

# I

## WORSHIPPING

### ANIMALS

The word 'animal' means possessing vital breath or spirit, a short step from the spirit world. The religious significance of animals has been a constant throughout history; in the unceasing quest of human beings to make sense of their world through stories and images, what more vivid material could there be for the imagination than the multiplicity of forms, colours and behaviour that make up the animal kingdom.

Animals carry our needs and desires, and it is precisely because they cannot speak our language that they represent something pure, uncontaminated by human duplicities and conceits. Take birds, those airy spirits soaring heavenwards, defying gravity and leaving behind the land to which we are bound. It's easy to see why they were perceived as messengers from the gods, or the dead, and why they are the stuff of myth. Who hasn't longed to climb on the eagle's back, to cast off from the cliffside or float upwards on a thermal? While watching birds and *seeing* them, one becomes for the moment a free spirit with them.

Identifying with animals is as close as we can come to the early relationship between animal and human that is hypothesised. Of the Kalahari Bushmen, or San people, Laurens van der Post writes that they

and the animals ‘participated so deeply of one another’s being that the experience could almost be called mystical. For instance, [they] seemed to *know* what it actually felt to be an elephant, a lion, an antelope. . . . it seemed to me that [the San’s] world was one without secrets between one form of being and another.’ This is not an airy-fairy Garden of Eden, but one in which humans survived by killing and eating animals. For it seems likely that primitive men identified so closely with animals for this very reason: they had to know them in order to be successful as hunters. Indeed some believed that in eating the meat of an animal, they incorporated its being into their own; they became that animal.

Thus animals must be hunted and killed, but in this they must also be venerated. Veneration led to totemism and on to deification, the mystery of animals allied to the mystery of gods: that which cannot be understood must be propitiated and worshipped. In many cases the animal was not worshipped – though it may have been revered – for its own sake but because it was thought to represent, or even to manifest, a god. Hindus, for example, who refrain from eating cows and even to this day allow them to wander their traffic-bound streets, do so from a long-held tradition of respect for the ‘sacred cow’ as goddess and mother rather than for love of the beasts themselves.

\* \* \*

Worship, reverence, respect – all words that refer to a space between the subject and object. There is no place for over-familiarity here, certainly none for indulgence; these are lean words describing a serious state of mind on the part of the worshipper. As to the animals, they remain at all times dignified, a little aloof, worthy of worship.

So let’s take a look at some of the many animals that have been worshipped by humans over the millennia. Those San of southern Africa made studies on rock, both paintings and engravings, of a power and technical mastery that equals or even excels the more widely known European cave paintings. Certainly the variety of animals depicted is greater, and the San could not have painted these animals – eland and other antelope, cattle, horses, elephants, rhinos, hippos and many other mammals, as well as birds and bees, snakes and the occasional crab – so accurately without knowing how they were put together, what lay under their skin. And, as Leonardo da Vinci was to show thousands of years

later, there is no better way of finding this out than by dissecting, or in the case of the San, butchering them. But these African animals were not mere meat and were, it now appears, more than just objects of wonder. Recent study of African rock art shows that these images, packed as they are with symbolism and metaphor, reflect without any doubt the role of animals in religious beliefs and practices and the link they were believed to provide between the physical and spirit worlds.

Central to the belief of the San was that the altered state of consciousness achieved by the shamans in their 'trance dance' put them in touch with the spirit world and allowed them to cure disease, foretell the future and perform other supernatural acts. And central to this, as messengers and go-betweens, were animals. A shaman often identified with a particular animal, which would act as his spirit guide and provider of 'potency'. The eland was the most highly prized and most invoked of the ritual animals, as it was believed to be especially endowed with this potency. The shaman possessing eland power would be able to see what eland saw, feel what they felt and know where they were at any given time; useful knowledge also for the hunter. This connection was confirmed by a San less than fifty years ago, who described 'hunting techniques and rituals as if there were no difference between the two'. The healing dances were often combined with the killing and sharing of an animal for food in a joint celebration: van der Post was told that 'ever since the days of the first Bushman, no hunter had ever killed an eland without thanking it with a dance'.

The eland gains its status not just on account of its size and beauty, but because of its fat. To all hunter-gatherers fat is highly desirable, but eland fat is not only prized as food. The supernatural potency tapped into by the shaman is believed to reside specifically in the fat, which is also used in initiations, rites of passage and menstruation ceremonies. In the trance dance the shaman trembles, sweats profusely, staggers and bleeds from the nose as he approaches entry to the spirit world, actions that mimic the behaviour of an eland as it dies.

Besides the four-footed animals that one can almost smell as they pound across the painted rocks of southern Africa, there are some spectacular birds – and some engagingly comical ones. For the San, as for us all, flight is a metaphor for escaping our earthbound limitations, and nothing evokes this so well as the soaring flock of birds at Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape, their ochre forms silhouetted against the cloud-like grey rock. The trance experience was identified with the sensation



*Flying, soaring, wheeling – the birdlike sensations associated in San mythology with spirituality are personified in a rock painting from The Drakensberg, South Africa.*

of weightlessness, which is likewise vividly captured in the rock painting illustrated. But it was the very earthbound ostrich that fulfilled so many needs for early Africans, providing them with eggs to eat and the shells as containers, currency and jewellery; with meat and oil; with feathers and leather. These too were surely worshipped, but we have no evidence of this other than a wry caricature on a rock face.

\* \* \*

Birds had a role in the religion of the ancient Egyptians. Horus, god of the sky, was portrayed as a man with the head of a hawk or sometimes simply as a hawk. He is best known for his single eye, lost in battle but later restored, and adopted by the ancient Egyptians as a symbol of protection. The Egyptians didn't worship birds or animals per se, but believed that the gods resided in animals and accordingly treated them with great reverence, often mummifying and burying them alongside their pharaohs: pets to keep their masters company in the afterlife, along with other animals to provide them with food.

Another ancient Egyptian god with a man's body and a bird's head was Thoth, usually depicted with the head of an ibis, though sometimes, confusingly, with that of a baboon. Thoth, god of equilibrium, acted as a mediator in disputes, as well as being credited as the inventor of writing and a dazzling array of sciences including mathematics and astronomy, 'the true author of every work of every branch of knowledge, human and divine'. One wonders how the little ibis head could hold so much and how its attribution came about; the Egyptians regarded the long curved beak as symbolic of the crescent moon, which was associated with wisdom, but more prosaically such a beak must surely have been useful for picking up all those pieces of knowledge.



*Thoth, here with the head of an ibis, on a relief in the temple of Ramesses II in Abydos, Egypt.*

The giant of the Egyptian pantheon was the sphinx, possibly better equipped for intellectual capability with its human head, set upon the flanks of a lion and sometimes also bearing wings. But though in Egyptian mythology sphinxes were massive, benevolent pussycats acting as guardians to the tombs of the pharaohs, the feminine Greek version is altogether more threatening: a monster with female head, lioness's body, eagle wings and serpent's tail, prone to setting obscure riddles and devouring all those who fail to answer them. This Sphinx had a predilection for young men, but finally met her match in Oedipus and flung herself off a cliff.

The Greek gods had an intimate relationship with animals, and none more so than Zeus. His sacred animals were the bull and the eagle and he used both to his advantage, seducing Europa (who subsequently gave birth to Minos) in the guise of a bull, and as an eagle abducting the beautiful youth Ganymede. Zeus took advantage of his sister Hera's soft spot for animals by disguising himself as an abandoned baby cuckoo before jumping on her, but it was as a swan that he performed his most dramatic seduction – or was it rape? In perhaps the most famous rendering of the myth of Leda and the swan, there is little doubt. Yeats's poem needs no illustrating; it is one of the most vivid and explicit descriptions in poetry:

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?

Leda succumbs, and thus is conceived Helen of Troy.

\* \* \*

Animals don't necessarily have to embody or even represent gods in order to play a part in spiritual belief. Animism is a broad term for the belief system shared by indigenous people before the advent of formal, god-based religion; less a religion than a way of viewing the world, making sense of it, as people explored what it was to be alive. For them there was no division between the spiritual and the physical dimension, and souls were shared by humans and animals alike, an inclusive, 'innocent' attitude towards life closer to the idea of paradise before the arrival of the serpent.

In *The Golden Bough* Frazer wrote of the people of Calabar, in southern Nigeria, who 'believe that every person has four souls, one of which always lives outside of his or her body in the form of a wild beast in the forest. This external soul, or bush soul . . . may be almost any animal, for example, a leopard, a fish, or a tortoise; but it is never a domestic animal and never a plant.' He goes on to say that the life of the man is so intimately bound up with the animal, which he regards as his bush soul, that death or injury of the animal may also bring about death or injury of the man. 'And, conversely, when the man dies, his bush soul can no longer find a place of rest, but goes mad and rushes into the fire or charges people and is knocked on the head, and that is an end of it.'

The beliefs of the Australian Aborigines are centred in the land, and they regard animals and plants as the creators of that land. In their Creation stories, the world was flat and barren until the Rainbow Serpent awoke from its sleep and pushed through the surface of the earth, creating lakes and rivers and giving life to animals, plants and humans, who then helped to form the land. This gives to all a common kinship and a common soul; reincarnation allows all living forms to intermingle and exchange souls. From this belief comes an inevitable respect for all fellow beings: you do not abuse your family, and especially not your ancestors. It's a complex set of beliefs not to be explored here, but the inclusion of animals (and plants) in the hierarchy and their status as equals with humans has an obvious effect on how they are regarded and treated.

In the formative time of the Creation, which the Aborigines called the Dreamtime, the various species were believed not yet to be fully formed, the boundaries between human and animal remaining undefined. In what came to be known as totemism, a person would take on a special relationship with one particular species or individual animal, his totem. Some totems are not chosen but bestowed at birth or even conception, and this totemic being, most often an animal, guides and influences the child, often appearing in dreams.

\* \* \*

The Aborigines of Australia are not alone in having totem animals. For most people the totem image that comes immediately to mind is the carved pole of the North American Indians – huge, colourful and teeming with stylised birds, animals and fabulous beasts representing the family of the chieftain – but there are more subtle examples that also delineate clan. The Tlingit, an indigenous people of the Northwest Pacific Coast, were animists and carved intricately designed bowls, utensils and ceremonial rattles incorporating ravens, oystercatchers, frogs, bears and other totem animals. They also portrayed deliberately ambiguous creatures spanning the 'moieties', or divisions, of Tlingit kinship that blurred the boundaries between one animal species and another. Describing a bowl carved from the horn of a mountain sheep and decorated with abalone shell, portraying an animal that could be a wolf but equally a marmot, the anthropologist Robert Storrie writes: 'Trying to decide exactly what creature is carved on the bowl is probably to misunderstand the carver's intention. At an important level the design can



*Rattles depicting ravens and other animals, here frogs, are used in ceremonial dances to demonstrate the power of chiefs throughout the Northwest Coast. A shaman reclines on the raven's back, and the sound of the rattle is believed to form a conduit to the supernatural world.*

represent the transformational potential of all beings. Ambiguity acts to give the bowl a blank character in which changing identities can be discovered. They can be wolves for me and marmots for someone else, yet neither of us is wrong.' A good lesson for us in the twenty-first century, with our obsessive need to classify and pigeon-hole.

Relating to a particular animal and identifying with it, even emulating it, is common to many societies and is still practised today. Of the twelve signs of the astrological zodiac familiar to Westerners, seven (and a half if you count Sagittarius) are animals. And most of us will have found similarities – in our friends, if not ourselves – to the animal characteristics of the star signs: a stubborn Taurus with his feet solidly on the ground, that slippery Pisces you can't get hold of, an Aries trampling everything in sight. It's surprising how often the traits fit. The Chinese astrological signs

are all animals, the twelve that came to bid farewell to Buddha before he died, after each of which he named a year. And anyone interested in finding their own 'spirit animal' can have a ball on the internet – though you might do better going off into the woods and sitting under a tree for a few hours.

\* \* \*

The Buddha is reputed to have sat under a tree for forty-nine days in order to achieve enlightenment, and it is tempting to speculate on the insects and animals that would have visited him during his still and silent vigil; it seems likely that in his heightened state of consciousness he would have *seen* them, been truly aware of their essence. And there would have been many, for the tree he sat under was a pipal tree, a sacred fig, and figs are dependent on wasps in a complex system of mutual gain, while the fruit itself feeds an array of exotic birds such as orioles and barbets as well as a variety of mammals. What symbolism here for anyone with the time, and the eyes, to see.

The Buddhist creed insists on the sanctity of life for all sentient beings, with no division between human and animal. This means that taking life for food is not allowed and the eating of meat is forbidden; animals must be treated with compassion and empathy at all times. So far, so good. Yet Buddhists also believe that humans are reincarnated as animals because of misdeeds in this life, which immediately implies the inferiority of the animal even if it is held that both human and animal have the potential for enlightenment, the ultimate goal in Buddhism. Leaving aside this somewhat obscure ideology, the avoidance of violence, however theoretically desirable, appears far from reality when one considers the law of 'kill in order to survive' that maintains most of the animal kingdom. But if it reduces by any tiny percentage the suffering inflicted by our current methods of meat production, then it is surely to be encouraged. If Buddhism has much to say about the sanctity of animal life, it offers little about individual animals. There is though a touching tale about the Buddha himself: in a previous lifetime he was said to have sacrificed his own life in order to feed a tiger and her two cubs, trapped by the snow and starving, his reasoning being that it was better to save three lives than to preserve his own.

Hindus share many of the attitudes of Buddhism regarding the sanctity of animal life. Spiritually, Hinduism sees no distinction between animals and humans: all possess souls and all are manifestations of God,

though with animals as limited beings and on a lower scale of evolution than mankind. Many animals are worshipped, particularly cows that are considered sacred and must never be harmed, though they may be killed as sacrifice to the gods. This may seem at best perverse, but the reasoning is that as we depend on the gods for our protection, so the cows depend upon us for their welfare, and as we nourish the gods with sacrifice, so cows nourish us with their milk. It's a strange logic to Western ears, but one that we who keep cows in a metal stand for their entire lives should ponder before we judge it. The practice of sacrifice is denied by many Hindus and is now dying out as attitudes change. But in India, cattle past their prime as milk producers have always been revered and allowed to die naturally and now, rather than competing with the increasing traffic on city streets, they are more likely to be taken off to the bovine old-age homes that are springing up across the country. In fact, a recent report states that 'funds for old cows may outstrip that [*sic*] for senior citizens'.

Cattle have been, and still are, the literal lifeblood of many African people; their dependence on cattle is absolute. The Dinka of East Africa are particularly known for devotion to their cows, as their lives are inextricably bound. They don't eat them as meat until the cows die naturally, but live almost exclusively on their blood and milk. But this is only a fraction of what cows provide. Their dung is used as fuel and plaster; their hides for leather; their bones for making utensils; their horns for spoons, spears and ornaments; their scrotums for pouches; the hair from their tails for tassels. These are merely the physical gains. Cattle are also exchanged as currency and dowry, battles are fought over them, social gatherings centred upon them, spiritual beliefs vested in them. There's a story about a Christian missionary who, extolling the joys of heaven to a group of Dinka, is asked by an elder if he can take his cattle with him when he goes to heaven. The preacher fluffs the answer, so the elder shrugs and says that without his cattle, heaven isn't worth going to. You have to remember that these cattle of the southern Sudan are elegant beasts far removed from our chunky farmyard cows, more akin to the eland but with huge outwardly curving horns. In vast numbers, ashen and ethereal, they churn through dust clouds or lie beneath their forest of horns, serenely aware of their special place in the order of things.

\* \* \*

Christians are not so besotted with cows, but cattle are mentioned in the first book of the Old Testament and a calf in the last chapter of the New. The Bible teems with animals: in parables, as symbols and metaphors as well as in more lowly physical roles, ploughing and carrying and providing meat. Horses, camels, donkeys, goats and the ubiquitous sheep – the most common domestic animals of biblical times and terrain – are all there, but so too are less obvious creatures: lions and leopards, foxes and badgers, birds of prey and sea birds, ants and bees. Mostly it seems that these animals were noted rather than *seen*, evidence of God's omnipotence more than objects of wonder in their own right. And, in the divisive doctrine of Christianity, they served as metaphors for good or evil, clean or unclean, the saved or the damned: the 'white' sheep on one side, the 'black' goats on the other. There's not much place for the middle ground here, although the dappled and pied goats must have given pause for thought. Not much place for empathy either, but Proverbs has an endearing passage about 'four things which are little upon the earth, but they are exceeding wise', namely ants, conies (the rock hyrax), locusts and spiders – 'the spider taketh hold with her hands, and is in kings' palaces'.



*The hyrax (Greek for shrew-mouse) is more closely related to elephants and manatees than to the small rodents it resembles. Its ancestry goes back some fifty million years, and this, the rock hyrax mentioned in the Bible, lives today in the Middle East and South Africa.*

Christianity began at an uneasy time in the history of man's relationship with the animal world: too late to enjoy the pre-agricultural harmony that we imagine in the age of the hunter-gatherer, too early to be concerned about the destruction to both animals and land caused by the need and greed of modern humanity. For those living in Galilee two thousand years ago, it must have appeared to be a land of ceaseless plenty; though much of it was harsh and mountainous, it was blessed with a high rainfall, and this terrain supported untold numbers of grazing animals that provided meat, milk, skins and a livelihood for the entire population. So perhaps the idea of the sacrificial lamb that runs through the Old Testament a few thousand years earlier was not as shocking then as it may seem to us today, though the slaughter of a hundred bullocks, two hundred rams and four hundred lambs to mark the dedication of a single 'house of God', as ordered by King Darius I, must seem excessive to most people. The sacrificial lamb described by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, silent and accepting of its fate, would become in the Christian story the Lamb of God. Unlike the scapegoat, which was allowed to wander off into the wilderness, the lamb, bearing the supposed sins of humanity upon its innocent back, is slaughtered – surely a strange choice of symbol for a religion of compassion and mercy.

\* \* \*

For many of us, Buddhist or Christian, vegetarian or carnivore, animals offer a Utopian vision of how we might live more simply, uncluttered by the trappings of civilisation and materialism. Animals, both wild and domesticated, have a purity of emotion that can seem enviable. (Many times, after a fitful night in which minor problems loomed and then intensified out of all proportion, I have greeted my dog who has slept for ten hours solid without a care in his head, and wondered which of us was the clever one.) Whether *seeing* animals helps us to attain spiritual goals is questionable, but empathising with them – without sentiment and with clear sight – certainly makes one feel calmer and more grounded, more in touch with one's own nature as well as theirs. Animals show us the pettiness of our troubles, in the same way that facing death must do; we cannot take with us the wealth or the fame we may have accumulated, we are reduced to our naked essence – the

state of animals at all times. These are surely spiritual lessons, even if not an exact religion. ‘There was a time when I thought sweeter the howling of wolves, than the voice of a priest indoors, baaing and bleating,’ wrote an anonymous Irishman in the twelfth century. In a time of much baaing and bleating, of politicians as well as of priests, we might do better to listen to the wolves howling – especially if they are howling for their planet.

SAMPLE