra Pitaka*, which the Buddha employed to teach his disciples about how different perceptions lead to discord.

When this parable traveled into the Persianate world, it served to endorse the majesty of a sultan and, more importantly,

to make the idea of an infinite God digestible to the basic senses. A poem in one Persian manuscript of Herat in 1569 tells a story of a sultan's elephant in a city not far from Ghūr in today's Afghanistan. The elephant was kept to prove the sultan's "splendor, rank and state." Blind delegates then came to investigate this rare animal, each sensing its different members and striving to acquire a clear image of it. In the end, each "had but known one part, and no man all. ... Naught of Almighty God can creatures learn, / Nor e'en the wise such mysteries discern."<sup>3</sup>

In this Persian manuscript, not only the elephant was used to express the grandeur of the sultan's kingship, but it was also used to materialize the infinity of God. The poem is accompanied by an illustration of a white elephant surrounded by four blind men. Another Persian manuscript also includes a similar trope of a composite white elephant

being ridden by an Islamic ruler and examined by blind men [Fig. 1].

Similar to a crowned figure in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* frontispiece, an art piece at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto shows a figure of the elephant composed of other animals and men and ridden by a mahout [Fig. 2]. This watercolor work dates back to the early 17th century and was signed by Dawlat Khan, an artist from Agra of the Mughal Empire. In this work, the elephant and the rider, representing the king, are seamlessly connected by a multitude of animal and human elements to the extent that they are hardly separated from each other. The elephant and the king are in harmony, unifying and governing both people and animals under one universal realm. This iconology mirrors the Neoplatonic kingship and imperial ideology of the Mughal Empire.<sup>4</sup>

Moving further east, from Persia and India into Southeast Asia, where the Indic elephantology was translated into vernacular versions, an elephant treatise in Thailand tells an origin story of the divine elephant. The elephant in the Thai elephantology was composed of twenty-six deities [Fig. 3]. According to one Thai manuscript, a group of 26 deities descended from a heaven and formed together the elephant, each possessing different members of the elephant's body.<sup>5</sup>

Today, this divine composition is still believed and worshipped by Thai elephant caretakers. When one abuses an elephant, one has to beg for forgiveness not only for the offended elephant but also for the deities embedded in the physical body of the elephant.

Long before these composite figures of the elephant, the earliest composite iconography of the elephant was the god Ganesh. The tradition of Ganesh can be traced back to the early centuries of the first millennium. One of the earliest sculptures of this god was found in the northern region of India. This sculpture was found in the Pushkarim well in the city of Mathura and can be dated to the period between the first and third centuries.<sup>6</sup> The mythology of Ganesh spread across various Asian cultures soon after it had been elaborated throughout the Gupta period in India.<sup>7</sup> Elephant treatises found in South and Southeast Asia often started with venerating Ganesh before delving into other topics.

### Navanārikuñjara

A popular motif of the composite elephant was found in a term called *navanārikuñjara*. The word itself indicates the composite nature of the concept. The elephant, *kuñjara*, is formed by nine women, *navanāri*. The historical columnist Shefali Vaidya has explained that the elephant composed of the nine-woman figures represents strength as well as control over sense organs.<sup>8</sup> The iconography has been favored in Indian art since the 16th century at its earliest. Said visual has been adapted to vernacular tastes such as in the Mughal Empire, Sri Lanka, and Thailand [Figs. 4-6].

The French traveler Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689), who visited Golconda in the middle of the 17th century, claimed in his written record that he had witnessed a royal procession wherein a motif of the *navanārikuñjara* was brought into a real performance by agile "public women." He wrote that "nine of them very cleverly represented the form of an elephant, four making the four feet, four others the body, and one the trunk, and the King, mounted above on a kind of throne, in that way made his entry into the town."<sup>9</sup>

In Europe, a *navanārikuñjara* motif can be found in the Dutch Republic through an art piece by the 17th-century Dutch painter Willem Schellinks (1627-1678). Despite the elephant representation, he had never traveled to Asia. His "visit" to Asia was mediated through his networks which



Fig. 1: Illustration of a story of an elephant and blind men in the late-16th-century Persian manuscript. Denman Waldo Ross Collection, Accession number: 09.324c © The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 2 (left): The 17th-century watercolor of the composite elephant found in Agra. Accession number: AKM143 © Aga Khan Museum, Toronto.

Fig. 3 (left): A figure of the composite elephant in a 19th-century Thai elephant treatise. Digitised Manuscript, Shelfmark Or 13652, fol. 3v © British Library Board.



Fig. 4 (right): A navanārikuñjara elephant in a 17th-century Mughal miniature. Accession number: 1985.247 © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

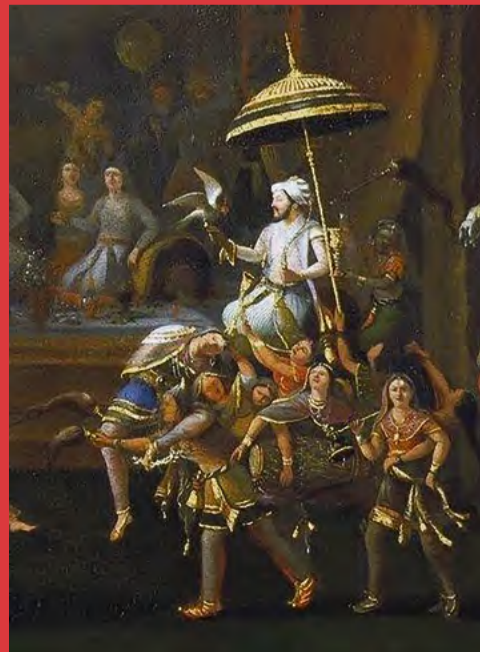


Fig. 5 (right): A navanārikuñjara elephant on a 19th-century wooden panel found in Sri Lanka. Anthropology, Object number: 219iii © Horniman Museum and Gardens, London.



Fig. 6 (left): A navanārikuñjara elephant in a 19th-century Thai elephant treatise. Digitised Manuscript, Shelfmark: Or 13652, fol. 18r © British Library Board.

Fig. 7 (right): A navanārikuñjara elephant ridden by a Mughal prince in the painting by Willem Schellinks. South & South East Asia Collection, Accession number: IS.30-1892 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



gave him opportunities to meet with contemporary European orientalists. Two of the paintings by Schellinks – one kept in Musée Guimet in Paris and the other in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London – portray the fantastical scene of the succession war between the four sons of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (1592-1666). Each prince is on his respective vehicle. One of these vehicles is a figure of the elephant composed in the navanārikuñjara style [Fig. 7].

### A fragile thread

By looking at the composite elephant, we can see the interconnectedness of a variety of elephant traditions in Asia. To recall the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam's need to write a connected history, the composite elephant can be one of the "fragile threads" that weaves together various polities in Asia, especially within the Indian Ocean world.<sup>11</sup> The composite elephant is one amongst many Asian elephant traditions that has commensurability within the region. Beyond Asia, as seen from the case of Willem Schellinks, this composite iconography may extend the connective thread into Europe, where there is an elephant tradition passed down from antiquity and Middle Ages that also associated the elephant with kingship and Christianity. The fragile thread of the composite elephant, thus, brings to light a historical continuum of the emblematic elephant across Eurasia.

#### Pichayapat Naisupap

is a PhD candidate in Colonial and Global History at the Institute for History, Leiden University. His project explores an entangled history of the Dutch Empire and Asian elephant traditions in the early modern period. Email: p.naisupap@hum.leidenuniv.nl

#### Notes

- 1 *The Elephant-Lore of the Hindus: The Elephant-Sport (Matanga-lila) of Nilakantha*, translated by Franklin Edgerton (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), 47.
- 2 Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe, Vol. II: A Century of Wonder, Book 1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 77.
- 3 This poem was translated freely but beautifully by Edward G. Browne in his *A Literary History of Persia, Volume II: From Firdawsi to Sa'di (1000-1290)* (Maryland: Iranbooks, 1997), 319-320.
- 4 Jos Gommans and Said Reza Huseini, "Neoplatonic Kingship in the Islamic World: Akbar's Millennial History," in *Sacred Kingship in World History*, edited by A. Azfar Moïn and Alan Strathern (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 192-222.
- 5 British Library, Digitised Manuscript, Or 13652, fol. 3v.
- 6 See the image of this sculpture at the shelfmark P-037260 in Photography (Kern Institute) of the Leiden University Library Digital Collections.
- 7 Raman Sukumar, "The Human-Elephant Relationship through the Ages: A Brief Macro-Scale History," in *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence: Rethinking Human-Elephant Relations in South Asia*, edited by Piers Locke and Jane Buckingham (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 36-37.
- 8 Shefali Vaidya, "A Unique Motif in Indian Art – Part 1: Nava Nari Kunjara," *Indica Today*, <https://www.indica.today/quick-reads/motif-in-indian-art-nava-nari-kunjara-i>.
- 9 Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India, Vol. 1*, translated by Valentine Ball (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), 158.
- 10 Jos Gommans and Jan de Hond, "The Unseen World of Willem Schellinks: Local Milieu and Global Circulation in the Visualization of Mughal India," in *A Companion to the Global Renaissance: Literature and Culture in the Era of Expansion, 1500-1700*, edited by Jyotsna G. Singh (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2021), 231-248.
- 11 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, 3 (1997): 761-762.