Sanctuary

Sanctuary is what we seek — not cure, not vaccine, not care. Sanctuary is a place where we can fly through the open doors of redemption, lay our confessions down and be redeemed. This is a place where every knock is answered and every plea is heard. Sanctuary is the fountain of clear, cool water where we seek to quench our thirsts. It is the place where our knuckles will not be torn and bruised by constant banging. It is the place where we imagine we will find ourselves again, dream the dreams we had forsaken, embrace the loves we had rejected and re-ignite the passions we had quelled. In our febrile imaginations, sanctuary would right all the wrongs and cleanse all our iniquities. It is why, in our dark corners, we mutter prayers to unknown gods and neglected ancestors. It is why we are attending to our supplications and bowing to our discarded gurus. It is that hour when to be human is to be a groveller, a penitent, a worm, raising hands skyward in the hope that providence will offer succour. This plea for sanctuary is at present parching our throats and cracking our lips because we are the unknown gods and neglected ancestors. This is the invitation that Paul Weinberg's *Earth Songs* delivers to us — come and live in a sanctified world.

In making these opening statements on Weinberg's photographs, I am not attempting to argue that, as humans, we don't deserve the modernity we have crafted. This is not even an attempt to hold up Nature and argue that it is her who has exhausted her patience and is now throwing us off her tired back. This is not even to argue that there is a "lesson" here, that this is a teachable moment, that those who fail to heed the parable will live to reap the whirlwind. There are no sermons here. There is only the stark and painful reality of an event without precedence and of the innumerable and unthinkable consequences. That is the sanctuary we cannot have; the future has been wiped from our foresight and we are left groping in the darkness for a shard of understanding. In Weinberg's photographs, we are witness to

multiple and polyphonic congregations. Mothers, wives, husbands, fathers, brothers, sisters, grandmothers and grandfathers are photographed in a state of grace — leaving evidence of their humour, incomprehension, irony, tenderness, carelessness, satire, exasperation and fortitude. These communities have been brought together, torn apart, reconnected and reconstituted, and in the instant when I looked at the photographs, I searched for the familiar tropes, the habitual, worn-out and recycled dictions. And just as I was about to fall back on the dependable maxims, I caught in the wind Miles Davis blowing on his horn and I heard it for the first time, the lilting and pulsating desire for a place where there are no sinners, only saints. In the intervals between propulsive and sharp phrases, Davis opened the space for the drummer to gallop in — fast, furious, unbridled. This is the sound that would open the caverns, the haunts, the fountains, the wellsprings of the sanctuary.

Rather than writing an erudite cogitation on the history of spirituality in South Africa, I have chosen to listen several times to the Wayne Shorter composition "Sanctuary"; Miles Davis included it on his electric and funk-inflected album *Bitches Brew* (1970). The word "sanctuary" comes from the Latin words "*sanctus*", which means "holy", and its derivative "*sanctuarium*", which means "holy place". According to the laws of the early Christian Church, a fugitive could seek sanctuary from prosecution or arrest by entering a church or even lying at its doorsteps. This is why, in some countries, one still sees homeless people sleeping in the doorways of churches. Beyond this etymology and history, "Sanctuary" is a jazz tune and a piece of liturgical music — "*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*...". It is as if the incantation becomes the forgiveness, the refuge, the respite. It is as if when the cantor throws their voice into the vaulted ceiling of the cathedral or synagogue or temple or mosque, the words become the benediction. This is what sanctuary is for — the words that annul punishment, the words that proclaim innocence. We need sanctuary for the same reasons we have needed prophets. Every generation births its own Jeremiah; its own Zarathustra; its own Enoch Mgijima. Every generation needs its voice in the desert to prepare the way for salvation. *Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*.

Paul Weinberg's photographs reflect our human desire for sanctuary. When the eye meets the stillness of a river estuary, or the isolation of a San rock painting, or the pantheon of deities decorating a Hindu temple, it is not "god" that comes to mind but the image of the believer, the faithful, the acolyte who comes to this place to seek the soothing balm of absolution. The places that Weinberg photographs have not necessarily been consecrated by an organised body – priests, imams, rabbis, *izangoma*; they are places that history itself has chosen as relics; wailing walls, *kramats*, *amaliba* (graves in isiZulu), groves, caves and hills. This assortment is a testament to how broad the spirit ranges in search of divinity; it is an affirmation of the psychological thirst for a higher being who intercedes in our mundane and not-so-mundane human affairs. To write about spirituality or sanctuary in South Africa is therefore to write about history – the history of damnation and redemption, a history of penitents and seers. This is not, however, just an innocent historical story about the human condition; the history of spirituality in South Africa is the history of clashing gods, clashing ancestors, clashing dogmas and clashing prophecies. It is a history of iconoclasms – gods living, gods dying, ancestors resurrecting, ancestors dying. Whereas the philosopher Friederich Nietzsche could declare, "I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar," in South Africa, our deities are polyglot; they speak in many grammars. Our *Götterdämmerung* – the Norse word for "twilight of the gods" – is forever suspended in a sea of languages. But this is not the only problem with mapping spirituality in South Africa. Language itself is the victim, since so many of the cultures and persons who have brought us "holiness" are controversial and their stories are unfinished.

Nongqawuse (1841–1898) is one example of an unfinished prophetic story. This young woman gave the *amaXhosa* the words that the ancestors had spoken to her – "...the cattle have been reared with defiled hands..." – and her utterances sparked a search for answers. In most accounts, her story begins with the prophecy that the cattle should be slaughtered, that there should be no cultivation and that new granaries should be dug in preparation for the dead who will arise. As Helen Bradford has pointed out, the "defilement" accusation is just as

important as the prophecy. What could it mean for a young unmarried woman to speak of defilement and witchcraft? Bradford's feminist interpretation positions Nongqawuse in a net of competing male dominators and guardians — the colonial state, her uncle Mhlakaza and the Xhosa chiefs who had supported prophets before. Equally important, however, are the many women who supported her pronouncements on the cessation of cultivation since it was their labour. Even then, Nongqawuse was a prophetess torn asunder by the "defilement" she perceived around her and the desire to cleanse the Xhosa nation, perhaps so that it may rise to fight yet another anti-colonial war. That strange word "defilement" then repeated itself throughout the history of prophecies — purgation, extrusion, purification became the new buzzwords for speaking about the world of the spirits. How much of this was the effect of Christian conversion and how much the desire for a receding pre-colonial idyll? Paul Weinberg's photographs of the Gxarha River mouth, where Nongqawuse first heard the ancestors speak, evoke this emerging bilingualism and polytheism — on the surface, the river is an impenetrable surface, but in the background, one can glimpse the green rushes which rustled their beckoning words to the young prophetess. Seduction and stillness, words and motion, power and restraint — it is all there in the world that confounded Nongqawuse and led her to speak of a nation defiled.

These nomadic journeys of the spirit continued in the 1920s and 1930s as new prophets and prophetesses looked at the world and only saw devastation — the influenza epidemic of 1918, the First World War, the consequences of the Natives Land Act of 1913. The world was once again at loggerheads, and the spirit of Nongqawuse rose to animate and mark new sanctuaries. Nonthetha Nkwenkwe (c. 1875–1935) and Enoch Mgijima (1868–1928) emerged from an already extant history of independent African Christian churches and self-made prophets. Unlike Nongqawuse — who in the aftermath of the Cattle Killing of 1856–1857 became a colonial curiosity — both Nkwenkwe and Mgijima faced the full might of the colonial and post-Union state. By this time, white religious leaders, politicians and officials had become suspicious of what they termed "Ethiopianism" — an expression of exegetical,

liturgical and ritual independence by African Christians. Nkwenkwe was labelled as "mad" and placed in two different psychiatric hospitals. Her arrest and eventual transfer to an institution in Pretoria did not deter her followers who walked to Pretoria only to be arrested and returned to the Eastern Cape. Mgijima – whose life story is more widely known – didn't even have the luxury of being committed; his Israelite sect was at first tolerated and then declared a threat by Jan Smuts' government. On 24 May 1921, his followers were mercilessly ambushed and killed by police and soldiers after several failed negotiations to evict them from their sanctuary, which Mgijima had named Ntabelanga. Neither the Nkwenkwe congregation nor Mgijima's Israelites dissipated; their followers are still making pilgrimages to their holy places and waiting expectantly for the prophets to return. The photographs attest to these constant gestures of renewal – Ntabelanga reborn; faith revived. The images that Paul Weinberg has produced of these holy places give the viewer the opportunity to think on multiple dimensions – there is the physical beauty of the landscape, the sometimes-inconspicuous markers of human presence, the candle burning next to an open bible, the cockerel that inhabits a cave. These are psychic and spectral powers that draw you in; even if you didn't know what you were looking at, you would find yourself looking for signs of enchantment, signs of ethereal beings.

The sanctification or beatification of the body is a practice as old as time. One can imagine, for example, a Viking chieftain being sent floating on a fiery ship to Valhalla in the same way that one can imagine a Zulu king, tied up in the foetal position, being interred with his worldly goods and his *insila* (body-servant). History reveals to us more and more how porous the barrier between the terrestrial and the celestial has always been. We are probably the first humans to attempt to live in a purely secular world, and so such practices seem distant to us. In Paul Weinberg's photographs of royal graves, he doesn't attempt to recreate this bygone beatification; instead, the lush and verdant vegetation seems to index the fecundity of the body that lies there entombed. Whether it is the *Vha-Venda* or the *amaZulu*, kings and queens lie in eternal repose surrounded by briars and ferns, the whisper of the leaves being their unending death prayer. These graves are often kept secret exactly because, as in life, so in

death, and the bodies of royalty remain sacred and therefore spiritually potent even when they are deceased. The overgrown greenery is therefore both coincidence and consequence. It is as if their bodies continue to offer ministration and vitality even after they are long gone. By evoking these powers visually, Weinberg's photographs translate into any context where being royal meant a posthumous life of veneration and rapture.

Forests, rivers and caves are not the only markers and symbols of the spirit which we humans veer towards. Mountains and their peaks also seem to invite our imagination to ascend upwards to the skies and heavens. Ever since Moses descended Mount Sinai with divine commandments written on stone slabs, every prophet and sage has attempted to replicate his journey. Again, there may be logical and historical reasons — mountains and hills have also been places where human beings built military fortifications; therefore, it makes sense that shrines, temples, churches and monasteries would also be built on elevated planes. There may also be climactic considerations; the higher you go, the colder it becomes, we were taught, and so it makes sense that if one is going to spend several days fasting and praying and waiting on the divine, one would want to do it in the coolness of a cave. Regardless of these possibilities, the images in this book affirm the connection between ascension and religiosity; the higher you go, the closer you are to the divine, the images seem to affirm. The isolation and elevated position of the Bidklip of Richtersveld draws the eye upward and into the lofty holiness and solitariness of the oblong obelisk on the mountain's peak. The coral hues of the clouds and sky mimic the colour scheme of this obelisk and thus confirm its otherworldliness. It's a mountain in need of its own Moses, ready to commune with divinity.

If Paul Weinberg's only interest was in producing images of quaint and whimsical sects and cults, then this wouldn't be a compelling book. Moreover, there have been plenty of other books and photographic collections of African independent churches, and so Weinberg would be taking a stab at an already worn-out photographic genre. What makes this collection unique is that Weinberg also attends to our post-modernist, post-Enlightenment mysticisms — the various versions of ecofeminism, new ageism and mindful esotericism. Thus, he travelled

to the African version of the American-based "Burning Man" festival site. Here too, the interaction between human and spirit, terrestrial and lofty symbols creates an inviting and evocative visual language that takes seriously the expressions of spirituality that are being planted there.

One of the complicated aspects of attempting to visualise African spirituality is that unlike Judeo-Christian teachings, which focus on the binary split between this world and the next, African spirituality is based on a seamless imbrication of gods and mortals, spirits and deities, flesh and ghost. Weinberg's photographs attempt to walk that line – animism without the patronising "fetish" assumptions. Even the word "animism" contains the taint of colonial interference in which outsiders assumed that the African was living in a world of ghouls and vengeful sprites, rather than just a world of constant spiritual alertness. In devising this photographic project, Weinberg had to be careful not to repeat that overbearing and judgemental understanding that the African spirit world was already an idea that was past its time. The photographs in this book bring into the present tense themes that have intrigued the South African imagination for centuries. From Wilhelm Bleek's interpretations of San rock art to Bengt Sundkler's photographs of "Zionists", the realm of the spirit has always captured the imagination of scholars, photographers and amateur anthropologists. It is therefore necessary to pay careful attention to specificity and context if one wants to produce images that don't simply repeat the conclusions that have already been drawn.

By definition, the art of photography relies on the past – a photograph, as Susan Sontag has argued, is an "incitement to reverie". The function of the photograph is to give us the illusion that we have fixed the past; that we have accessed that past; that, in some faulty and incomplete way, we can relive the past. In its infancy, it was very popular for photographers to add faeries, sprites and nimbuses to photographs in order to imply the presence of a higher power. In this way, photographers attempted to bridge the yawning gap between photography and painting by applying to the photograph the logic of the reliquary. Intriguingly, these touch-ups were not used (at least not to my knowledge) when photography travelled to the colonies. Thus, for

example, when Alfred Duggan-Cronin photographed African diviners, he did not add signifiers of spiritual power. This may be because African ingenuity made such additions redundant — African diviners already wore headdresses and insignia that identified their profession. It may also be that photographers like Duggan-Cronin didn't want to elevate the *inyanga* (herbalist) and the *isangoma* (diviner) to the level of the hallowed and beatified. Spirituality, according to this mindset, was earthly and bounded by culture and location. Not so in Paul Weinberg's photographs. By ranging so widely over the South African landscape in search of sanctuaries, Weinberg has opened wide the sanctified worlds that have blessed us with a pantheon of gods and deities of which we are so undeserving. In this book, Weinberg has revealed the divine surfeit that enlivens the religious practices of millions of South Africans. In this way, he has given us a glimpse of what a truly ecumenical spirituality could look like. Imagine the beneficence of a whole country that is a sanctuary.

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