

SIGHTINGS
OF THE SACRED
DANIEL NAUDÉ

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OF THE SACRED**

CATTLE IN UGANDA, MADAGASCAR AND INDIA

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For my son, Benjamin

THE ANIMAL HAS SECRETS WHICH, UNLIKE THE SECRETS OF CAVES, MOUNTAINS, SEAS, ARE SPECIFICALLY ADDRESSED TO MAN.

— John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?*

Observing cattle is for me a form of meditation, a type of therapy that is actuated through intense visual engagement. The effect is similar to the feeling of serenity brought about by gazing at the waves of the ocean. I use portrait photography to capture and communicate that serenity: a poised stillness that I perceive as a radiant presence, and in which I recognise a mutuality between myself, landscape and animal. This mutuality can be extended to the viewer through the medium of the photograph.

Like many African animals, the Ankole cattle found in Uganda are appreciated at first sight for their exoticism. Western big-game hunters pursued the Ankole as they would lions or buffalo, their enormous horns collected as trophies to decorate the mansions of the European aristocracy. My initial attraction to these animals was not dissimilar: I found them peculiarly beautiful and outlandish, their horns too heavy and unwieldy for effective defence or predatory assertion, their bodies and demeanour too fine and stately for unassisted survival in the wild. To photograph them was to possess and preserve their beauty, perhaps a response to their apparent need for human ownership.

In Uganda Ankole have been placed in separate reserves to safeguard them, a practice that is reminiscent of protecting wild animals against extinction by preserving their territory. The threat to the Ankole lies in crossbreeding with Holstein cattle. Farmers worldwide practice crossbreeding to ensure the optimum productivity of their cattle, and, in some cases, their survival, when a breed does not possess the necessary qualities for enduring harsh territories. At the same time, however, crossbreeding is a certain way of steering a breed towards extinction. Statistics show that Ankole cattle could be outbred within the next forty years due to crossbreeding with the Holstein, which produces more milk and therefore provides a higher income for farmers.

Ironically, the practice of keeping Ankole in nature reserves has resulted in a different form of crossbreed, the Ankole-African buffalo, which I photographed for this series. Both the spontaneous crossbreeding of Ankole with African buffalo and the controlled crossbreeding of Ankole with Holstein point to the breed's extinction; a first-generation Ankole-African buffalo cross already shows smaller horns. In Rwanda the cattle of the kings, the Watusi Longhorn – whose enormous horns could reach a span of two to three metres from tip to tip – is already extinct. The demise of the Watusi implies the loss of cultural wealth and knowledge, and in Uganda cattle owners' desperate efforts to preserve the purity of the Ankole breed are similarly about preserving and protecting their indigenous cultural capital. These animals are associated with bygone royalty, a connotation enhanced by the animal's aura of dignity and strength.

My encounters with the Ankole in Uganda instilled in me a desire to extend the photographic series, perhaps to go back in history and track the origin of the present-day head of cattle. Then, on a visit to Paris, I saw a funeral post of the Madagascan Bara tribe in the Musée du quai Branly. The post was decorated with Zebu skulls, and pointed me to Madagascar as another site of discovery.

Madagascar – part African, part Indian – is a raw and remote country that relies on the simple technologies of ancient times; for its inhabitants life revolves around survival. In some areas people still trade rather than buying and selling, and they choose to invest

their money in buying Zebu cattle. Cross or outbreeding poses no threat to the Zebu since no other breeds exist on the island. In contrast to the almost religious awe with which Ugandans regard their cattle, the cattle of Madagascar appear to play dual roles in their owners' lives. On the one hand, cattle are capital; the interaction between human and animal is governed by husbandry, and the relationship is one of master to slave. The Zebu is employed to pull ancient ploughs and carts or wagons that still run on wooden wheels. On the other hand, people believe that their cattle have supernatural functions. Investigating both these aspects while maintaining my focus on the interactions between animal, human and landscape, I travelled to the *fady* (forbidden) tombs that are situated four days' drive south of a small town called Sakaraha, stopping to photograph Zebu at a cattle market in Ambalavao on the way.

In photographing the Zebu I was struck by what seemed to be a quiet patience in the animals, which appear resigned to accepting humans' claims to their ownership. They carry their forbearance without sacrificing the dignity of their Ankole brothers and sisters, suggesting a connecting thread between Ankole and Zebu that perhaps tracks their physical journeys between continents and islands. Yet, it seemed to me that resignation and submission had to some extent replaced radiance.

The concept of *fady* steered my understanding in a different direction. Apart from being instrumental in the labours of agriculture, and by extension their owners' survival, the Zebu also fulfil a more ethereal role in Malagasy culture. The Malagasy burial grounds are forbidden territories to foreigners. Closely interwoven with the Malagasy regard for cattle is a conception of this beast as a vehicle to the hereafter, a magical function that they perform in the forbidden areas where their owners rest after death. The Zebu skull and horns that decorate the funeral posts of humans are meant to represent the Zebu that will transport them, while the Zebu as sacrificial animal serves to provide sustenance on these spiritual journeys as much as it provides sustenance to the gods. While these abilities are believed to strengthen the Zebu in their lives of labour, they are even more vital to their owners' spiritual wellbeing.

Interwoven with the belief in the esoteric gifts of the Zebu is another phenomenon. Some Malagasy tribes find in certain trees the same mystical presence that they believe resides in their cattle, and they credit these trees with similar powers of transporting humans to the afterlife. This led me to explore the trees as photographic subject matter, seeking to convey the same numinous quality that I perceived in the animals.

To complete the series I travelled to India, where Hindus venerate cattle as earthly manifestations of divinity, treating them with a deep love and respect. I travelled to the southern regions of India to photograph the Mattu Pongal festival, an annual celebration in honour of the vital role that cattle play in preparing the soil for planting, raising the crops and bringing in the harvests.

In contrast to the almost undisturbed landscapes of Uganda and Madagascar, in India I found landscapes densely cluttered with the debris of civilisation. Telephone and electricity wires are everywhere; road signs and buildings dominate the seemingly endless urban terrain in which humans and cattle live and work side by side in equal number. The disjunction between landscape and animal soon became central to the photographs of cows that I took in India, the cluttered context somehow heightening the animals' aura of otherworldliness.

In India spirituality is central to life. Divinity is perceived throughout nature – in anthills, mountains, rivers and animals. Trees become shrines; they impart the same aura of divinity as cattle, providing space for worship that is considered as holy as a temple. People create representations of animals as earthly incarnations of their gods, and the bull and cow are core characters in this rich theatre of spirituality, chief among them Nandi the Bull, the protector of Shiva's celestial dwelling, according to the Hindu faith.

My travels to India, Madagascar and Uganda brought me a new understanding of the ancient lineages that connect the cattle I encountered in these countries. I also became aware of a connection that remains visible in their bearing, a stance they carry to this day, regardless of their homelands. I sensed in these cattle something that is measured less in bloodline and physicality, more in terms of conscious awareness. That presence –

their radiance that enriches human interaction with them, to the extent that they shape cultures – is the subject of my photography.

My decision to take a particular image of an animal emerges from a reciprocity between us, a singular moment in which my presence and that of the animal merge. This moment is not stage-managed; the process does not entail any control over the animal's stance, as would be customary in human portraiture. The animal's bearing cannot be arranged or controlled. It does not pose; there is no pretence or acting, no affectation. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, it is possible to capture character, to create portraits of individuals rather than records of perfect specimens. The animal's stance is honest, direct, unscripted by the norms and dictates of beauty. The landscape in which the animal stands offers no idyllic stage, no fictitious backdrop to heighten the illusion of distinction or narrative. Indeed, it is possible to perceive in the landscape an equally strong presence, which may be similar or different to that of the animal. As such, landscape becomes a highly significant vehicle that expands the range of expression available to me in portraying the animal, touching on origin, history, function and a more liminal realm, all of which contribute to the aura that I wish the viewer to experience.

To my mind, it is this liminal realm that shapes the connections between animal, land and myself, so that when I photograph them I can recognise an animal's individuality, those characteristics and bodily expressions that convey a uniqueness in personality. These understandings soften the unanswerability of many of my searches, making me realise that the more I discover, the less I know.

UGANDA