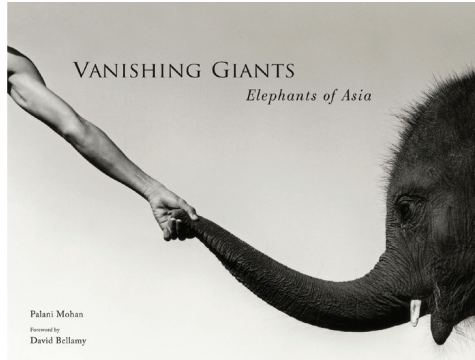


TOKO BUKU

Reviews of English language books on Indonesia

By Pak Bill

Vanishing Giants: Elephants of Asia by Palani Mohan



Asia's grandest animal, the Indian elephant (*elephas maximus*) moves in herds of 20-30 and stands only three meters

high. This species has small ears and isn't as hairy or as large as the African variety. While its relative in Africa flourishes, the elephant population of Asia numbers less than 40,000.

In essence a pygmy pachyderm, this noble creature was native to Java, but the Javan species became extinct shortly after Europeans arrived. Dwarf elephants lived on Sulawesi, Flores, Timor and other islands of the Lesser Sundas 18,000 years ago.

An estimated 1000 exist today on Borneo, mostly limited to Sabah in East Malaysia in the northeast. Another estimated 350-400 survive on Sumatra where the animal is steadily losing habitat to encroaching settlements, industrial estates and oil palm plantations.

To stop the unending conflict between man and beast, hundreds were taken to Sumatran 'Elephant Training Centers' such as Way Kambas in Lampung Province in 1985. The animal is equally beleaguered in the rest of Asia where it is both king and a commoner - worshiped as a God or used as a logo on everything from PVC pipes to medicine bottles.

Vanishing Giants is a new coffee table book, shot in powerful black and white, which chronicles the threatened animal's struggle to find a place in a rapidly urbanizing world. The photo book also contains gripping images of the lives of the people who live and work alongside the elephant.

Even as its African cousin thrives to the point where it has to be periodically culled, the Asian elephant is endangered as never before because of its tangled relationship with man. Once the animal is broken by its human master, it is put right to work as a tourist attraction or beast of burden in logging camps.

Author Palani Mohan was born in Chennai, India, and moved to Australia as a child. His photographic career began 20 years ago at the *Sydney Morning Herald* and he has been based in London, Hong Kong, Bangkok and now Kuala Lumpur. The photographer's work (www.palanimohan.com/) is regularly featured in leading magazines and newspapers. This is the fourth photo book he has published.

Mohan first encountered elephants before the altar of the family home in the form of Ganesha, the Hindu elephant god of luck and auspicious beginnings, who has the head of an elephant and the body of a human. He was always

attracted to elephants for the six "very long" years he traveled on assignment, following and chronicling their lives through Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Indonesia.

The black and white images used in the book carry with them an inherent dignity and power. With the medium's immense exposure latitude, black and white film is capable of great contrast control and tonal subtlety. These qualities are evident in Mohan's dramatic portrayures of this magnificent animal.

The memorable photographs show intertwined trunks, tears rolling down the cheeks of distressed elephants, elephants splashing in rivers, throwing basketballs, caged in wooden crates, kissing their trainers with their trunks, being prodded by a sharp tridents to "break" them.

In the cover image, a human hand reaches out to hold an elephant's extended trunk, embodying the idea of what the book is also about - a visual tale of two species - that of the elephant and that of the people with whom it shares its habitat in a sort of deadly and fateful embrace.

Throughout Asia, a love-hate relationship exists where elephants and humans live in close proximity. It's both a love story and a history of animosity, a study of shattered symbiosis, with the elephant winding up as the loser in the competition between the two species for space and resources.

Vanishing Giants reveals many little known facts. For example, a series of graphic photographs show the breaking in of an elephant. Using traditional methods and tools such as nail-studded sticks, hooked prods, ropes and a wooden crush, this process takes three agonizing days until the animal's spirit is broken. We learn that elephant skin may look tough, but it is in fact very sensitive and wounds heal slowly.

With a perceptive foreword by British environmentalist David Bellamy, this collection of extraordinary images is provocative, intriguing and in some instances alarming. But the handsome large format book is not simply a masterful series of photographs but an intimate and up-close glimpse into the world of this gentle giant and its complex relationship to man.

Vanishing Giants: Elephants of Asia by Palani Mohan, Editions Didier Millet 2009, introduction by Jason Gagliardi, ISBN 9814217301, paperback 120 pages, Didier Millet 2008, dimensions 12.1 x 9.1 x 1.1 inches, weight 2.3 lbs.

Available for Rp. 480,000 from Editions Didier Millet, Jl. Bypass Ngurah Rai 96B/331, Sanur, Bali, 80228, tel. 0361 284 153, fax: 0361 284 154, email: meliana@edmbooks.com.sg.

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