Exploring Elephants in European Hunting Narratives from Nineteenth-Century Southern Sudan

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Abstract: European accounts of elephant hunting in nineteenth-century Africa have been primarily used by historians to explore the construction of the idealized male imperial hero and his increasingly monstrous elephant foe. This paper asks what happens, however, if we see the elephants in such sources not only as symbolic representations but as living creatures with the capacity to communicate across species. Undoubtedly, the elephants who appeared in nineteenth-century hunting literature were distorted by cultural imaginaries, but this paper argues that they were nevertheless the product of interspecies encounters in which elephants could be experienced as extremely powerful antagonists. Hunters are, by necessity, the keenest observers of animal behaviour and the most likely to experience close bodily encounters with their prey. The elephants knew (or were learning) how to loom larger than life or how to disappear into thin air: their own behaviours and strategies produced the fantastic beasts in these texts as much as the authors' imaginations. By reading their accounts in dialogue with indigenous oral sources and more recent research on elephant behaviour and with attentiveness to the emotional, embodied, and even empathic aspects of hunting experiences, we can attempt to discern the intentions, messages, and impacts of elephants. This paper suggests that at least some of these behaviours likely arise from a specific historical context of unprecedentedly intense elephant hunting in nineteenth-century Southern Sudan. It argues therefore that the aggressive, vindictive monsters of European narratives were produced not just by the authors' imaginations but also by the effects of their hunting.

Keywords: *elephants, hunting, South Sudan, imperialism, ivory trade, animal history, interspecies*

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> "We were within reach of firing on the other large elephant, who left at a trot, at the noise of the salvo that we had made on the first. It was so large, so majestic, that it made us experience a feeling stronger than usual. This monstrous animal having endured our salvo, raised its trunk, turned it in all directions, and, seemingly having smelled us, set off on a run in our direction. But, having not been able to uncover us where we had withdrawn to, even though it had looked for us for five minutes, it returned to the same place where we had shot it, making a dreadful racket, and uprooting three trees that were bigger than a man."[1]

European accounts of elephant-hunting in nineteenth-century Africa have been primarily used by historians to explore the construction of the idealized male imperial hero.[2] As "by far the most formidable of all animals," according to the British hunter Samuel Baker, the simultaneously "majestic" and "monstrous" elephant described above by the hunter and ivory-trader Jules Poncet was the perfect foil to the noble white hunter.[3] Some scholars have therefore argued that hunting accounts inevitably reveal only the exaggerated imaginaries of their authors rather than the reality of the animals.[4] After all, elephants have been a focus of human imagination and fascination throughout history, and their imagery has been widely used to represent human ideas, values, and politics.[5] "In short," as Dan Wylie puts it, "elephants have become symbolic in various ways, an 'imaginary'

1 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 130. This and all following translations of *Le Fleuve Blanc* are by Bethany Brewer. "[N]ous fûmes à portée de tirer sur l'autre gros éléphant, qui s'était retiré au trot, au bruit de la décharge que nous avions faite sur le premier. Il était si gros, si majestueux, qu'il nous fit éprouver une sensation plus forte qu'à l'ordinaire. Ce monstrueux animal ayant essuyé notre décharge, leva sa trompe, la tourna en tout sens, et, paraissant nous avoir sentis, s'élança à la course de notre côté. Mais, n'ayant pu nous découvrir là où nous nous étions retirés, quoiqu'il nous eût cherchés pendant cinq minutes, il revint au même endroit où nous l'avions tiré, en faisant un tapage effroyable, et en déracinant trois arbres plus gros qu'un homme."

2 MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature* remains the foundational text; more recently Rothfels, *Elephant Trails*; Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts*.

3 Baker, *The Albert N'yanza*, vol. 1, 200; Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 31, 48.

4 Rothfels, "Killing Elephants"; Midgley, *Animals*, 14-17.

5 Saha, "E is for Elephant," 57; Rothfels, *Elephant Trails*, p. 4.

through and against which at least some humans define themselves and their place".[6]

Some of the most distorted imaginaries appeared in the form of the "rogue elephant," a figure which became increasingly prevalent in European hunting accounts from the mid-nineteenth century, epitomized in Baker's fantasy of "the terror of a district, a pitiless highwayman, whose soul thirsted for blood; who, lying in wait in some thick bush, would rush upon the unwary passer-by, and know no pleasure greater than the act of crushing his victim to a shapeless mass beneath his feet."[7] Replacing earlier emphases on the restraint and gentleness of elephants in the European sources, this malicious monster played an important role in justifying and glorifying the noble white hunter and the imperial projects of which he became a symbol.[8] Not surprisingly, scholars have therefore focused on the cultural construction and (mis)representation of elephants and other animals in imperial literature, which rendered them "manifestly powerless" and unable to "talk back".[9]

This paper asks what happens if we see the elephants in such sources not as symbolic representations but as living creatures with the capacity to communicate across species and to *make* hunters feel something "stronger than usual," as Poncet wrote. Undoubtedly, the elephants who appeared in nineteenth-century hunting literature were distorted by cultural imaginaries, but this paper argues that they were nevertheless the product of interspecies encounters in which elephants could be experienced as extremely powerful antagonists. Hunters are, by necessity, the keenest observers of animal behaviour and the most likely to experience close bodily encounters with their prey. The elephants knew (or were learning) how to loom larger than life or how to disappear into thin air: their own behaviours and strategies produced the fantastic beasts in these texts as much as the authors' imaginations. By reading their accounts in dialogue with more

6 Wylie, "Elephants and Compassion," 80.

7 Baker, *The Rifle and the Hound*, 8.

8 Rothfels, *Elephant Trails*, 22-55, 69–71, 83; Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, 254; Skotnes-Brown, "Domestication, Degeneration," 364–5.

9 Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, 5.

recent research on elephant behaviour and with attentiveness to the emotional, embodied, and even empathic aspects of hunting experiences, we can attempt to discern the intentions, messages, and impacts of elephants. This paper suggests that at least some of these behaviours likely arise from a specific historical context of unprecedentedly intense elephant-hunting in nineteenth-century Southern Sudan. It argues therefore that the aggressive, vindictive monsters of European narratives were produced not just by the authors' imaginations but also by the effects of their hunting.

Animal historians have debated more broadly whether textual sources can ever reveal animal subjectivities and experiences, or if they are limited to human representations and constructions of the animal. Erica Fudge emphasizes the essential impossibility of writing animal histories, when "a dog can bark, and that bark can be recorded, documented, but it cannot be understood [. . .] If our only access to animals in the past is through documents written by humans, then we are never looking at the animals, only ever at the representation of the animals by humans."[10] Éric Baratay argues, however, that such a recognition should be an "essential preliminary step" rather than an "ultimate finality":

> historical documents show, when this information is not rejected as anecdotal, that humans have seen or foreseen and assessed animal interests and have reacted, acted, and imagined as a result.[11]

Etienne Benson goes further in arguing that we need to radically rethink our definitions of authorship, to approach texts as "a collection of traces of the animal who writes through the human as well as of the human who writes about the animal". This provides "a way of thinking about historical sources that does not depend on the assumption that the producer of a trace was, in a particular instance or in general, intending to leave a record or to convey a specific meaning".[12] Jamie Lorimer and Sarah Whatmore have sought

10 Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow," 5-6.

11 Baratay, "Building an *Animal* History," 3–4.

12 Benson, "Animal Writes," 8, 10.

such traces of elephants specifically by "attending to both human and nonhuman embodied experience" in the hunting encounters of Samuel Baker in Ceylon. However, their conclusions remain focused on European hunting ethics and codes of sportsmanship which, they argue, rationalized away the affective experience and removed "the passionate body from the fray".[13]

This paper returns to the question posed by Lorimer and Whatmore: "How do we witness and evoke the embodied experience of elephants, especially past elephants?".[14] It argues that hunting narratives are an important resource for approaching this question, because these sources are never simply human-authored: the animals leave their own "writing" through the tracks, sounds, smells, and movements that we can trace in the texts. In making this argument, Benson draws on broader comparisons of the historian's craft with the skills of "tracking" that are vital to hunting.[15] Like Clapperton Mavhunga, we are "following the hunters that are following the tracks to arrive at and kill the animal that made them".[16] While Mavhunga's goal was the African technologies revealed by the hunt, the goal of this paper is closer to that of the hunters: an encounter with the animal itself. By tracking the imprints of elephants on hunters' narratives, the paper argues that the "passionate body" was never removed from the fray and that the meeting of elephant and human bodies in the hunt communicated messages and meanings between species that were not entirely controlled or fabricated by the human authors.

Close encounters between Europeans and elephants became much more common in the nineteenth century as exploration, imperialism, and transport technology enabled many more European travellers and hunters to observe elephants in their own habitats in Asia and Africa as well as in captivity.[17] Crucially, this shift occurred at a

13 Lorimer and Whatmore, "After the 'King of Beasts'," 669, 685.

14 Lorimer and Whatmore, 676.

15 Benson, "Animal Writes," 9–10.

16 Mavhunga, *Transient Workspaces*, 20

17 Rothfels, *Elephant Trails*; Ritvo, *The Animal Estate.*

time when elephant hunting greatly accelerated due to the unprecedented international demand for ivory. We can see these shifts and effects particularly strikingly in what became the southern provinces of Ottoman-Egyptian Sudan, including (and slightly beyond) modern-day South Sudan. Southern Sudan became a new focus for multinational elephant-hunting in the mid-nineteenth century but has received much less attention in the historiography of imperial hunting and ivory-trading than eastern or southern Africa. Ivory was one of the primary lures for Ottoman-Egyptian commercial and imperial expansion southwards from Khartoum after 1840 as well as for European traders and hunters, several of whom wrote accounts of their travels and hunting exploits for the growing reading audiences back home who were hungry for exotic, heroic adventure stories.[18] The most detailed descriptions of elephants were provided by European authors who had hunted them, notably the Savoyard/French ivory-trading brothers Jules Poncet (1838–1873) and Ambroise Poncet (1835–1868), the British consul and ivory-trader John Petherick (1813–1882) and his wife Kathleen (1827–1877), and the British explorer Samuel Baker (1821–1893), who was also employed by the Egyptian government to annex and govern its Equatorial province (1869–1873).

These sources provide only fleeting, fragmentary, and flimsy evidence of elephant lives, behaviour, and ecology, particularly in comparison to the knowledge held by the indigenous inhabitants of the region. Foreign hunters and ivory-traders were entirely dependent on this knowledge to guide them to elephants or to obtain ivory. Yet Europeans were often dismissive and critical of indigenous guides and hunters, as they sought to position their own knowledge and prowess at the top of the racialized hierarchy. The paper seeks to counterbalance these distortions wherever possible by highlighting evidence of indigenous knowledge about elephants and the impacts of elephants on indigenous as well as European cultures. It draws on some of twenty-three interviews about elephants conducted by two South Sudanese researchers in their home communities in 2021–22, including interviews with elderly

18 MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature*, 43-51; Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, 9–10, 256–7.

former elephant-hunters. This, too, is problematic evidence for understanding human-elephant relations in the nineteenth century: interviewees were hunting in more recent contexts of civil war, government prohibitions, and modern weaponry and by the time of the interviews, elephants had been almost wiped out in South Sudan. But their testimonies underscore that hunters in any period engaged in detailed observation of their prey and in close bodily encounters with elephants, alive and dead. In some societies, hunting used to be a specialist profession for particular families, whose knowledge would have been closely guarded and passed on through generations. More widely, knowledge of other species was also preserved and passed down in cultural forms such as songs, oral literature, and material cultures, imparting historical knowledge to contemporary hunters.

It is largely impossible, however, to find direct evidence of human-elephant relations in Southern Sudan before the Ottoman-Egyptian conquest of northern Sudan in 1820. The earliest sources by European travellers and traders in the 1840s and 50s suggest that there were some established methods for hunting elephants, but also that ivory was not itself a motive, being of limited value. The historian Patricia Mercer points to a rapid increase of the ivory trade through Khartoum after it was established as the Ottoman-Egyptian administrative capital of Sudan: in 1814 "there was little or no ivory trading," but by the 1830s, the high demand for ivory was impacting the more accessible Shilluk regions of what is now South Sudan.[19] Ottoman-Egyptian expeditions in 1839-40 cut through the swampy vegetation of the Sudd to open the upper Nile and Equatorial regions to an influx of multinational ivory traders for the first time. By c. 1870, areas of the Bahr el-Ghazal were reported to be depopulated of elephants altogether.[20] We can assume that this sudden and dramatic increase of hunting would have substantially increased the elephants' experience of threat, loss, and trauma in relation to humans. This paper explores the ways in which they may have dealt with this, and the effects and affects it had on different people.

19 Mercer, "Shilluk Trade," 417-8.

20 Schweinfurth, *The Heart of Africa*, 47, 120-1.

To aid analysis and interpretation of the sources, the paper draws on ethological literature, particularly the work of the long-running Amboseli Elephant Research Project (AERP) and associated online database — the ElephantVoices Elephant Ethogram — of elephant visual, auditory, and tactile signals and gestures.[21] We should not assume that elephant behaviour is universal and standardized across time and place: any elephants that are the subject of recent ethological observations live in radically different circumstances to those in nineteenth-century Sudan, and their behaviours are the product of history, culture, and individual personality as well as biology.[22] Yet the longer-term consistencies in their biology nevertheless ensure at least some continuities in behaviour: the primary importance of hearing and smell, for example, makes elephants most likely to extend their ears and trunks to deal with stimuli.[23] The increasing evidence for distinctive group cultures within species again underscores the need for caution in assuming universal behaviours; yet it also demonstrates the importance of social learning, by which knowledge and traditions are passed down through generations, ensuring some degree of historical continuity as well as variation and adaptation.[24] As Glover and Mitchell suggest, "we can reasonably expect that what holds for animals' experiential capacities today would be similar in historic settings as well […] A greater understanding of animals' sensoria, capabilities, and social lives can enable informed and more confident explorations of animals' experiences and subjectivity."[25]

The paper therefore suggests that there is value in using ethological guides to elephant behaviour as an interpretative tool for understanding what elephants may have been doing and saying with their bodies as recorded in the historical sources, while remaining alert to their individuality and retaining a focus on the ways specific historical contexts shape their responses. Indeed, the paper emphasizes that

21 Moss, Croze, and Lee, *The Amboseli Elephants*; Elephant Voices Ethogram at https://www.elephantvoices.org/.

22 Baratay, "Building an *Animal* History"; Benson, "Animal Writes".

23 McComb, Reby, and Moss, "Vocal Communication," 162.

24 Bates *et al.*, "Knowledge Transmission".

25 Glover and Mitchell, "Introduction," 11.

elephant behaviour in Southern Sudan is likely to have been changing even during the nineteenth century; again, there are parallels—however approximate—in the reactions and adaptations of elephants to more recent contexts of intense hunting or other disruptions.

The first two sections explore the primary strategies of elephants in response to human hunting: avoidance and aggression. Both forms of behaviour were convenient for authors wishing to emphasize the challenges of elephant-hunting, but that does not mean they were entirely fictitious. Rather, they reveal the embodied and emotional responses of elephants to heightened threats. Changing behaviours and cultures among elephants thus impacted on human cultures through the writings of their hunters, with longer-term historical consequences discussed in the conclusion.

Ethology aids our capacity to speculate about why elephants acted as they did in nineteenth-century sources. But, in the final section, the paper will also argue that elephants could communicate with humans even then in ways that did not and do not require the mediation of expert scientific observers. Empathy, emotion, and even anthropomorphism could reveal the individual elephant as a person, beyond typologies of behaviour.

Disappearing Elephants

Before the major expansion of ivory-trading after 1840, elephant-human relations in Southern Sudan would have been characterized primarily by avoidance. Humans—especially those who kept cattle—benefited from the environmental effects of elephants: these "landscape engineers" consumed and destroyed dense vegetation, creating grasslands for grazing animals, including cattle. Elephant pathways also opened routes through dense bush, while livestock benefited from the waterholes and salt-licks dug by elephants.[26]

26 Western, "The Ecological Role"; Thorbahn, "The Precolonial Ivory Trade"; Håkansson, "The Human Ecology"; Laws, "Elephants as Agents"; Shoshani, "The African Elephant"; Emin Pasha, *Emin Pasha in Central Africa*, 406; Junker, *Travels in Africa*, 2:110; Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 118; Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male church elder in Nzara, 16 December 2021; Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly male cattle-keeper, Yirol East, 24 December 2021.

Humans nevertheless hunted elephants for their meat and fat, as a test of hunters' skills, fitness, and teamwork, and/or to deter elephants from consuming crops.[27] Ivory was used to make adornments and tools but was not the object of elephant hunts; the early international traders found plentiful supplies of ivory that had been left lying in the bush or used for mundane purposes.[28] For most communities, elephant-hunting would have been rare, as one elderly hunter explained in a recent interview: "When there are other animals, there is no need to kill the elephant. Hunting it down was difficult."[29]

Elephants in turn largely avoided humans, particularly in areas where hunting was more prevalent.[30] They are known to learn from past experiences in assessing threat.[31] Poncet depicted the "cunning" of older elephants who "feel around with their trunk, while walking" to avoid falling into human-made traps.[32] Baker made a similar claim:

> The old bulls never approach a watering- place rapidly, but carefully listen for danger, and then slowly advance with their warning trunks stretched to the path before them; the delicate nerves of the proboscis at once detect the hidden snare…[33]

Trunk tips indeed contain "hypersensitive nerve bundles unique to the elephant".[34] Equally, these elephants would have been using their acute sense of smell to detect threats, as an elderly man from southwest South Sudan emphasized in a recent interview. Elephants have had ever more reason to fear humans in recent decades with the

27 Hillary, Amuom and Leonardi, *Elephants Are Stories Now*, 11–14; Howell, "A Note on Elephants".

28 Petherick, *Egypt, the Soudan*, 448; Petherick and Petherick, *Travels in Central Africa,* 1:209-10; Simonse, *Kings of Disaster,* 256.

29 Interview by Machot Amuom with an elderly man, a renowned hunter, Yirol East, 16 January 2022.

30 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc,* p. 114; Leonardi, '"Extraordinarily Inconspicuous Elephants'", 259–60. .

31 Evans and Adams, "Elephants as Actors".

32 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 172: "Les éléphants les plus âgés sont beaucoup plus rusés, ils ne se laissent jamais prendre dans les fosses que creusent en général les nègres. Ils tâtonnent avec leur trompe, en marchant, si le terrain est solide."

33 Baker, *The Albert N'yanza*, 205.

34 Wylie, *Elephant*, 38.

advent of automatic weapons and protracted wars. But the detailed observations of elephant wariness around humans seem likely to reflect much longer histories:

> When it walks, it fears nothing. [But] when elephant sees a person, it has much anxiety; since it can now smell the person, where exactly is he? On which side is he? It will stand. That was the male. It would lower its trunk and raise its eyes and line it up and lower it again below. And it would take its ears this side and that side, like this, and start to measure the place, to see. These ears show that person was there. It would measure the place with this nose that was a trunk, it was curved here. Always it measures the place, it takes air, it takes air. If it looks without seeing the person, but it smells the odour of the person, then it snorts, *fu'ooo*, and if elephants were there in that place, if it snorts twice, they would start fleeing [. . .] They would run from that place. Only where they don't get the odour of people, there they are happy to stay well.[35]

Elephants rely heavily on their excellent sense of smell and hearing, and ethologists note that apprehensive or alarmed elephants will employ particular gestures that they have categorized as Trunk-Curled-Under or Trunk-Outstretched, Jaw-Tilted-Upward and Eyes-Wide, and ears stiffened and slightly spread, all of which seem to be described by the interviewee. Snorting or "blowing out through the trunk" is used to intimidate a predator or adversary.[36] The ElephantVoices Ethogram also indicates that elephants will snort when surprised or alarmed, and "to alert other members of their group to a new situation".[37] The interviewee's description was thus clearly based on direct observation of elephant behaviour.

Other indigenous sources can also be seen as evidence of elephants' prevailing tendency to avoid people. One widespread fable tells of an eating contest between the elephant and the cockerel, which

35 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male church elder, Nzara, 16 December 2021.

36 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 110,114.

37 ElephantVoices, "Snort," at https://www.elephantvoices.org/elephant-ethogram/search-portal/behavior?id=245 (last accessed 8 March 2025).

the latter cleverly won, leaving the elephant terrified of his power; this explains elephants' fear of the cock's crow, which humans use to deter elephants from homesteads. The Italian explorer Gaetano Casati recorded the story as a Dinka fable in 1880, adding that people carried a cockerel when travelling at night as protection from elephants.[38] Similarly widespread in (and beyond) the region is "the myth of the spear and bead," which begins with the spearing of an elephant. A Lotuho version includes "a final separation" of elephants and people after the human protagonist wrongs and tricks the elephants.[39] Similarly, a Nuer story recorded in the 1940s by British administrator P. P. Howell explains the separation of the human ancestor of elephants, Nyalou, from her community after she grew ever huger:

> She called her people together and said to them, "The time has come for me to leave you. I must go to the forest and live there, for there only can I find sufficient food to feed me." Then she took her sleeping skins and attached them to her ears and straightway they became part of her body. "I am now different to you," she said, "and my descendants will live in the forest apart from mankind. Men will want to kill me because of my huge teeth and because my flesh is fat and sweet."[40]

When faced with men who wanted to kill them in the nineteenth century, elephants generally sought to flee whenever possible. Poncet found no elephants in one area "as they stayed further away, because the inhabitants of the village hunted them when they saw them come". Elsewhere, he witnessed elephants keeping a distance because "they smelled our odour, or even those of their companions that we had just killed […] they were on their guard".[41] European hunters frequently failed to find or follow elephants, often blaming

38 Casati, *Ten Years in Equatoria*, 49.

39 As recorded by Comboni missionaries and retold to the anthropologist Simon Simonse in the 1980s: Simonse, *Kings of Disaster*, 328.

40 Howell, "A Note on Elephants," 97.

41 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 115, 126: "car ils se tiennent plus loin, parce que les habitants du village les chassent quand ils les voient arrive" / "Ils sentirent notre odeur, ou même celle de leurs compagnons que nous venions de tuer… ils étaient sur leurs gardes."

indigenous reports and guides when in reality elephants are surprisingly adept at disappearing, despite their size.[42] They used their knowledge of the environment to their advantage: one elephant pursued by Samuel Baker, for example, "entered a thick thorny jungle through which no horse could follow, and I failed to obtain a shot".[43] In the early 1880s, German explorer Wilhelm Junker witnessed a large gathering for an elephant-hunt in the far south-western frontiers of Egyptian Sudan, "but the pachyderms soon saw that something was wrong, made their way to the [River] Welle, and simply swam across".[44]

Elephants also undertook much longer journeys to find safety, as reported by Emin Pasha, Governor of the Equatorial Province, in the late 1870s:

> The extraordinary abundance of elephants in the east may be connected partly with the occurrence of forests of Balanites, but, on the other hand, considering the scanty supplies of water towards the east, may be due to the fact that the animal is capable of long marches, and in the dry season retires to the broad swamps of the Ber country, which never dry up, and to the swamps on the northern frontier of Usoga, where he defies all pursuit.[45]

Such refuges have been shown as vital to elephant survival in both East and South Africa over the longer periods of ivory-hunting in those regions.[46] The much more sudden increase of elephant-hunting for ivory in mid-nineteenth century Southern Sudan may have made elephants more likely to seek such refuges or simply reinforced the importance of these seasonal migrations. While Emin used the male pronoun, the "long marches" would have relied on the knowledge and spatial memory of older females. Ethology has shown that such matriarchs "have a strong influence over the decisions taken

42 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc,* 88, 92, 149; Stigand, *Hunting the Elephant.*

43 Baker, *The Albert N'yanza*, 193.

44 Junker, *Travels in Africa*, Vol. 2, p. 431.

45 Emin Pasha, *Emin Pasha in Central Africa,* pp. 222, 401.

46 Thorbahn, "The Precolonial Ivory Trade"; Swart, *The Lion's Historian*, 1–2.

by family units, often appearing to determine group movement [. . .] Such leadership is critical in effective use of large ranges."[47] It is also usually a female elephant who "places herself several meters behind a bunched group of elephants in *Full-Retreat*" to play a "rear-guarding" role.[48] Casati witnessed this in 1880 when "immense" herds of elephants near the Nile fled at the sound of a steamboat's whistle: "I could never have believed in the rapidity of action and velocity of such large animals; one of them always remained at a distance, as sentinel, to watch those whom they supposed and feared to be enemies."[49] Female elephants have also been found to become more active at night in areas of high risk from human threats.[50] The nineteenth-century sources suggest that elephants were eating crops only at night and in areas of lower population density, and generally moving more at night.[51]

Older female elephants would thus have been crucial to risk avoidance for their extended families, but by the mid-nineteenth century they were also the most likely to be targeted by hunters for their larger tusks. Knowledge, memory, and skills in using and traversing ecosystems "are likely to [be] passed on from generation to generation and from family to family," meaning that the loss of a significant matriarch could have long-lasting repercussions. Following such losses, elephant families tend to aggregate in larger groups clustered "around the few remaining experienced females".[52] This may explain the unusually large herds described by some of the nineteenth-century observers in Equatorial Sudan after years of ivory-hunting; Baker, for example, "saw a dense herd of about two hundred elephants".[53] Emin also described areas west of the Nile where hunting "appears

47 Mutinda, Poole, and Moss, "Decision-Making," 246, 255.

48 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 117.

49 Casati, *Ten Years in Equatoria,* 40–41.

50 Smit et al, "Anthropogenic Risk Increases Night-time Activities".

51 Baker, *The Albert N'yanza*, 1:180, 226 and vol. 2, p. 293; Emin Pasha, *Emin Pasha in Central Africa,* 263; Baker, *Ismailia*, 1:407; Evans and Adams, "Elephants as Actors"; Shoshani, "The African Elephant", 54.

52 Mutinda, Poole and Moss, "Decision-Making," 255, 258.

53 Baker, *Albert N'yanza*, 1:235. Stigand also reported a huge, densely packed herd of around five hundred elephants in 1908 to the south of what is now the South Sudan-Uganda border: Stigand, *Hunting the Elephant*, 71–73.

to be little practised" and so "the country literally teems with herds of elephants".[54] Recent ethological research has confirmed that elephants can distinguish which humans are a threat, and also that "families led by older matriarchs display [. . .] more appropriate behaviour in response to threats and predators".[55] Emin reported that elephants had become so numerous in the Equatorial regions that in some places they "have become a public calamity".[56] This suggests that the loss of cautious older females may have not only made surviving herds larger but also more likely to take risks in raiding crops and coming closer to humans.

The loss of older male elephants would also have had an impact, particularly on younger males. A group of male elephants unexpectedly appeared in an area of dense human settlement on the Nile banks in early 1870s Equatoria, only to be attacked by Baker and his troops.[57] The fact that Baker reported the surprise of local people at seeing elephants in such a populated area (and in daylight) suggests that their movements were abnormal. Younger male elephants tend to follow the guidance of older males when in all-male groups,[58] but ivory-hunting, which would have been most impactful in the vicinity of the Nile in the 1850s and 60s, targeted older males for their larger tusks.

Long-term geographical knowledge and memory among elephants would also have been disrupted by the new infrastructures of the ivory trade and Egyptian administration, as was evident in 1874 when a new government station was constructed at Lado on an elephant route to the river:

> On the night of the 16th we had a visit which put all the little garrison in a fright. An elephant had entered the camp, passing through a gap which had remained in the hedge, and not

54 Emin Pasha, *Emin Pasha in Central Africa,* 314.

55 Kangwana, "The Behavioural Responses"; Bates et al., "Elephants Classify Human Ethnic Groups".

56 Casati, *Ten Years in Equatoria*, 258 (quoting a report by Emin Pasha to the *Esploratore*).

57 Baker, *Ismailia*, 1:407–14.

58 Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge*, 79–80.

> finding the way out, began to run about among the tents with uplifted trunk uttering terrific screams. It was impossible to fire at him without the risk of shooting some one, but at last he got out, and so the uncomfortable visit ended. On observing the tracks next morning we could see that he had formed one of a numerous herd, which were going to their usual watering-place on the Nile.[59]

As ethologist Joyce Poole emphasizes, "Elephants are highly expressive and demonstrative animals, and they vocalize loudly and in chorus under a wide variety of circumstances."[60] They also engage in panic-running and produce deafening sounds including trumpets and roars when confronting dangers and threats.[61] Such elephant expressions and body language made lasting impressions on human observers and were often recorded or recalled in considerable detail. Their size, sounds, trunks, and ears all heightened forms of expression that might have otherwise been less remarkable to humans, ensuring considerable cross-species communication. This would be all the more obvious and intentional on the part of elephants when they sought to intimidate and frighten off the hunters through aggressive behaviours. As hunting escalated through the mid-nineteenth century, elephants were more often drawn into situations of confrontation from which they could not — or chose not — to flee.

Becoming Rogue: Elephant Aggression

The elephant who found himself trapped inside the government station at Lado was clearly communicating panic, desperation, and fear through his behaviour, as did many of the elephants who appear in nineteenth-century European hunting accounts. Yet by far the most common emotion attributed to elephants by the authors of these sources was "anger", often in the extremes of "rage" and "fury". While emphasising the anger and aggression of elephants under attack was certainly convenient for authors wishing to construct a worthy and wilful opponent, it was also the elephants' intention

59 Gessi, *Seven Years*, 89.

60 Poole, "Behavioural Contexts," 153.

61 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 114; Poole, "Behavioural Contexts," 141.

to intimidate and terrify through their behaviours towards predators and other threats. It may not have been "anger" that they were feeling—we can never know—but they were certainly communicating aggression with such powerful effect that authors reached for terms like "fury". Authors granted the elephants not only this emotional capacity but also the capacity for thought and decision-making agency, claiming that individual animals chose to take on their attackers rather than fleeing. What is only implicit in these accounts, however—but what is obvious if we accept their own assumption that elephants are thinking, feeling, social beings —is that these individuals were acting out of desperation, defending themselves and their relatives and companions, and that they were increasingly likely to have been previously wounded and traumatized by other encounters with human hunters and the loss of relatives. More recent research affirms that elephants are likely to be become more aggressive in similar contexts, particularly in the absence of older elephants.[62] As Jules Skotnes-Brown suggests, lone male "rogues" were likely to have been previously wounded and unable to keep up with herds.[63] This was even recognized by Emin Pasha, who reported a soldier in Equatoria in 1877 being attacked by an elephant "which had no doubt been previously wounded, and therefore become separated from its companions".[64]

That the "rogue elephants" of hunting accounts were more than simply the fantasy of their authors becomes apparent if we examine the detail of the textual descriptions. Samuel Baker provides a particularly lengthy account of a hunt he undertook on an ailing horse, Tétel, in the Latuka country of eastern Equatoria: "Galloping through the green but thornless bush, I soon come in sight of a grand bull elephant, steaming along like a locomotive engine straight before me."[65] Baker shot him twice and pursued him, "until he suddenly turned

62 Bates *et al.*, "Knowledge Transmission," 8; Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge*; Swart, *The Lion's Historian*, 5-6.

63 Skotnes-Brown, "Domestication, Degeneration," 367.

64 Emin Pasha, *Emin Pasha in Central Africa*, 7.

65 Baker, *The Albert N'yanza*, 192. The horse was probably affected by trypanosomiasis spread by tsetse fly in this region.

round, and stood facing me in an open spot in grass". Baker "made a good shot exactly behind the bladebone. With a shrill scream the elephant charged down upon me like a steam-engine". The "enraged bull" pursued horse and rider before soon halting again: "I thought he was dying, as he stood with trunk drooping, and ears closely pressed back upon his neck." Baker was then distracted by the oncoming "rush" of a tightly-packed herd of elephants, which he scared off and pursued unsuccessfully, before his Latuka guides led him back to the wounded male elephant: "immediately perceiving us, he gave a saucy jerk with his head, and charged most determinedly […] I managed to evade him after a chase of about a hundred and fifty yards." Baker then followed the elephant and shot him again:

> for a moment he fell upon his knees, but, recovering with wonderful quickness, he was in full charge upon me […] screaming with rage, *gaining on me* […] thus I had the pleasure of being hunted down upon a sick and disabled horse. I kept looking round, thinking that the elephant would give in—we had been running for nearly half a mile, and the brute was overhauling me so fast that he was within ten or twelve yards of the horse's tail, with his trunk stretched out to catch him. Screaming like the whistle of an engine, he fortunately so frightened the horse that he went his best, though badly, and I turned him suddenly down the hill and doubled back like a hare. The elephant turned up the hill, and entering the jungle he relinquished the chase.[66]

The badly wounded elephant was found dead by local people the next morning. We can see in Baker's narrative (which runs for several pages) all the tropes of heroic hunting accounts, including the frequent assertions of the cowardice of his northern Sudanese employees contrasted with his horse's (and implicitly his own) courage and ability. The failings of his companions and the horse's unexpected weakness explain away Baker's own failure to kill the elephant outright while adding to the drama and danger of the story. Strikingly, he employed the steam engine repeatedly as metaphorical device. This may have been a way to objectify and depersonalize the animal but

66 Baker, *The Albert N'yanza*, 192–7.

Baker was also reaching for the most powerful moving thing that he or his readers had experienced to evoke the terrifying speed, sound, and force of the charging elephant.[67] As the hunted becomes the hunter, thrice pursuing Baker and Tétel over long distances, the elephant proves himself the worthy and equal adversary necessary to the construction of the heroic hunter.

Yet the elephant that we encounter in these pages is not simply a fantasy foe; the behaviours described by Baker correlate with those recorded and categorized by ethologists. Baker may of course have assembled these from multiple experiences to construct this particular story: we cannot know if he was actually chased three times on one occasion, or whether he is describing a single individual or a composite elephant. But elephants do have a range of aggressive behaviours for responding to predators or opponents. When they wish to appear threatening, elephants deliberately stand tall and spread their ears wide while facing their opponent head-on. They also employ "terrifyingly powerful sounds" such as loud trumpet-blasts when confronting a predator or other threat, which are "intended to intimidate".[68] The "rush" of "a closely packed herd of about eighteen elephants [. . .] bearing down directly upon me" which interrupted Baker's attack on the elephant, was likely either "panic-running" or a "group-charge". In both cases, a threat leads elephants to bunch closely together and either flee or "charge towards an adversary en masse in a highly coordinated manner," usually "as an anti-predator display".[69] Baker assumed that he was "unobserved in the high grass" by the charging elephants, but given their greater reliance on smell than sight, they may well have identified his position and deliberately charged towards him. It is particularly striking that the individual elephant — and perhaps also the herd — clearly identified Baker/Tetel as the threat, despite the remote effects of his gun. Poncet similarly described an elephant that he and his fellow hunters had shot at in the dark: "It seemed to be looking to discover

67 Baker had used the same metaphor to describe the scream of an elephant in Ceylon: Baker, *The Rifle and the Hound*, also cited in Rothfels, *Elephant Trails,* 70.

68 Poole, "Behavioural Contexts," 141; ElephantVoices, "Trumpet-Blasts".

69 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 111.

from where the shots had left by turning its head and its trunk".[70] Elephants may thus have been learning to associate humans with gunfire and its effects.[71]

Elephants under attack drew on behaviours for dealing with predators that were intended to communicate and intimidate across species boundaries, as they arguably did very effectively through Baker's writings. Some aspects of the wounded elephant's gestures and actions were perhaps more akin to behaviour during conflicts with other elephants, however. The "saucy jerk" of the head that Baker witnessed can be an expression of "irritation or impatience," suggesting that Baker's and other writers' reading of "rage" into the elephant's behaviour may not be inaccurate. A head-shake can also be prelude to a charge, characterising "more escalated elephant aggression". Male elephants will run after or chase a rival, sometimes over several kilometres "in an aggressive, persistent, and Prolonged-Pursuit".[72] The stretched out trunk may have been an attempt to catch the horse, as Baker assumed, but it is also used during duelling between male elephants as "a form of defensive protection against the force and sharp tusks of his rival".[73] The prolonged pursuit is most often used against rival males, often interspersed by bouts of confrontation, as occurred with Baker. But the ElephantVoices Ethogram adds that an elephant "may also engage in Prolonged-Pursuit when seeing off vehicles".[74] The individual and collective elephant behaviours described by Baker seem to combine responses to predators with forms of aggression against elephant "opponents," a term most commonly used by ethologists in describing these behaviours. Interestingly, ethologists also use the term "duel" for male elephant contests, in a strange echo of the nineteenth-century sources.[75]

70 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc,* 83: "Il semblait chercher à découvrir d'où les coups étaient partis en tournant sa tête et sa trompe".

71 As shown in more recent contexts: Swider, Gemelli, Wrege, and Parks, "Passive Acoustic Monitoring".

72 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 111.

73 Poole and Granli, 113.

74 ElephantVoices, "Prolonged-Pursuit," https://www.elephantvoices.org/elephant-ethogram/search-portal/behavior?id=340 (last accessed 8 March 2025).

75 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 111–3.

Interspecies hunting contests could thus incorporate behaviours that both humans and elephants might otherwise use in fighting members of their own species. While many indigenous hunters devised methods of avoiding dangerous direct confrontations with elephants, some deliberately sought out a battle, according to a British colonial administrator in the 1940s. For the Nuer:

> it is considered cowardly and spiritually dangerous to attack the elephant without giving it due warning to stand and fight […] "cane nyieny", they shout, " We are fighting ", and then launch their attack. They maintain that an elephant thus challenged will always turn to fight it out, though the rest of the herd crashes off in terror […] [T]he whole procedure of hunting elephant is expressed in terms of fighting as between man and man, for which there are recognized rules…[76]

While Baker's construction of his most "formidable foe" involved objectifying it as a mechanical engine, Nuer hunting codes were based on beliefs in the common ancestry and spiritual connections between humans and elephants. In different ways, both European and African hunters possibly sought to construct a noble foe that was similar to humans: "a worthy brother of man, a worthy foil for his manhood," as Haraway puts it.[77]

The British trader and hunter John Petherick attempted to depict another male elephant as a combatant in a duel, in ways that both distorted and recognized elephant agency and intentions. Sailing down the Nile, a large herd of elephants drinking from the river withdrew inland when they saw the boat:

> one of the tuskers looking round as he retreated; and to my great astonishment he turned, and came on charging at the top of his speed. I never had seen one so tall: he was a perfect monster. When he arrived at the very brink of the bank, as we were passing under it, his raised trunk and head precluded me from aiming at it, and I discharged my rifle at his chest. A small red

76 Howell, "A Note on Elephants," 96.

77 Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 48, 31.

> mark plainly indicated where the ball had penetrated. Suddenly turning, his first impulse was to run away; but changing his mind he came down again to the water's edge [. . .] down came the huge brute, and charged furiously into the water. When within about ten yards of us, up to his middle in the stream, I fired, and plainly saw that the ball had penetrated just above the trunk, on which he retreated to the cover of the wood [...] Again retracing our way, the animal accepted our challenge, and charged instantly. Another ball stopped him as before. His subsequent charges were, however, confined to the shore. When moving on the brink of the water parallel with my boat, and exposing his flank, using increased charges of powder until I had arrived at six drachms, I hit him hard shoulder shots, after every one of which he writhed severely. After thirteen charges, and as many shots, he declined to meet me; but after standing a few moments on a height beyond the little wood, he rushed with fury into it, and the crash of two ambadj trees announced his fall.[78]

In depicting the elephant as having essentially chosen his own fate and "accepted our challenge," Petherick is reinforcing the rogue elephant trope and justifying a shooting from the boat that could in no way be imagined as a courageous hunt. For once, he even acknowledged the visible signs of pain as the elephant "writhed severely". Yet his depiction also recognizes the animal as an individual, decision-making actor, capable of "changing his mind" and deliberately going on the offensive.

The "raised head and trunk" described by Petherick is an obviously aggressive response to threat,[79] and one that coincidentally made it more difficult to shoot the elephant lethally. Baker wrote at length about this problem, to both emphasize the challenges of elephant-hunting and combat growing contemporary criticisms of its cruelties.[80]

> The brain of an African elephant rests upon a plate of bone exactly above the roots of the upper grinders; it is thus wonder-

78 Petherick, *Egypt,* 432-3.

79 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 110.

80 See Rothfels, *Elephant Trails*, 59-71.

> fully protected from a front shot, as it lies so low that the ball passes above it when the elephant raises his head, which he invariably does when in anger, until close to the object of his attack.[81]

Petherick's wife Katherine also employed the language of human duelling in her second-hand recount of a story told by Carlo Evangelisto, an Italian elephant-hunter, of pursuing a male elephant, who…

> badly wounded, led them to an open plain. Here the elephant, a heavy tusker, chose to fight it out, and accepting the challenge, the hunters, walking boldly up, fired a volley at forty yards. The again wounded and now furious animal charged them instantly…[82]

Again, the emphasis is on the elephant's capacity to choose to attack rather than flee. He pursued Carlo "sometimes with his trunk stretched after his flying enemy, at others using it to pick up stones, bits of earth, and dust, to throw at him". Ethologists identify "Throw-debris" as an aggressive behaviour used by male elephants against opponents, and their aim "can be very accurate, even at some distance".[83] Jules Poncet reported being chased by a wounded elephant which picked up the rifle he had dropped and hurled it far ahead with its trunk.[84]

Carlo managed to take cover in a bush; his recollections, as recorded by Katherine Petherick, suggest that the elephant's behaviour was imprinted on his memory:

> Passing him unnoticed, the baffled animal stopped, and raised his trunk perpendicularly, to catch his scent; but fortunately the slight breeze came from a direction opposite to where the worn-out and senseless young man lay. Shrieking with pain and rage, the maddened and disappointed animal elevated his huge ears and strained his senses to their utmost, but in vain.[85]

81 Baker, *The Albert N'yanza*, 200; Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc,* 169–70.

82 Petherick and Petherick, *Travels*, 1:116–7.

83 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 111.

84 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 131.

85 Petherick and Petherick, *Travels*, 1:116–7.

Even via a second-hand account, loaded with human interpretations of its emotions, the elephant looms out of the text as a profoundly real sensory, bodily, and emotional creature; its own heightened senses contrasted with the "senseless" hunter.

The very real threat that aggressive elephants posed to hunters is also evident in reports of injuries and deaths. One of Petherick's hunters, "Hassein," was attacked by another wounded elephant, an "infuriated beast" which "grappled him with his trunk, and threw him on his back. Before his comrades could assist him, the maddened animal ran his tusk through his body. Shrieking with rage and intent upon carrying off his victim, two more shots from the terrified witnesses of this sad catastrophe put an end to his life." The hunter died two days later.[86] A similar emphasis on the rage and sounds of a wounded elephant appears in Poncet's account of hunting one which "turned around and followed us one after the other while making high-pitched cries to deafen us". Again, the inference of intent on the part of the elephant is not inaccurate in recognising that the loud trumpet calls were meant to scare away threats. Another elephant fell under fire but, when the hunters approached, it "'got up hurriedly while making ear-splitting cries, and wrapped his trunk around Dérax, the first hunter who was with us" and threw him ten paces away, unharmed, while the elephant was finally killed. The hunters then shot its companion repeatedly, as described in the quotation at the beginning of this paper, until the elephant

> grasped with its trunk the hunter that it found closest to it, threw him to the floor, crushed him with its feet, then threw him against a tree […] During this fatal event, we had retreated and reloaded our weapons; but the noise that our sticks made brought this elephant back, who, not content with one victim, still wanted others. As for us, sad and furious at the misfortune that had just happened, we resolved not to return to camp without having its tail […] We identified that our bullets had hit its lung, its heart, its shoulders and from behind its ears; in a word, that its body had been riddled with them. Having con-

86 Petherick and Petherick 232–3.

> quered this terrible elephant, we had to mourn the loss of our hunter…[87]

In Poncet's account, as in accounts within South Sudanese cultures, vengeance crosses the species boundary. In Zande communities, families who had lost a relative to an elephant attack maintained a sense of feud with elephants akin to human feuds, refusing even to hear the name "elephant" spoken.[88] Oral literature also imputes an anthropomorphic desire for revenge to elephants: the Lotuho myth of the spear and the bead includes vengeful elephants pursuing the man who killed their brother.[89] The story encapsulates in one episode what may have been a longer process by which some elephants responded to the increasing violence of ivory-hunters by becoming more violent towards humans.[90]

Anthropomorphic readings of elephant behaviour may be inherently problematic and inaccurate. But they can also be seen as evidence of the ways in which elephants did communicate across species boundaries through their aggressive behaviours. Poncet's account of the wounded elephant uprooting trees is echoed by a later British colonial officer and elephant-hunter, Chauncey Stigand, who similarly interpreted such behaviour as a sign of "rage":

> Wounded elephant[s] often get very angry and vent their rage on trees or inanimate objects. One of the district commissioners of

87 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 85–6, 127–33: "il se retourne et nous poursuit les uns après les autres en poussant des cris aigus à nous assourdir" / "se releva précipitamment en poussant des cris à fendre les oreilles, et enveloppa avec sa trompe Dérax, le premier chasseur qui était avec nous." / "il saisit avec sa trompe le chasseur qu'il trouva le plus près de lui, le jetta à terre, le broya avec ses pieds, puis le lança contre un arbre… Pendant ce fatal événement, nous avions retrogradé et rechargé nos armes; mais le bruit que firent nos baguettes ramena cet éléphant, qui, non content d'une victime, en voulait encore d'autres. De notre côté, tristes et furieux du malheur qui venait d'arriver, nous résolûmes de ne pas rentrer au camp sans avoir sa queue… Nous reconnûmes que nos balles avaient frappé au poumon, au coeur, aux épaules et par derrière les oreilles; en un mot, son corps en était criblé. Ayant eu raison de ce terrible éléphant, nous avions à deplorer la perte de notre chasseur".

88 Interview by Isaac Waanzi Hillary with a male community elder in Rimenze, 14 December 2021.

89 Simonse, *Kings of Disaster*, 327–8.

90 See Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge*, for the effects of trauma on elephant behaviour.

> Nimule told me that he wounded a big elephant near that place and on following it up found that it had gone for miles, pulling up and breaking down trees on the way, out of pure anger. I remember firing at an elephant once who, when I hit him, rushed towards me, screaming with rage. When he got about a third of the distance to me, he met a tree and tore off the branches, screaming the while. Having done this he turned round and rejoined the herd.[91]

This "Redirected-Aggression" is also reported by more recent elephant researchers: "When a tendency to attack is thwarted, for some reason (e.g. by fear of the opponent), an elephant may redirect his or her aggression to some other individual or object, such as thrashing bushes, pushing trees (*Bush-Bashing*), throwing sticks and/or grass (*Throw-Debris*), or threatening or attacking other, lesser elephants, smaller species, or humans in the vicinity".[92] Similarly, Poncet recounted a wounded elephant which, "dazed by its agony, passed by us two paces away without seeing us," entering the high grass where lions were hiding. "I soon heard a deadly roar, I understood that it was wrestling with the lions. Five minutes after a really infernal racket, there was a profound silence" and the lions left; the hunters discovered one lion's body crushed by the elephant.[93]

Reading anger and its extremes of rage and fury into such behaviour by elephants may be a very anthropomorphic response by these authors. But ethologists also use terms like aggression, frustration, and irritation to explain gestures, actions, and sounds. Whatever the limits of our understanding of elephant emotions, there is no doubt that their bodies express emotions to one another and, to a considerable extent, to human hunters and other observers, and indirectly to readers. The texts certainly involve misreadings: perhaps most obviously when ignoring the elephants' pain or claiming that they were freely choosing to engage in combat with hunters. Most of the aggressive

91 Stigand, *Hunting the Elephant*, 278-9.

92 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 113.

93 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 122–4: "Notre animal étourdi par son agonie, passa à deux pas de nous sans nous voir" / "j'entendis bientôt un rugissement foudroyant, je compris qu'il était aux prises avec les lions. Cinq minutes après un vacarme vraiment infernal, il se fit un profonde silence."

behaviour by elephants was intended to scare away predators and intimidate opponents rather than to invite a fight, let alone to "accept the challenge" of hunters armed with guns. But some individual elephants clearly did decide to confront rather than to flee from their attackers, and in doing so they possibly employed behaviours that they might also use in "duels" with other elephants or against predators. The "rogue" or formidable foe of European hunters was thus far from a purely imaginary construction. Rather, it was a self-perpetuating outcome of the spiral of violent encounters between humans and elephants in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Affecting the Hunter: Empathy and Equivalences

Yet there could also be other forms of elephant-human relations and relatedness beyond — and even within — the aggressive combats that some European authors sought to publicize. Evasion and aggression by elephants were both the most common behaviours that hunters were likely to experience and the most convenient to their construction of the noble hunt. Yet in depicting the elephant as a cunning foe, authors were both distorting elephant motives and, importantly, acknowledging their capacity to think and feel. As primatologist Frans de Waal argues, anthropomorphism can aid rather than hinder understanding of other species, particularly those with whom humans share the most characteristics: "To rail against it for the sake of scientific objectivity often hides a pre-Darwinian mindset, one uncomfortable with the notion of humans as animals."[94] Scientific objectivity has also required denial of emotional, empathic, and intuitive forms of communication between species, but as de Waal argues, empathy both evidences human commonalities with other animals and enhances our understanding of other species.[95]

De Waal particularly highlights "the ease with which elephants arouse human sympathy," despite major anatomical differences. This may in turn be explained partly by his assertion that "Of all animals, elephants are perhaps the most empathic," as well as

94 De Waal, *Are We Smart Enough*, 26.

95 De Waal, *The Age of Empathy.*

"extraordinarily sensitive". On a lighter note, he suggests that "most of all, we recognize their fun […] They seem to have a sense of humour."[96] The playful wallowing in a mudhole that de Waal cites here is the kind of behaviour that is entirely absent from accounts produced in a context of human threat and elephant wariness. But we do have one poignant instance, recounted by a northern Sudanese hunter to Katherine Petherick via her husband's translation:

> Wód Ali, who was one of the hunters and a soldier, speaking of elephants, told the following anecdote, being one of his many experiences, which Petherick thus translated to me: "Wód Ali, when at one of my hunting stations, at the Djour, Bahar il Gazal, roaming with his followers in all but impassable forests, found himself unexpectedly in the midst of a herd of adult male elephants in the enjoyment of a midday repose. Some shots were fired, and Wód Ali, endeavouring to approach a heavy tusker, to his surprise found himself closely followed by the largest elephant he had ever seen. Wód Ali rushed into a thick bush, and there ensconced himself in its centre, when he was horrified to see the animal pick up and examine his cap that he, in his endeavour to secrete himself, had lost, and had remained suspended to some of the long thorns that armed the branches of his hiding-place. He for some moments examined it minutely, then putting it on the ground, remained for a time stationary. The animal, more playful than wicked, again took up the cap, and placing it on the top of the bush, walked off, but followed by the delighted Ali, who, showing a want of gratitude, shot the elephant.[97]

Passing through several interlocutors, it is striking that the elephant's behaviour is interpreted consistently as "playful," since this is also how their behaviour in relation to objects is described by ethologists: "Elephants are very curious and are quick to investigate and play with anything new in their environment. Elephants are particularly engaged by novel man-made 'toys' […] This kind of Object-Play,

96 De Waal, *The Age of Empathy,* 119–21, 134–45; Bates et al., "Do Elephants Show Empathy?"; Poole, *Coming of Age*, 143–4.

97 Petherick and Petherick, *Travels*, vol. 1, 189–90.

especially with novel objects, can last 10 minutes or longer with the elephant totally absorbed".[98] The capacity of elephants for individual thought was also reported in an unusually peaceful context by Baker, who witnessed a large elephant coming up to an even larger *Heglig* tree (*Balanites Egyptiaca*): "The elephant paused for a short time, as though considering; he then butted his forehead suddenly against the trunk" which made the whole tree shake and dislodged the fruit, a favourite food of elephants.[99] Baker was told by his local guides that elephants "mutually assist each other, and that several engage together in the work of overturning a large tree"; indigenous knowledge and observation of elephants was always deeper than his own.[100]

However, the nature of the European sources means that most opportunities for direct observation or close encounters with elephants came only in the fraught context of pursuing and attacking them. While some authors like Baker sought to describe suffering elephants with complete dispassion and pseudo-scientific objectivity, others admitted more readily to empathy and emotion, particularly when confronted with the elephants' own empathy and social bonds. Poncet described his party's attempts to shoot one elephant with "the most beautiful tusks (for they were really phenomenal)," who was startled and took refuge in the middle of the herd: the other elephants gave "the assistance of their own bodies, by surrounding it". Poncet thus not only recognizes the deliberate attempt to protect the elephant by the herd but also infers their awareness that it was the object of the hunters. Eventually the men did get the chance to shoot and kill the tusker.

> Then the largest part of the herd fled, there remained only around ten who did not glimpse us, as we were hidden behind a bush. They came closer to the one that had just been killed, kneeling down while passing their tusks underneath the body to try to pick it up. They let out shrill and pathetic cries. We

98 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 121; Poole, *Coming of Age*, 143–51.

99 Baker, *Ismailia*, 1:435.

100 Baker, *Albert N'yanza*, 199.

> could have in this moment killed again two or three of them; but being upset and touched with pity for these animals that were so intelligent, I left them to lament in their way and in their own time the death of their companion. Having tried in vain to pick it up and understanding that this scene was for them macabre, they stood up and fled together…[101]

Such behaviour is documented by ethologists: "elephants may use the tusks, trunk, or feet to attempt to lift and even carry sick, dying, or dead elephants," and there is considerable evidence of elephants investigating the remains of their own kind "or considering them in quiet reflection".[102] But while scientific interpretations are cautious and dispassionate, Poncet is explicit about the emotional impact of witnessing the elephants' evident distress, which left him "upset and touched with pity" as well as recognising that the elephants had "their own way" of lamenting the death, which he interpreted as a marker of their intelligence.

Poncet also recorded an intriguing act by the elephant who killed one of his hunters, picked up the dead human body and "dropped it off at the foot of a large tree that it had uprooted and with which it covered the body, as is the custom of these animals"'.[103] Indeed, elephants "are known to collect vegetation and dirt with the trunk, feet or tusks and use it to cover a dead elephant or dead human".[104] Poncet had presumably heard enough other accounts of such behaviour to term it a "custom," reflecting a nineteenth-century

101 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 94–5: "qui avait encore de plus belles défenses (car elles étaient vraiment phénoménales)" / "les éléphants cherchaient à le garantir à l'aide de leurs propres corps, en l'environnant" / "Alors la plus grande partie du troupeau s'enfuit, il n'en resta qu'une dizaine qui ne nous aperçurent pas, car nous étions cachés derrière un buisson. Ils s'approchèrent de celui qui venait d'être tué, s'agenouillèrent en passant leurs défenses par dessous le cadavre pour essayer de le relever. Ils poussaient des cris aigus et lamentables. Nous aurions pu en ce moment en tuer encore deux ou trois; mais étant confus et touchés de la pitié de ces animaux si intelligents, je les laissai deplorer à leur manière et à leur aise la mort de leur compagnon. Ayant vainement essayé de le relever et comprenant que ce lieu leur était funeste, ils se redressèrent et s'enfuirent ensemble."

102 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 123-4.

103 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 131: "il le déposa au pied d'un grand arbre qu'il avait arraché et avec lequel il le recouvrit, comme c'est l'habitude de ces animaux."

104 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 123.

recognition of cultures in other species that has only recently become accepted again among biologists, who now also point to "customs" or "traditions" passed on within specific groups through social learning.[105] It remains a mystery, however, as to why elephants would cover the bodies of humans as well as elephants, though some interpret it as evidence that elephant empathy can extend to humans.[106]

The elephants' inherent empathy was evident in their social cooperation: Poncet reported that he had "seen a little elephant fall in a pit, to be lifted up by two large males" and Petherick was told by an indigenous witness of an elephant which had fallen into a pit-trap "being drawn out of it by the trunks of his companions".[107] The protectiveness of elephants towards other herd members, especially young ones, was also reported by Poncet when his party fired on a large herd of female elephants: "Two fell dead, and the others fled while pushing in front of them the child of one female that we had just slain".[108] A particularly heartbreaking account of the bond between a mother and a baby elephant was given by Petherick, who had announced a reward if a group of local Dinka hunters could capture a baby elephant alive for him. The hunters attacked its mother with spears, paying little attention to the young one

> but it had occupied my constant attention, and even sympathy; whilst its mother was making the most furious charges, it followed her at the top of its speed. With raised tail and ears, and its fresh shrill note and elevated trunk, it indicated plainly the same feelings which animated the mother. At length, the latter being sorely pressed, the baby, determined to defend its mother, also valiantly assailed the negroes, and, unmolested, was allowed to charge into their ranks in the hope of securing it; but, although an infant in appearance, it proved itself wor-

105 De Waal, *Are We Smart Enough*, 151–6, 51–53; Bates et al., "Knowledge Transmission"; Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge*; Whiten, "The Burgeoning Reach".

106 Poole, *Coming of Age*, 153–8; De Waal, *The Age of Empathy,* 142.

107 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 172: "J'ai vu un petit éléphant tomber dans un fossé, être relevé par deux gros mâles."; Petherick, *Egypt,* 415.

108 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 127: "Deux tombent mortes, et les autres s'enfuirent en poussant devant elles le petit d'une femelle que nous venions d'abattre."

> thy of more consideration. Attacking their legs, it tripped up several men, one after the other, and by its cries attracted the attention of the mother. A volley of spears was unnoticed by her, as she made a furious charge for the rescue of her young. This she effected; braving another shower of spears, as she caressed the recovered baby, who now placed itself between her forelegs. Renewed attacks, after a slight respite, called forth renewed energy on her part, in which the young elephant again took part, but, to my sorrow, was pierced by a negro so effectually that it dropped. The death of the mother soon followed, her entire body being perforated with lances; some she had broken in her attempts to extricate them.[109]

Clearly even Petherick himself was moved by the mutual efforts of mother and baby to defend each other. The young elephant's behaviour and body language unmistakeably communicated its "feelings" to the author as well as defying his intentions completely. The mother's "caress" in the midst of everything was, according to ethologists, a "common behaviour in an elephant family" to protect, reassure, and comfort calves.[110] The loss of the two elephants would also have impacted on their family and even wider social groups; Petherick described the mother as "evidently an old elephant, her long and taper tusks weighing fifty pounds each," and thus likely to be the kind of matriarch on whose social and geographical knowledge other elephants relied.[111]

Despite admitting his "sympathy" for the elephant calf, Petherick immediately segued from its death into a matter-of-fact discussion of the differences between male and female tusks, as if to remind himself and his readers of the reason why he was there at all. One still wonders why he chose to include such an emotive account, but perhaps he wished to demonstrate the challenges of capturing young animals, given the increased interest and demand for living "specimens" in European zoos and menageries (he

109 Petherick, *Egypt*, 416-7.

110 Poole and Granli, "Signals, Gestures," 117.

111 Petherick, *Egypt*, 417.

was acting as agent in Khartoum for several zoological societies).[112] Although responsible for the attack on the elephant, he was also able to distance himself from the deaths through his reliance on local hunters. On another occasion his demands for ivory prompted a Zande community to conduct a larger-scale elephant hunt using fire, and again Petherick expressed some emotion: "although their tusks proved a rich prize, I was touched at the massacre".[113] Other European authors similarly condemned indigenous hunting practices, even as those who were hunters, like Baker, expressed no remorse for the prolonged and painful deaths that their own inadequate weapons inflicted.[114]

Yet there is considerable evidence that indigenous societies in the region went further than Europeans in recognising the personhood of elephants and the parallels between humans and elephants. Recent interviews in South Sudan highlighted the social bonds between elephants and their protectiveness of their young, as well as the parallels between human and elephant gestation and lactation periods and even female anatomy. In the Dinka language, "the elephant is a person".[115] Howell's 1945 account of Nuer elephant-hunting detailed the equivalences between killing elephants and people, as well as the special ritual role of those considered most closely related ancestrally and spiritually to elephants.[116] Such relationships may help to explain the animosity that Poncet encountered from a Rek Dinka community in 1861 "because of the massacre that we were making of their elephants".[117] Similarly, a Catholic missionary travelling with Petherick's caravan in 1859 near the River Yei in Equatoria encountered a *monye* (chief) who refused to allow elephant meat or tusks to be brought into the village "because he thinks that men originated from the elephants".[118]

112 Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, 247; Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts*, 44-80.

113 Petherick, *Egypt*, 471.

114 Baker, *Albert N'yanza*, 1:203–7; Schweinfurth, *The Heart of Africa*, 207.

115 Hillary, Amuom and Leonardi, *Elephants are Stories Now*.

116 Howell, "A Note on Elephants".

117 Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc*, 100–101: "c'est à cause du massacre que nous faisions de leurs éléphants".

118 Morlang, "The Journeys," 118–9.

Interspecies empathy could both transcend and be used to construct racial difference. One of the earliest European travellers in Southern Sudan, the German explorer Ferdinand Werne, accompanied the Ottoman-Egyptian expedition up the Nile in 1840–41 and employed a young "huntsman", Sale, from "Mahass" in northernmost Sudan. Sale and Werne witnessed the death of an elephant from a cabin window when it was attacked by the expedition troops on the riverbank:

> He extended his ears up and down like the opening of an umbrella, not so much from pain, as from the balls raining on them, and sticking in the ear-laps, as we found afterwards, having only penetrated one skin. He was already blinded by the shots, for in elephant hunts they first aim at the eyes, and few missed […] At last he sat on his hind-quarters, stretched forth his fore-feet, and died in this half-standing posture. I could not have shot him myself so close, for the blood running from his eyes and numerous wounds moved my compassion too much to do so; even Sale said to me, in a melancholy tone, "El messkin!" (the poor creature).[119]

Werne reinforces racial difference in recording this episode — "even Sale" — and went on to emphasize Sale's fear when Werne ordered him to retrieve the elephant's tail (a trophy even for a non-hunter like Werne). Yet we can nevertheless see that the elephant's suffering evoked empathy both across species and across the racial distinctions that Europeans sought to construct. As in so many of these European accounts, the elephant's body, movements, and behaviour are vividly described, bringing the animal to life in the pages not so much by the skill of the author as by the power and impression that the animal's "passionate body" makes upon him. It is particularly striking that the eyes were the target of the hunters, given the long and continuing history of humans perceiving emotions and soul in the eyes of elephants.[120]

119 Werne, *Expedition to Discover*, vol. 2, 181-2.

120 Rothfels, *Elephant Trails*, 36-55.

Conclusion

"El Messkin!" We might all share Sale's sentiment at reading the evident prolonged pain and suffering of the elephants in the pages of these hunting accounts. Indeed, as Rothfels suggests, drawing on Mary Midgley, pity is likely to be the principal emotional reaction evoked among readers by descriptions of elephants under attack since at least the late twentieth century. Pity is in itself an important, necessary form of interspecies empathy. As Rothfels also shows, such reactions were not uncommon even in the nineteenth century and "helped galvanize critics who believed that elephants should be protected from overexploitation," including some hunters themselves.[121] These concerns culminated in the 1900 London Convention for the preservation of wildlife in colonial Africa, which advocated hunting regulations and game reserves. The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan saw immediate legislation and creation of its first game reserve just a year later. The perceived failure of its government to enforce game protections helped to stimulate the creation of the Society for the Protection of the Wild Fauna of the Empire, a powerful British lobby group which would push for further hunting restrictions and eventual national parks in African colonies, including Sudan.[122] Anthropomorphism and empathy for animals became part of the British "civilising mission," used to differentiate and educate Africans, perpetuating the nineteenth-century European hunters' emphasis on the cruelty of indigenous hunting methods.[123] The pity evoked by dying elephants in nineteenth-century hunting literature thus had lasting effects on colonial conservation and lives on in the iconography of elephants in international conservation up to now.

Yet the elephants in the nineteenth-century sources were not simply "pathetic" and "pitiable"[124] if we take seriously the authors' depictions of the animals as intimidating, unpredictable, emotional, decision-making individuals. As Midgley herself emphasized, while the

121 Rothfels, "Killing Elephants," 56-7; Rothfels, *Elephant Trails*, 59.

122 Carruthers, "Lessons from South Africa," 306–7; Day and Garside, "Wildlife Management in South Sudan," 617–8.

123 Shadle, "Cruelty and Empathy".

124 Rothfels, "Killing Elephants," 56–7.

European hunters engage in "self-deception" and "a false view" of what they are achieving by shooting animals, "these fantasies, however, are not misleading in their central implication that the elephant is conscious, and in some sense a worthy adversary [. . .] an *opponent*—a being like themselves in having its own emotions and interest."[125]

By exploring these descriptions not only as self-glorifying and foe-aggrandising fabrications of human authors but also as texts imprinted by the animals themselves, this paper has argued that they reveal how elephants were attempting to deal with the sudden escalation of hunting in nineteenth-century Southern Sudan. While caution and evasion were the elephants' prevalent responses to human threats, the effects of hunting also increased the likelihood of more aggressive encounters. Individual elephants who had been wounded or traumatized by previous hunts could have been more likely to go on the offensive against hunters, seeking to eliminate the threat or to protect herd members. Collectively, the killing of older male and especially female elephants entailed the loss of knowledge and guidance that might have kept elephants away from humans and taught them caution. The monstrous "rogue" elephant beloved by European hunter-authors was thus an embellished version of how some elephants may have behaved in response to the escalation of hunting for ivory. It incorporated a repertoire of aggressive sounds, gestures, and actions that elephants do employ against threats and which profoundly impacted on hunters: the individual elephants communicated their intention to intimidate and drive away human foes very effectively.

The rogue elephant was thus a product of the effects of hunting on elephants, who were in turn shaping human culture through their impact on these authors and their readers. Arguably, this entangled interspecies constitution of the aggressive elephant had more influence on subsequent colonial policies and elephant histories in Southern Sudan than the pity elicited by accounts of dying elephants. The British colonial administration of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1899–1956) viewed elephants primarily as a revenue source, both

125 Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, 16.

directly through a government monopoly on ivory and indirectly through the sale of hunting licenses to British and Egyptian officers or international visitors. Thousands of elephants continued to be killed every year, with critics labelling the Game Preservation Department the "Game destruction dept".[126] As the colonial economy increasingly focused on the enforced cultivation of crops like cotton, the government sought to assert a role as protector of people and crops through the "control" of elephants.[127] Even a century later, interviews in Western Equatoria revealed that the vernacular term for game wardens translates as "shooter-of-elephants".[128]

As late as the 1950s, Peter Molloy, a British game warden, evoked aspects of the old trope of the rogue elephant in describing hunting two "notoriously bad-tempered old bull elephants" with "angry little piggy eyes" who "had been raiding crops at a village". Even though the elephants did not charge aggressively at the party but moved "slowly and deliberately" towards them, Molloy still wrote that "we were treated to one of the most magnificent and awe-inspiring sights in Africa — that of a big bull elephant coming out to do battle for his life". Molloy did not want to kill them but wounded one "enough to give him a slight headache [. . .] and teach him not to be so aggressive next time," adding that the elephants immediately fled to the "sanctuary of the Acholi hills, seventy miles away".[129] The paradox of such descriptions is that they simultaneously imagined elephants as willing and formidable combatants in a fatal duel and recognized their individual agency, affective power, and emotional capacity. The aggressive elephant thus lived on into the twentieth century as both an effect of hunting and as the justification for it, in the context of a colonial economy that largely prioritized ivory and crops over empathy for elephants.[130] The foundations had been laid since the nineteenth century for later wartime economies in postcolonial Sudan in which elephant populations were decimated for ivory and meat.

126 Carruthers, "Lessons from South Africa," 312.

127 Day and Garside, "Wildlife Management," 617; Molloy, *The Cry of the Fish Eagle*, 191.

128 Hillary, Amuom and Leonardi, *Elephants Are Stories Now*, 15–16.

129 Molloy, *The Cry of the Fish Eagle*, 193–4.

130 In contrast to Kenya: Shadle, "Cruelty and Empathy".

Cultural representations of animals could thus have real implications for living animals as well as for the people who lived with them. But those representations were never simply human-authored: they were products of interspecies encounters and relations, shaped by individual animals and collective behaviours. European accounts of hunting in nineteenth-century Southern Sudan reveal emotional, embodied experiences and observations of elephants by hunters. And importantly, they indicate something of the reverse: the impacts of intensified hunting on the bodies, behaviour, emotions, and social lives of elephants. The argument of this paper and the tragedy of the history it tells is that we may be able to approach elephants as living, subjective beings more closely through the narratives of the hunters who killed them than in the contemporary South Sudanese landscapes that they did so much to shape.

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