The elephant and slavery: thinking about slavery through the Animal in the Early Modern Dutch Empire

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5. The Elephant and Slavery: Thinking about Slavery through the Animal in the Early Modern Dutch Empire

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Abstract: This chapter examines the relation between the elephant and the idea of slavery in the Dutch Empire of the early modern period. The Dutch had access to elephants in Ceylon, where trading settlements of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) were located. This chapter shows how the discourse of slavery was expressed, negotiated, and criticised through the Dutch knowledge and management of elephants. Treatises on the elephant published in the Dutch Republic expressed conflicting ideas regarding enslavement when applying the discourse of slavery to the elephant. On the one hand, the elephant was indisposed to bondage and servitude. On the other hand, it was compliant and loyal to its master once tamed. This chapter will show that the elephant was part of a spectrum of thinking about slavery. On the one hand, the slave-elephant was both criticised and empathised with when considered as a rational and freedom-loving being very close to the human. On the other hand, the slave-elephant was cherished due to its strong compliance. It is within this paradox, so this chapter argues, that the early modern idea of slavery hinged upon the ambiguous, contingent line between the human and non-human animals, while also going hand in hand with the abstract qualities of rationality and liberty, which were not monopolised by the human being, but also shared by the elephant.

Keywords: Elephants; the Netherlands; VOC; slavery; rationality; liberty

Introduction

A 1680 portrait of Hillegonda Schellinger painted by her aunt, Gesina ter Borch, shows an imagined representation of a harbour in Curaçao in the

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background (fig. 5.1). Schellinger was born in Curaçao, which had been part of the Dutch Empire since 1634 and functioned as a slave depot for Spanish colonies until 1713, when the British came to dominate the Asiento de Negros.[1] The Dutch slave trade was centred in Curaçao before the preferred destination for slave ships switched to Suriname in the eighteenth century. In 1680, seventy-four percent of the Dutch West India Company's (WIC) slave ships arrived in Curaçao (Postma 1975, 242). Many enslaved people were indeed present in Curaçao and also feature in Schellinger's portrait along with ships, trees, hills, and buildings.

Strangely, behind enslaved men hauling a ship, we see two elephants. It is likely that Ter Borch incorporated the elephants to emphasise the exotic nature of the place, given that there are also several other strange animals in the painting. However, notably, there were no elephants in the West Indies at the time. Treatises on the elephant published in the Dutch Republic since 1650 confirm this fact. For example, in the Dutch edition of John Jonston's natural history work entitled *Beschrijving van de Natuur der Vier-Voetige* ('Description of the Nature of the Four-Footed Animals'), published in 1660, elephants were classified by their natural habitats, which are located only in Asia and Africa (Jonston 1660, 26–27). So, why are the two elephants present in Schellinger's portrait?

According to Benjamin Schmidt (2002, 347–69), the exotic world in the Dutch imagination was composed of a multitude of natural things regardless of their provenance. Whether the elephants and the enslaved were placed in close proximity to one another deliberately by Ter Borch or not, this feature can be figuratively read as a microcosm of the intersecting imagination between the elephant and slavery in the Dutch cultural sphere – a dynamic that is explored in this chapter.

Ter Borch produced the above watercolour in the Dutch Republic, but brought together two elements that existed in different settings of the Dutch Empire: enslaved men in Curaçao and elephants in Asia. In addition to Africa and the West Indies, slavery was also widely practiced across the Indian Ocean and the Dutch East India Company (VOC) was actively involved in slavery systems in Asia. Recent estimates suggest that during the early modern period, between 670,000 and 910,000 people from across the Indian Ocean were transported by the Dutch throughout their overseas empire and networks (Schrikker and Ekama 2017, 181). Various Dutch outposts were connected via this network of imperial migration that moved enslaved

1 The Asiento de Negros was a monopoly contract between the Spanish Empire and merchants in supplying African enslaved people only to the Spanish colonies in America.

Figure 5.1 The portrait of Hillegonda Louise Schellinger in an imagined Curaçao by Gesina ter Borch, featuring working enslaved people and two elephants in the background. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

peoples (as well as personnel, princes, convicts, soldiers, and sailors) within the circuits and nodes of the colonial companies, shipping fleets, settlements, and colonies (Ward 2009, 13). It is from the Dutch Empire's network, which facilitated the flow of enslaved peoples and elephants, that such representations are drawn together in Ter Borch's painting.

Although slavery was outlawed, in the Dutch Republic Black Africans remained a common presence accompanying Portuguese and Jewish

merchants who resided in and around Amsterdam. These Black Africans were most likely enslaved people in the guise of servants. Dienke Hondius (2008) suggests that Rembrandt van Rijn might have encountered or been in contact with them when he lived in Amsterdam in Jodenbreestraat, where Portuguese Jewish merchants owned houses. Hence, Rembrandt's painting *Two African Men* may have originated from his experiences at home, rather than from his time in Antwerp (Hondius 2008, 90–92). As argued by Peter Erickson (2009), the representation of the two Black men in this painting by Rembrandt was still far from recognition of the individuality of enslaved humans, as the two 'remain generic figures, caught in a vague border area between particularized individual and abstract exercise' (40–41).

In the case of the elephant, the Dutch established their settlements around the coast of Ceylon, where they had access to wild elephants. The Dutch captured elephants, both for trade and gift-giving diplomacy. Other than gifting elephants to Asian rulers, there were also several cases in the early modern period in which the VOC shipped Ceylonese elephants to the Dutch Republic as gifts for Dutch stadtholders (*de facto* heads of state). One such gift-elephant became well-known throughout Europe and was also portrayed by Rembrandt in his sketches and etchings. This elephant later became known as Hansken (Abbing 2021). Yet, like Rembrandt's painting of the two African men, Hansken was also portrayed by Rembrandt as a generic figure deprived of any significant context. There was, however, one exception, in which Hansken was placed in a Christian mythological scene, as seen in Rembrand's 1638 etching *Adam and Eve*. This can show that the elephant Hansken was an ambivalent figure standing between one notion that recognised the elephant's symbolic significance in the European context and another that deprived the animal of such significance.

This chapter examines how the discourse of slavery was expressed, negotiated, and criticised when thinking about, or imagining, the elephant. The idea of slavery has been historically studied for the most part by considering enslaved humans as a specific category. For example, all of the articles in the first part of Schrikker and Wickramasinghe's (2020, 43–146) multi-author volume *Being a Slave* explore the human aspects of slavery and subjugation as experienced by enslaved peoples from across the Indian Ocean. However, we could question if the enslaved, especially during the early modern period, were even deemed to be full human beings.

Indeed, at that time, the boundary between the human and the animal was both ambiguous and contingent. Even though from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, Cartesian philosophy had tried to establish a clear line between the human and the animal (Harrison 1998, 481–82), naturalists in

the eighteenth century saw the human as part of the animal world (Pasteur 1793, 24; Raff 1781, 3–5). However, by blurring the dividing line between the human and non-human animals, the discriminating distinction between the enslaved and their white (and hence more human) masters remained. As shown in *Becoming Human* by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020), Black people have been seen as beings with abject animality, whereas white people have been deemed as rational, civilised beings – that is to say, as complete human beings. As we will see in the pages that follow, the elephant complicated this matter because, whilst the elephant was seen as fundamentally subject to human control, it was also believed to possess 'civilised' qualities, which elevated it above other animals and brought it closer to the human in the great chain of beings (Harrison 1998, 472–75).

Attitudes that saw enslaved human and non-human animals as close to one another existed in the context of the Dutch Empire. These views can be seen both in the Dutch Republic and elsewhere in its empire and networks. For example, in an antislavery book entitled *Swart Register van Duysent Sonden* ('Black Register of a Thousand Sins') by Jacobus Hondius, which was first published in 1679 (Kennedy 2017, 212), sin number 810 is: 'sinful people […] buy slaves to sell them again and trade with wretched people as with other sellable goods and as if they were only animals' (Hondius 1724, 363–64).[2] Even though Hondius's book opposed such treatment, by reading this book differently we can deduce that enslaved people and non-human animals were not treated that differently. Hondius (1724) also pointed out that such treatment was not practiced only by 'Jews, Turks, […] but also by Christians such as Spanish, Portuguese, and others, yes also by the Dutch' (364).[3] In Asia, such attitudes were visible in the *Thesawalamai* or customary law of Jaffna in the northern part of Ceylon. This law was drawn up in 1707 by Isaac Isaaksz, a Dutch administrative head of a province – known as *dessave* – of Dutch Ceylon, in consultation with twelve local elites. Enslaved people and the slave trade were present throughout the code. On an aspect of usufruct, enslaved persons were to be handled in the same way as cows and sheep, because the enslaved 'formed transferable property and could be bought and sold, inherited and manumitted at the will of the owner' (Schrikker and Ekama 2017, 189). Thus, enslaved people and non-human

2 'Sondigen sodanige menschen … nochtans slaven koopen om die weder te verkoopen, ende met die ellendighe menschen haten koophandel te drijven, gelyk met andere waren en goederen ende als of het maer beesten waren.'

3 '… soosanige slaven-handel al gedreven wordt niet alleen van Joden, Turcken, en Heydenen, maar oock van genaemde Christenen als van Spanjaerden, Portugijsen, en andere; jae oock van de Hollanders.'

animals were not so different from each other, either in legal categories or cultural imaginations.

The following sections will be threefold. The first part discusses the tripartite division into the non-human animal, human, and enslaved, and how they were historically related to, and overlapped with, one another. It also briefly demonstrates how the case of the elephant can be used to nuance this division. The second part will show how elephants were brought into submission by the VOC and how the discourse of slavery was articulated when elephants were chained in bondage. Further, the second section will also discuss how the act of enslaving elephants, seen as rational and freedom-loving beings, was criticised whilst empathy was also expressed towards them. In the final part I will discuss how elephants, as intractable animals, in effect negotiated and resisted their servitude and how they taught humans a lesson on slavery. By structuring my analysis in this way, the latter two parts echo the work of the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc (also known as Comte de Buffon), who wrote about the elephant in his *Natural History*. Buffon's work on the elephant was translated into Dutch and published in the Dutch Republic in 1779. Buffon understood the elephant from two perspectives: first, as 'independent and free' (*onafhankelijk en vrij*); and second, as being in a 'state of slavery or domestic submission in which the elephant master's will is partly the motive of the elephant'[4] (Buffon 1779, 14).[5]

The Non-Human Animal, Human, and Slavery

Non-human animals have been studied by several scholars as symbols of slavery. Jason Hribal (2003) proposes that throughout history, non-human animals have played significant roles in the development of both the agricultural and industrial revolutions, to the extent that 'animals are part of the working class' (435–53). Although Hribal mainly emphasises aspects of the labour and commodification of non-human animals, his writing frequently states that non-human animals were 'treated as chattel slaves to be bought and sold at will' (436), thus sharing similar circumstances as

4 'in zen staat van slaverny of huisselyke onderwerping waar in zyns meesters wil gedeeltelyk het beweegrad van den zynen is.'

5 This chapter occasionally consults the Dutch edition of Buffon's work with an English version when translating texts from Dutch into English (see the English edition of Buffon's natural history in Buffon 1775).

enslaved humans. In America, the commercial livestock industry thrived along with the plantation system that depended for its existence on slave labour. Also, during the eighteenth century, with the invention of the animal-powered cotton gin that separated cotton fibres from the seeds, horses and oxen were employed by humans to produce an enormous amount of cotton. The mass production powered by these non-human animals laid the foundation for cotton plantations and the cotton economy, which would go on to serve and strengthen the slavery system in America for years to come (Hribal 2003).

Non-human animals were also kept by humans, especially men, to exercise their mastery and at the same time to strengthen their positions in the master-enslaved relationship. For example, Sarah Hand Meacham (2011) has studied the culture of pet keeping in the town of Chesapeake, Virginia, during the late eighteenth century. Her work reveals that Chesapeake elites, who were usually plantation owners, kept pets 'in part because doing so gave them validation of their right to have slaves' (524). These pets included dogs, birds, cats, and squirrels that were restrained and confined by collars and cages, thus enforcing their submission. Other than being symbols of wealth and refinement, devices such as collars and birdcages indicated men's mastery over the animals they subjugated. Meacham also shows that the keeping of pets served the additional purpose of training the children of the plantation owners to become more accustomed to the role and practice of planter they would one day undertake (Meacham 2011).

Yet, by only drawing attention to the symbolic relation between slavery and non-human animals, research of this kind does not touch upon the aspect of the blurred line that exists between human and non-human animals – something that is important, if we are to understand the historical process of enslaving humans and non-human animals alike. Works on the orangutan, however, come somewhat closer.

The orangutan has been a creature that disrupted the exceptionalism of the human. The great ape has been portrayed in travel writing, literature, paintings, exhibitions, and performances as capable of doing what humans can do (Cribb, Gilbert, and Tiffin 2014). Silvia Sebastiani (2021) argues that 'the animalization of the African [enslaved] was construed through the humanization of the primate' (68). In other words, whilst the orangutan was considered to possess an anatomy and feelings comparable to that of humans and was thus used to reflect human nature, Black Africans were depicted as bestial, ape-like beings (Sebastiani 2021). Sebastiani's work is a relevant study of how early modern dehumanisation was closely related to the unclear boundary between the human and non-human animals.

However, instead of see-sawing between humanisation and dehumanisation with the dichotomy between the non-human animal and the human (the former humanised and the latter animalised, or vice versa), this chapter will show that the humanisation/emancipation and dehumanisation/enslavement of the elephant occurred simultaneously. As the human represents the highest form of all animals at one end of the spectrum, the elephant could move backwards or forwards on the spectrum towards or away from the human. Humanisation then does not mean separating humanised non-humans or objects from animals, but rather, moving them closer to the human. Moreover, unlike the orangutan, delegitimisation of enslavement of the elephant did not concern anatomy and physical acts resembling those of the human, but rather rationality and indisposition to bondage and servitude – that is to say, freedom.

Rationality was thought to reside in the elephant's mind. One of the earliest Dutch treatises about the elephant was written by the Flemish scholar Justus Lipsius. In his work *Historie vanden Elephant* ('History of the Elephant'), published in Dutch in 1621, the elephant is portrayed as capable of understanding human languages, having an excellent memory, feeling love, being compassionate, having dignity, and being prudent and pious. Lipsius (1621) concludes his elephant treatise by stating: 'I have made the elephants into human beings gifted with speech, rationality, affection, and virtue. Farewell'[6] (12). At the same time as humanising the elephant, Lipsius (1621, 2–4) also stresses the remarkable loyalty of the elephant when tamed, which confined the elephant to the realm of non-humans. In the eighteenth century, Buffon also considered the elephant as physically competent and mentally rational as the human. Citing the French missionary Philip of the Blessed Trinity, who had travelled to Persia and Goa in the seventeenth century, Buffon (1779) wrote that elephants 'come close to humans in judgement and rationality'[7] (49). In another excerpt, Buffon quotes the English traveller Edward Terry, who had travelled to the Indies during the early seventeenth century and had written that elephants did many things that resembled human reasoning beyond pure natural intuition (Buffon 1779, 50–51).

The elephant can be used as a comparison for issues involving Black people, who were seen through the concept of the polygenic origin of humans as beings closer to the ape (Robertson 2015, 62–63). The elephant's

6 'ick hebbe de elephantine tot menschen ghemaeckt, begaeft sijnde met sprake, met redelickheyt, gheneghentheyde ende deuchden. Vaertwel.'

7 'De olyfanten, zegt de Vader Philippe, Koomen in oordeel en redeneering naby de menschen.'

rationality was deemed to be higher than that of the ape because the ape's reasoning was based more on mimicry, whilst the elephant was considered to possess intrinsic reason (Hesse 1694, 214). This resembles Enlightenment comparisons of the speech capability of Black people to the way in which parrots speak by mimicking (Jackson 2020, 24). The elephant was, moreover, portrayed through Christian eyes as a virtuous animal with a sexual modesty employed to teach 'married folk not to be given too much to carnal and sensual pleasures' (Lifschitz 2019, 749; Schultz 2019, 178–80). Conversely, Black men were stigmatised as 'a bestial sexual threat […] unrestricted by morality or prohibition' (Jackson 2020, 13).

The elephant's fondness for liberty can also be seen as emblematic of the Germanic ideal of freedom, which had detested slavery long before it was introduced under the Roman custom by a Frankish king. The Germanic freedom had been promoted since the beginning of the establishment of the Dutch Republic. Dutch legal scholars in the seventeenth century also attempted to ally the idea of Germanic freedom with the idea of slavery (see van Nifterik 2021, 164, 184–86). More evident than looking at the human who claims to be above nature, the elephant from *nature*, with its strong fondness for freedom, can be deemed as a creature with '*natural*' rights, of which liberty is part. Dutch political debates on slavery during the early modern period also primarily addressed a secularised version of the idea of natural rights. Although freedom is inborn and inalienable, one had to prove oneself capable and worthy of freedom (Sierhuis 2022, 69). As we will see, the elephant, with its significant level of rationality, shows a disposition towards liberty in many instances, ranging from the moment of capture to the process of taming. Thus, the elephant as a rational, freedom-loving being was surely capable and worthy of liberty. By examining the case of the elephant, this chapter suggests that the (de)legitimisation of slavery, which was connected with processes of (de)humanisation, concerned less the outward characteristics of the beings than their abstract, inner qualities, such as virtuous rationality and a fondness for liberty – qualities that were thus far considered uniquely human, but that were now shared by the elephant.

Chaining Elephants

Procuring elephants from the wild demanded substantial human effort. Whilst the VOC and private traders obtained enslaved people from the west coast of Africa for the Atlantic slave trade and from various polities

throughout the Indian Ocean, ranging from Mozambique to South India and from Bengal and Arakan to the Indonesian archipelago for the intra-Asian slave trade (Emmer 1972; van Rossum 2020; Vink 2003), the VOC obtained elephants via elephant hunts in Ceylon; elephants given as tribute from the Vanniyars who lived in Jaffna under Dutch rule; and diplomatic gifts from Asian rulers, such as the kings of Kandy and Siam. Once in the hands of the VOC, the elephants were used by the Dutch for the intra-Asian elephant trade and for diplomatic gift-giving to rulers across Eurasia. In the same way humans did not naturally become enslaved to other humans, elephants likewise did not naturally become VOC property. The VOC's enslavement of elephants instead called for processes of hunting and taming and, similarly, the discourse of slavery was articulated and negotiated during and after those same processes.

There were several ways of capturing wild elephants in Ceylon. In his 1713 account, the Dutch commander of Galle, Cornelis Taay van Wezel, mentions two methods in the area ruled by the Kandyan king of Ceylon. The first way was to use a noose. Elephant hunters went into the forest and hid behind large trees. When a wild elephant appeared, hunters put a noose round one of its hind legs. The elephant was then tied to a tree until exhausted. Once calm, the elephant was taken to a stall by two tamed elephants and thus began the taming process. The other way was to dig pits that were covered with thin branches, leaves, and soil for camouflage. Unaware of the pit, the elephant walked on and hence fell into the trap. The elephant would be left in the pit for several days until showing signs of submission through hunger and thirst. Then the elephant was pulled out of the pit and again brought to a stall (van Wezel 1713, 188–89). As the pit method often proved fatal, it was forbidden by the VOC during the early eighteenth century (van der Baan 2017, 36). However, the VOC used neither method since these yielded only a small number of elephants per hunt, which did not meet the demand of the large trading company. A more systematic, albeit labour-intensive, way utilised by the Dutch to capture wild elephants in a great number was the kraal.

The kraal method as used in Ceylon was described meticulously by many Dutch literates in both published and unpublished works. The VOC probably started using kraals for capturing wild elephants in the south of Ceylon during the 1640s and in the west after the capture of Colombo in 1656 (Raben 2004, 267). In his children's book of natural history, the Dutch politician Jan D. Pasteur visualises the kraal method employed by the VOC by using three Roman letters. The letter *V* in a horizontal form was thought by Pasteur to be a good representation of the overall palisades of the kraal. Inside the kraal there was a section into which hunters drove elephants with fine

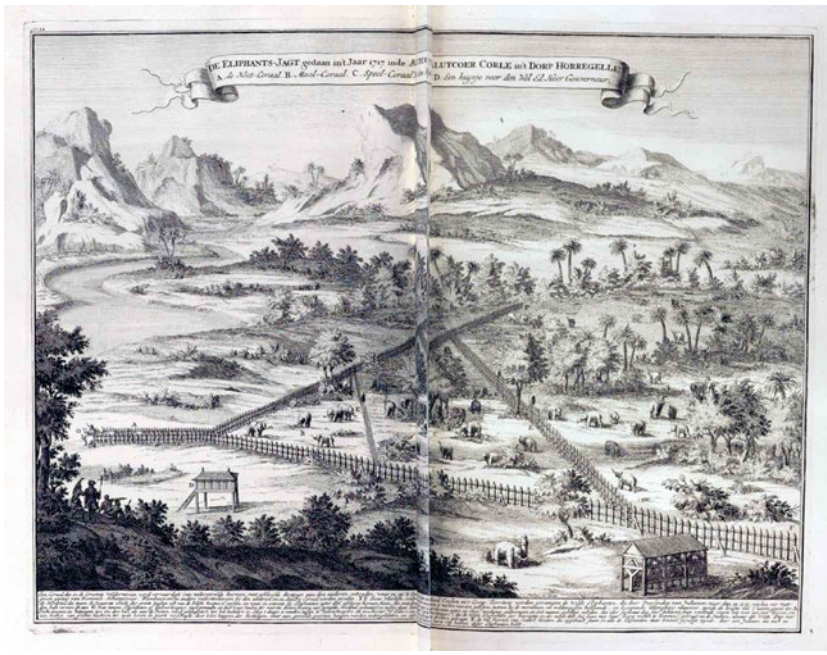

Figure 5.2 The etching of the elephant kraal in the Alutkur *korle* in 1717 from François Valentijn's work on Asia. Source: François Valentijn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, Vyfde Deel.

physical characteristics. This inner section combined with the kraal more or less resembles a horizontal *A*. At the end of the kraal, there was a narrow space or a funnel for captured elephants to exit the enclosure. This funnel attached to the kraal was similar to a horizontal *Y* (Pasteur 1793, 182–83). Pasteur's visualisation of the elephant kraal is an imaginative way to see the structural form of the overall enclosure in one's mind's eye. François Valentijn – who lived in Asia for more than a decade in the service of the VOC and who wrote extensively about Asia in eight volumes published between 1724 and 1726 (Gaastra 2003, 106) – in his fifth volume includes an illustrative etching of an elephant kraal in the Alutkur *korle* (subdivision of a province) near Negombo in 1717 (Valentijn 1726). The kraal in Valentijn's work fits perfectly with Pasteur's Roman-lettered kraal (see fig. 5.2). The German traveller Elias Hesse, who was also in the service of the VOC, wrote about the kraal method in the section 'how the elephants in Ceylon were tamed and caught by *Hollanders*'[8] (Hesse 1694, 212). He wrote that this method called for a great number of people, who had to be equipped with snares, axes, shovels, spades, and other tools. Once the kraal had been set

8 'Hoe d'elephanten in Ceylon van de Hollanders gevangen en tam gemaeckt warden.'

up, hunters went into the forest and screamed out loud whilst hitting drums and cymbals to frighten a herd of wild elephants, driving them into the kraal.

Another description of the kraal method comes from the Dutch minister Jan Brandes, who travelled to Asia during the late eighteenth century. In Brandes's unpublished sketchbooks, the kraal method as used in Ceylon was diligently illustrated. Brandes attended an elephant hunt in December 1785 – an account that is also set in the Alutkur *korle* (Raben 2004, 270). According to Brandes, the kraal was compartmentalised into four sections: the *losse kraal* (loose kraal); the *speelkraal* (playing kraal); the *maalkraal* (chewing kraal); and the *noodkraal* (forced kraal). These four sections were also portrayed in the kraal shown in Valentijn's etching. More importantly, Brandes's drawings show vivid pictures of the process in each section of the kraal. The hunt officially started when a Dutch *dessave* had given the order. People formed a large circle a few dozen kilometres in diameter around a herd of wild elephants. The circle slowly contracted, pushing the elephants towards the open end of the kraal. During this contraction, hunters were shouting, beating drums, firing guns, and lighting torches. As soon as the wild elephants passed the first line into the *losse kraal*, a row of posts was set upright immediately to shut the open enclosure and horizontal beams were attached to them. Once in the enclosed kraal, elephants were driven into the other compartments: the *speelkraal* and the *maalkraal*, respectively. In the *maalkraal*, elephants were provided with banana trees. After these two kraals, elephants entered one by one into the *noodkraal* (or *hira gala* in the Sinhalese language, which means a prison kraal). The *noodkraal* was the narrowest section of the overall kraal, to the extent that the elephants could not move, neither to the left nor to the right. Nor could they move forwards or backwards, because in this section they were separated by four transverse beams (Raben 2004, 269–81).

Immediately after an elephant emerged from the *noodkraal*, the process of taming began. The elephant was tied by nooses at the legs and bound by strong ropes at the neck. These ropes were in turn attached to rope harnesses of two tame elephants that stood waiting at the gate. Several procedures had to be done once a wild elephant was out of the kraal. An elephant was measured, 'baptised' with water, and given a personal name whilst being flanked on both sides by two tame elephants. Tame elephants could discipline a wild elephant by beating it with their trunks or offering it food. In Dutch these tame elephants were known as *zielverkopers*,[9] or soul

9 The term *zielverkoper* arguably originated from the situation when *volkhouders* (dealers in personnel) supplied the VOC with sailors in return for a *ceel* (a written authority signed by

sellers (Raben 2004, 281–91). This word had been used previously to denote a recruiter of sailors for the VOC and WIC. These sailors were usually men who had come to Holland and Zeeland in search of financial opportunity, but ended up being indebted to men and women who offered them provisions and lodging. Often these debtors were 'sold' to the VOC and WIC by the creditors who were now called *zielverkopers*, and the first wages of these new VOC and WIC employees were transferred to the creditors in reimbursement (Ekama 2018, 144). For the elephant, according to this nomenclature, this initial process of taming can be interpreted as its soul being 'sold' into a new state of submission. This interpretation was also articulated by Pasteur (1793) in his children's edition of a book on natural history. He wrote: 'there stand two tame elephants, one on each side, that were called *zielverkoopers* in Ceylon because they give away and sell their own kind into slavery'[10] (Pasteur 1793, 184). Before this process, when an elephant was still in the kraal and slowly moved towards the other end of the kraal, the elephant might already have felt that it was about to lose its liberty. However, in the kraal, especially in the *noodkraal*, an elephant's soul might have been already moulded to fit the objective of the VOC, its body steadily cramped into the narrow passage of the *noodkraal* (for a similar analysis, see Saha 2018, 159–77).

The post-kraal taming process involved the animal being locked up and adhering to a fixed schedule. *Zielverkopers* took a wild elephant to its stable, where it would spend several weeks. The still-wild elephant was again tied between two trees, this time to a scaffold of four vertical and several horizontal beams (fig. 5.3). One horizontal beam was placed under the chin to discipline the elephant to keep its head upright. A wild elephant was fed at the stable and taken by *zielverkopers* to a watering place to alleviate its thirst and the heat, and for bathing (Raben 2004, 291–92). Once tractable, an elephant became a fully enslaved commodity under the authority of the VOC.

In Batavia, elephants and enslaved humans had a close connection. Although there were no wild elephants on the island of Java, tame elephants were occasionally shipped as diplomatic gifts from Southeast Asian polities and Kandy for VOC governor-generals. These elephants were probably kept at a stable near Batavia Castle. We know from VOC records that these

sailors to transfer part of their salaries received from the VOC to a holder), which *volkhouders* would sell on to entrepreneurs. For this reason, *volkhouders* were also called *ceelverkopers* (*ceel* sellers), a later corruption of which became *zielverkopers* (Nadri 2015, 339).

10 'daar staan twee tamme olifanten, een aan wederzijde, die op Ceylon Zielverkoopers genoemd worden, omdat zij die van hunne eigen soort verraden en verkoopen om hen in slavernij te brengen.'

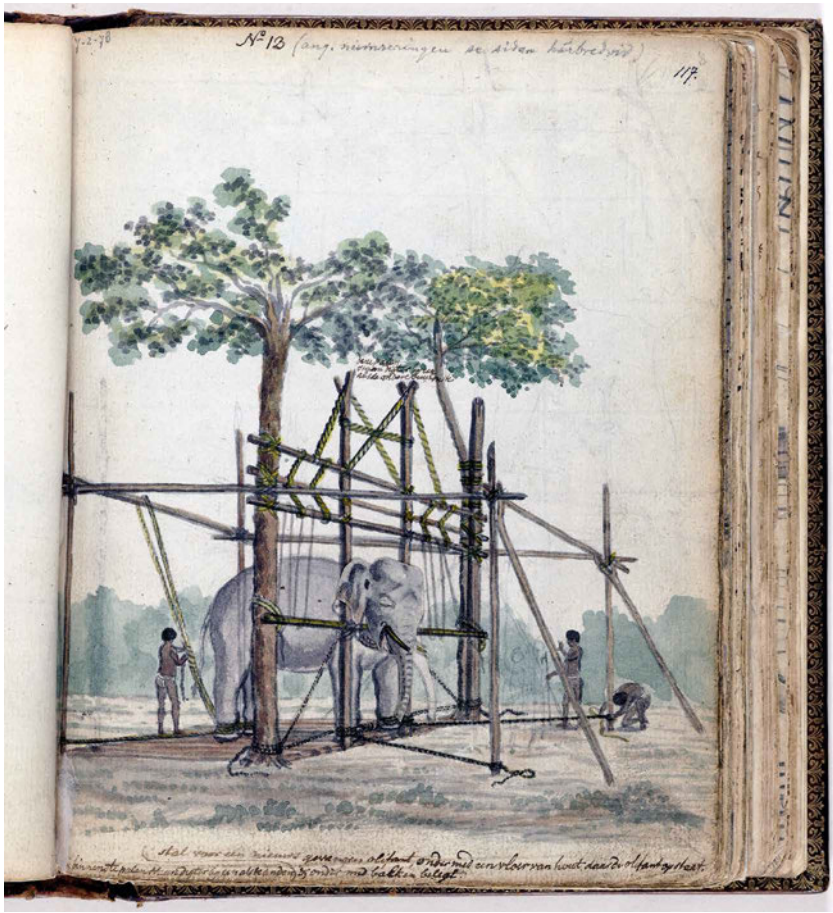

Figure 5.3 Jan Brandes's drawing, showing how a wild elephant was locked up in a stable after emerging from a kraal. Source: Album van Jan Brandes, Deel 2. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

animals were cared for by enslaved humans. They had the duty to clean the elephants and provide food for them. Besides, enslaved people in Batavia were responsible for repairing the stables if damaged (*Generale Missiven* 1610–1638, 43).

François Valentijn and Jan Brandes, who depicted the process of enslaving elephants we have seen so far, also had direct experience with enslaved humans. A minister in Amboina in the late seventeenth century, Valentijn was also a slave owner by his marriage to a wealthy widow, owning thirty enslaved humans. He complained about 'evil slaves' who were drunk, smoked, and stole. The corporal punishment for such enslaved persons was not administered by Valentijn himself, and he ordered employees under the VOC public prosecutor called *kaffirs* to do this instead (Knaap 2022, 510). Brandes,

who was also a minister stationed in Batavia, similarly owned enslaved humans. He used to punish his 'evil slaves' by beating, but came to realise that such harsh treatment did not stop them from running away, nor did it make them work any harder. Instead, Brandes rewarded his well-behaved enslaved persons by giving them a small amount of money and allowing them to go into the city to use the money and have fun (Djajasoebrata, Veenendaal, and de Bruijn 2004, 159–62). Brandes also made several portraits of enslaved people in silhouette, although the enslaved in his portraits remain anonymous, like the Black Africans in Rembrandt's painting from the previous century (Djajasoebrata and de Bruijn 2004, 163). Perhaps for Valentijn and Brandes, a very tractable enslaved elephant might be seen as a perfect example of a 'virtuous slave.' However, the harsh treatments such as starving and beating by *zielverkoper*-elephants and *mahouts* or elephant keepers during the processes of kraaling and taming might be deemed by some as an efficient means of transforming a chained elephant into a good enslaved non-human.

However, the servitude of the elephant also caused controversy. It was criticised in the Dutch edition of Buffon's natural history, which stated that subdued elephants had several disadvantages compared to free counterparts. First, domesticity reduced the elephants' size. Those taken into the state of slavery when still young would never grow to full size. Servitude reduced not only their height, but also every other proportion (Buffon 1779, 43). Captive elephants displayed stunted growth in comparison to their wild counterparts, especially African elephants, whose young that were brought to Europe always stayed below the growth standard (Buffon 1779, 29, 43). Second, their longevity was reduced when living in captivity. Buffon wrongly believed that the lifespan of captured elephants was only one hundred and twenty to one hundred and thirty years, whereas free elephants could at least live up to two hundred years.[11] Elephants that were shipped to the Dutch Republic by the VOC did not live long either. Hansken, the gift-elephant for the Dutch Stadtholder Frederik Hendrik, lived no more than twenty-five years and died in 1655 in Florence after a tour of Europe (Abbing 2021). Another young elephant arriving in William V's menagerie at Het Kleine Loo near The Hague in 1773 died only a year later. This young elephant was dissected by the Dutch physician Petrus Camper (Pieters 2001, 61). Third, as it was believed that elephants were virtuous animals, elephants did not copulate in the state of domesticity because in such conditions, elephants

11 This early estimation of the elephant's lifespan is wrong compared to modern zoological knowledge, which places the average lifespan of an elephant at approximately sixty-five years.

were rarely left alone and they would not mate before the eyes of others (Buffon 1779, 40). Regarding the third reason, Buffon (1779) stated that 'the source of subsequent generations [of elephants] uselessly dries up'[12] (28). These various strands of criticism of the enslaved elephant reflected comments on human slavery in the Dutch Republic during the late eighteenth century. Driven by a discourse of the decline of the Dutch Republic and its colonial possessions in terms of economics and society, Dutch defenders of slavery were concerned with the high mortality and low fertility rates of enslaved people. To be able to supply enslaved humans to fuel the overseas and home economies at times when the acquisition of new enslaved people was limited, the defenders of slavery supported a humanitarian argument that the cruel treatment of enslaved humans should be stopped in order to make them healthy, long-lived, and hence more likely to procreate (Sens 1995, 95).

The criticism regarding the slavery of elephant also conjured sympathy and empathy. Once elephants were domesticated into a submissive state, they were taken away from their home in the wilderness. Under the VOC, such tamed elephants were mostly deported, either for trading or gift-giving, to other places across Eurasia: some to Europe; some to Persia; some to India; some to Batavia; and some even to Japan. These animals had to endure hardships at sea, new environments in destination countries, and different treatments according to new natural and cultural conditions. All such sufferings considered, exported elephants might have felt a profound longing for home. Buffon hinted at this feeling of distress when he discussed the matter of climate for elephants. He stated that the climate is one of the factors that explained why elephants are in Asia and Africa, but not in Europe. Elephants prefer to live their lives in these two regions because they 'are loyal to their fatherland and steadfastly attached to their climate'[13] (Buffon 1779, 24). Whilst Buffon's language when describing the homesickness of the elephants is fairly empirical, the feeling of yearning for home in those beasts was beautifully recounted earlier in the previous century by the Dutch VOC official Pieter Nuyts, who wrote a treatise on the elephant.

Nuyts's *Lof des Elephants* ('Praise of the Elephants') (1670) is a work about the elephant and its associated emblematic meanings. The work is less an empirical study of the elephant and its physical features than a book of emblems showing with whom and with what the elephant was associated under a system of correspondences in which all things in nature were related

12 'de oorsprong van volgende geslagten nutteloos verdroogt.'

13 'zijn getrouw aan hun vaderland en standvastig aan hun klimaat verknogt.'

to one another and bore symbolic meanings (see Ashworth 1990). Nuyts travelled to Batavia from the Dutch Republic in 1627, whereupon he was appointed governor of the VOC settlement on Formosa Island (Taiwan). During his tenure as governor, he clashed with the Japanese authorities, who also claimed power over the island. He was later ordered for the second time to sail to Japan as an emissary, but upon arrival in Japan, he was placed under house arrest in Hirado. He spent his time under house arrest drafting his work on the elephant. He was released in 1636 and sailed to Batavia, and from there he returned to his fatherland. His work on the emblematic elephant was published posthumously by his son in Delft in 1670 (Blussé 2003, 95–110). In one of the chapters, Nuyts wrote about the good memory of the elephant. When caught and taken far away from its home, a migrant elephant still 'has continual memory of [its] fatherland and birthplace,' in which 'the deprivation often and for a long time is shown not only with sorrow but also with shedding of too many tears' (Nuyts 1670, 80–81).[14] Nuyts empathised with the captured elephant from his overseas experiences in Asia. He wrote this treatise when he had been away from home for six years, was under house arrest in Japan, and was aware of the death of his other son in Batavia (Blussé 2003, 110). Although these experiences were very upsetting for Nuyts, he did manage to travel back home eventually, whereas the enslaved and deported elephants never had the chance to do so.

Elephants Break Free

As stated in the Dutch edition of Pliny the Elder's natural history published in 1703, 'captured elephants bewail all night at their bondage or servitude not only with their usual voice but with plaintive sigh and groan'[15] (Pliny 1703, 108). During the early modern period, Pliny's text served as a source for various Dutch authors when writing about nature. At the beginning of his account on the elephant, Taay van Wezel referred to *Plinius* as his point of departure, albeit stating that Pliny 'had made some mistakes' (Wezel 1713, 176). Despite his mistakes, many European intellectuals agreed with Pliny that the elephant was not fond of being chained.

14 'Den eliphant … heeft gestadigh sulcken geheugenisse tot sijn vader-lant ende geboort-plaats, dat de ontberinge des selfs, menigmaal ende langen tijd, niet alleen met droefheyt, maar met stortinge van overvloedige tranen te kennen geeft.'

15 'De gevangen olyphanten beweenen des nachts hare knechtschap, ofte dienstbaerheyt, niet alleen met hare gewoonlijcke stemme, maar met een seer klagelijk gezucht ende gekerm.'

Imperial narratives of subjugation, domestication, and colonisation were frequently disrupted by non-human animals (Burton and Mawani 2020, 1–16). In the case of elephants, these animals, as charismatic megafauna, clearly possess agential power (Saha 2017, 169–89). In Dutch Ceylon, where the Dutch exerted colonial control over various groups of people, lands, and natural environments, elephants also played a role in disrupting imperial power. As recorded by the Dutch commander of Jaffna, Hendrick Zwaardecroon, elephants rampaged through agricultural lands and harmed people's lives. Some places in Ceylon had to be garrisoned by *toepasses* (Christian natives) under the command of Dutch sergeants in order to protect both land and people from the incursions of wild elephants (Zwaardecroon 1911, 85). Indeed, some wild elephants were called 'thief elephants' by local people because they roamed around and devoured crops. This habit caused them to come into conflict with humans, and this human-elephant conflict made these animals accustomed to attacks from people and thus fearless of fire or guns (D'Oyly 1938, 248). In his travel writing, published in Amsterdam in 1672, the Dutch minister Philippus Baldaeus advised people not to travel on the island unless they were accompanied by soldiers (*lascorijn*) 'with their Drums and Kettles [kettledrums], the noise whereof frightens these Creatures' (Baldaeus 1703, 825). He further cautioned against travelling during the evening because elephants were 'most dangerous towards evening when they are hungry' (Baldaeus 1703, 825). Palanquin bearers, who carried *sedans* or litters for local elites and Europeans, 'often run away at the sight of an Elephant, leaving those they carry to shift for themselves' (Baldaeus 1703, 825). The same narrative was also found in François Valentijn's work (van der Baan 2017, 34). During the hunt, a 'thief elephant,' usually a loner, was the most difficult to control and capture, and was liable to break the line of a kraal (D'Oyly 1938, 247–48). After the hunt, Baldaeus also stated that elephants were 'very hard to be tam'd, and require sometimes four whole months before they can be brought to lie down' (Baldaeus 1703, 825). On the one hand, the Dutch tried to enslave wild elephants through their hunting and taming processes. On the other hand, elephants showed their agency to counter their enslavement. Control always comes with negotiation and resistance, whether from humans or non-human animals.

The intelligence and dexterity of the elephants were often praised by naturalists as a way not only to resist and negotiate their captivity and exploitation, but also to demonstrate their yearning for liberty. The story of an elephant at a menagerie in Versailles breaking free from its chains was recounted in Pasteur's children's version of natural history (1793). This elephant untied a double leather leash that chained its leg. By using its

trunk, the elephant lifted the tongue of the buckle and took the leash out of it. When the elephant was tied tighter by the leash, which had a rope twisted around with many knots, it 'untied all of these knots without breaking anything' (Pasteur 1793, 194).[16] Also at Versailles, a painter wanted to create a drawing by observing a live elephant. When the painter wanted to capture the elephant in an extraordinary posture, the painter's servant threw some fruits at the elephant so that the elephant would raise its trunk and mouth to receive the fruits. In many instances, the servant just pretended to throw without any fruit in his hand. When the elephant realised that it was being deceived, it splashed water at the paper to spoil the drawing. The elephant 'did not take revenge on the servant but the master,' because the elephant knew that 'the drawing of the painter was the reason for this scourge' (Pasteur 1793, 193–94).[17] In this incident, we see that the elephant understood the submissive condition of the painter's servant – a condition that the elephant also shared with the servant, as they shared the same circumstance that made both obliged to follow the master's commands. Similar narratives are also found in Buffon's natural history (1779, 48). Indeed, it is quite possible that Pasteur borrowed these two incidents from Buffon's work, which had been published in Dutch two decades earlier.

Elephants as a species were never entirely subject to the state of slavery. This refusal to submit absolutely was well-acknowledged by Buffon and Pasteur. As elephants were not born into slavery, the fact that some of them became subjugated was not applicable to all members in the elephant family. An 'individual alone is a slave, the species remains independent and refuses steadfastly not to procreate for the advantage of their tyrant' (Buffon 1779, 17).[18] The tyrant here can be taken to mean an elephant master, a ruler, a king, or even a trading company exploiting elephants to their own benefit. Because of this insistence on freedom, elephants were 'above all the common nature of the beasts' (Buffon 1779, 17).[19] Pasteur (1793) summarised the elephant's inclination towards liberty by comparing it to other beasts:

> See a circumstance there again where the elephant differs from the other animals. The camel, the horse, the donkey, the cow, the sheep, the goat, the cat, [and] the dog propagate their species in slavery and are then

16 'ontknoopte hij alle die knoopen zonder iets te breken.'

17 '… hadden hij gemerkt dat het tekenen van den schilder de oorzaak van dit plaagen was, wreekte hij zig niet op den knegt, maar op den meester.'

18 'Hier is de individu alleen slaaf, de soort blyft onafhangelyk, en weigert standvastig ten voordeele van haaren tyran voort te teelen.'

19 '… boven de gemeene natuur der beesten te kennen.'

> entirely submissive to man. On the contrary, while the elephant can be brought into slavery, no offspring [of the elephant] bear the state of slavery. This is also the reason why the species of the elephants does not degenerate or alter.[20] (185)

This notion can be read against the tradition of hereditary slavery, in which one was automatically born into slavery. This practice can be found across the globe from America to Africa and Asia. Hereditary slavery followed a principle called *vrucht volgt buik* in Dutch, literally translated as 'fruit follows womb,' according to the Dutch version of Roman law (Vink 2003, 154). A loophole in which a child born to a free woman and an enslaved man was born free caused the VOC in 1732 to reissue a 1704 ordinance against that type of concubinage, declaring that a child from this kind of relationship maintained slave status (Ekama 2020, 110).

Pasteur (1793) might have intended to pass this statement on to his readers, whom he addressed in his preface as 'young readers' (*jonge lezers*). The purpose of this natural history was to encourage Dutch children not only to 'learn more accurately about familiar animals,' but also 'to gain knowledge on animals that [they] do not know yet exist in the world' (Pasteur 1793, 4–5).[21] However, the elephant was surely known more or less to his young readers through elephant motifs in the arts and the presence of actual elephants in Europe. But its strong discontent with slavery and yearning for liberty might have been rather novel for them, considering that the period between 1787 and 1794 in which Pasteur's natural history was published was the time when antislavery arguments progressed internationally and to some extent influenced Dutch debates on slavery as well (Brandon 2016, 3–26).

Conclusion

Buffon and Pasteur praised the elephant's resistance to slavery whilst at the same time lauding the elephant's faithfulness and compliance when it

20 'Zie daar wederom een omstandigheid, waarin de Oliphant zig van de andere dieren onderscheidt. De Kamels, de Paerden, de Ezels, de Koeijen, de Schaapen, de Geiten, de Katten, de Honden planten hun geslagt voort in slavernij en zijn daarom den mensch geheel onderworpen, terwijl de Oliphant integendeel wel zelf tot slavernij gebragt kan worden, doch geene kinderen in den staat van slavernij voortbrengt; dit is dan ook de reden dat het geslagt van de Oliphanten niet verbasterd, of veranderd is.'

21 'Zijn zal van meest alle bekende viervoetige dieren na lekanderen … Gij zult ook kennis krijgen aan dieren, die Gij nog niet weet dat in de waereld zijn.'

was eventually forced into a state of submission. As stated by Buffon (1779), the elephant's

> devotion became sometimes very intense and lasting, and its affection was absolute to the extent that it refuses to serve under anyone else except its master, and the elephant was seen dying of repentance when it had killed the master in an attack from wrath.[22] (23)

Pasteur (1793) followed suit by stating that 'once the elephant is domesticated, it is the tamest and most obedient of all animals' (185).[23]

Due to this paradox, the discourse of antislavery thought through the elephant in early modern natural history should not be regarded as part of early abolitionist ideas. Instead, Louise E. Robbins (2002, 195–98) has proposed that we should see this contradiction as part of 'happy servant' discourse. The elephant, Buffon (1779) stated, 'accustoms itself slightly and submits to man and serves with zeal, fidelity, keen intelligence, etc., not so much by violence but by kind treatment' (11).[24] Jumping on Buffon's bandwagon, Pasteur (1793) also stated that 'if the elephant was exhorted to gratitude by good treatment,' it would serve a master 'with fidelity and zeal' (156).[25] In this way, the elephant's state of servitude could be accepted, as long as it was treated with kindness by a master. This benevolent bondage can to some extent be compared with Dutch religious arguments that reconciled the Christian faith with the idea of slavery by promoting Christian kindness and gentleness in treating enslaved people (van Nifterik 2021, 184).

To be fully human, one must therefore strongly desire for freedom and absolutely despise subjugation. These qualities were often associated only with white Europeans, who were thought to possess a high level of rationality, while Black Africans were considered devoid of such intellect and full of abject animality. Following this line of reasoning, the autonomy and domination of the former, and the impediment to civility and state of slavery of the latter were legitimised.

22 'Zyne verknogtheid wordt zomtyds zo sterk, zo duurzaam; en zyne genegenheid zo volkomen, dat hy weigert onder iemand anders te dienen, en dat men 'er een heeft zien sterven van spyt, dat hy in een aanval van toorn zyn bestierder gedood had.'

23 'Wanneer de oliphant eens getemd is, is hij het makst en gehoorzaamst van alle dieren.'

24 'hy gewent zig ligtelyk aan den mensch, onderwerpt zig minder aan hem door geweld, dan door vriedelyke behandelingen, dient hem met yver, met getrouwheid, met vernuft, enz.'

25 'als hij door eene goede behandeling tot dankbaarheid wordt aangespoord, wanneer hij zijnen meester met getrouwheid in ijver zal dienen.'

The elephant was a liminal non-human animal with regard to these two characteristics. On the one hand, the enslaved elephant was criticised and the subject of empathy when seen as a rational, freedom-loving being. On the other hand, the enslaved elephant was cherished due to its strong compliance. To put it another way, as the boundary between humans and non-human animals was blurred and contingent, the elephant came close to the human any time it showed signs of rationality, resistance to bondage, and longing for freedom, proving that the elephant was capable and worthy of 'natural' rights. However, when the elephant was compliant to its master as a 'happy servant,' it moved towards non-human animality, albeit never too far from the human because such compliance by the elephant was still based on its marvellous intellect. All in all, the case of the elephant illustrates that the early modern idea of slavery was very much interspecies, questioning the sharp line between humans and non-human animals as well as human exceptionalism in terms of possessing rationality and disposition towards liberty.

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