

## About zebus and zebuzeiros:

Value and price, influences and substances in elite cattle auctions

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### Abstract

Brazil is one of the largest producers of beef. It also produces and markets the most expensive zebus (*Bos taurus indicus*) in the world. In sumptuous auctions, which offer an abundant amount of food and drink to the participants, elite cattle are sold for millionaire prices. This article, aims to analyse this market through an ethnography of a cattle auction in the state of Minas Gerais: the set of exchanges that produce race and pedigree, value, and reputations and the socdes and substances that link men and cattle.

**Key-Words:** Agribusiness; Auctions; Livestock; Value; Zebu.

## Sobre zebus e zebuzeiros:

valor e preço, influências e substâncias em leilões de gado de/da elite

### Resumo

O Brasil é um dos maiores exportadores de carne bovina. Também produz e comercializa bovinos zebus (da subespécie *Bos taurus indicus*) mais caros do mundo. Em suntuosos leilões, animais são comercializados por cifras milionárias. O presente artigo, através de uma etnografia de um leilão ocorrido em Uberaba, cidade do Triângulo Mineiro, analisa um mercado brasileiro: a pecuária de gado de elite. Descreve um sistema de trocas específico que produz raça e pedigrees, valor e forma preço, reputações e saberes, códigos e substâncias, que vinculam homens e bois. O artigo trata, fundamentalmente, sobre o intercâmbio de influências – econômicas, políticas e simbólicas – que fazem elites de zebus e zebuzeiros no Brasil.

**Palavras-Chave:** Agronegócio; Leilões; Pecuária; Valor; Zebu.

## About zebus and zebuzeiros:

# Value and price, influences and substances in elite cattle auctions

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“I’m going to tell you something: I think it’s an extraordinary animal; I look at one of those extraordinary animals the same way I look at an extraordinary picture of Portinari. It is still a piece art, but one of them was made by an artist with a brush [...] So it’s a kind of art, people who have dedicated themselves to it in an extraordinary way. I, for example, used to own and still own many animals that are pieces of art. I saw an exceptional animal in an auction, I didn’t even enjoy attending auctions because if I saw a very good animal, if I could, I would buy it”. (J.B, zebuzeiro from Uberaba)

That auction was “historical”<sup>1</sup> for more than one reason. The trading promoter, who is a respected breeder from Uberaba, had announced months before that he would leave the “elite” cattle ranching sector. In September 2011, during the course of Expoinel (Nellore International Exhibition) in Uberaba, he organized a trading section to “liquidate” his herd of “embryo donors.” For three consecutive days - Friday, Saturday and Sunday – at the cattleman’s farmhouse, beginners and traditional zebu cattle fanciers who are called “zebuzeiros”, disputed bids in order to be one of the new owners of those elite cows.

On the second day of the auction, no one was expecting that the bids would exceed the ones from the previous night. The price attained for a cow named Parla, a Nellore, was considered “a record”. A share<sup>2</sup> of 50% from the “donor” was purchased by a “joint ownership” of creators for two million and seven hundred thousand Brazilian reais.<sup>3</sup> The cow Parla was at that time the most expensive cow in the world. But the purchase of the first batch from the second trading day foreshadowed a “hot” auction. Another cow named Dália was sold for a million and a half reais.

It was Parla’s sister, Absoluta, also daughter of the bull Bitelo, who was the greatest protagonist of the evening. When Absoluta entered the “corral”, she was welcomed with a shower of chopped golden pieces of paper, the spotlights were lit, the DJ played very loud music and then, one of the “runners”<sup>4</sup> yelled “**Stoooooopp it.**” The “auctioneer” then announced: “**Absoluta is the sister of Parla, she is a diamond.**”

The minimum bid for Absoluta was set at five thousand Brazilian reais. Like most of the auction bids, this amount referred to one of the 24 installments to be paid for the animal, so the initial price for this donor was 120 thousand Brazilian reais (24 x 5,000 = 120,000). The first offer was ten thousand, the second offer was fifteen, the third offer was twenty thousand and so on. When the bidding reached fifty thousand reais, some breeders who were interested became more restrained, then they started to offer smaller amounts, from five hundred to one thousand reais, in order to cover the remain bids.

The bids were displayed on an electronic panel next to the auctioneer’s pulpit. Runners ran gesticulated and shouted across the corral. Approximately a thousand auction guests were talking to each other and getting their mobile phones from their pockets to calculate the total price of the donor. “Advisors” stood

1 Native categories will be presented in quotes at first mention.

2 Elite specimens are sold in auctions for 25%, 50% and 75% shares. It is common that cattle breeders associate in “joint ownerships” to buy cattle and then split the profits from semen or embryos sale.

3 At the time of the research, one Brazilian real was worth US\$.56.

4 N.T. In this case, the slang term used in Portuguese is *pisteiros*, as explained by the author, they are the agents who receive the bidding offers, running around the auctions stage.

in front of the auctioneer's pulpit to talk about Absoluta's qualities: **"She won the grand tournament award in Goiania and the great reserved tournament in Uberaba, Absoluta is a unique cow."** **"It's a unique opportunity; it is a sure investment; in two or three years it will be possible to recover all the investment in the donor with the sale of her "pregnancies".** **"She has the average production of 120 "oocytes" per collection".** **"Genetics don't lie".** **"Bitelo has really produced special daughters".** **"Absoluta is the darling of her breeder".**

The room was shaking and the auctioneer added, **"She's a breeder"** **"She is a work of art"** **"Absoluta is the consecration of a family."** **"What housing! She's a donor! She is beautiful!"**. Then, one of the runners, blaring, announced that he had received an offer of 90,000 reais. The audience applauded, the DJ played a new song, and when everyone was expecting the completion of the sale, the auctioneer argued: **"Absoluta is worth a hundred! I'll only sell her for a hundred!"**.

The auctioneer, in fact, only hit the hammer after receiving an offer for a hundred. More specifically, Absoluta was sold for 24 installments of 101 thousand Brazilian reais. The whole amount invested in Absoluta cost two million and four hundred thousand Brazilian reais to its new owners. After the purchase was over, runners came to the front to announce the identity of the bids. As is usual in the elite cattle ranching market, buyers should know with whom they are playing and also the auction promoters should know the identity of the breeders interested in their breeding stock. Two farmers had created a joint ownership for Absoluta and, from then onwards, began to receive the dividends from the sale of the donor's embryos.

The sales results of the three-days trading session were "historic", according to breeders, veterinarians, animal scientists and members of the agribusiness specialized press. The auction promoter had raised about 23 million reais with the sales of his herd, a financial record for Brazilian elite cattle ranching.

After the auction was over, while I was conducting some field observations at the cattle trials of Expoinel in Uberaba, I tried to understand why the purchase of Absoluta, Parla's sister, had sold for such a sum. The auctioneer, who had presided over her sale, had this to say:

"I'd made an assessment of that cow, of her conditions, of the market conditions and concluded that she would fetch approximately 2 million Brazilian reais... It would fetch about 80,000 Brazilian reais for each installment. So, I believed that at that point I could use all my arguments: to hold, to wait, that certainly it interested people would appear. And she went beyond my expectations, my goal. She reached 101,000 Brazilian reais and I think it is a fair price for her in the current market".

But what exactly was the auctioneer assessing? Why did he consider that the price paid for Absoluta was fair? So, I insisted, asking him how a cow could cost that much:

"This information is not in any encyclopedia, I always said it. When we talk about assessment, you have to understand the timing of the market. It is not in any textbook or on the Internet how much a cow should fetch[...] then how could she be worth 2 million or 2 million and a half? It is the confidence that you have that her products, her embryos and the sequence of livestock rearing will be good. In this elite market, which is the top of the pyramid, ratings are often subjective as are estimates of the dissemination of her genes at various levels. Her daughters will be valued, her granddaughters will be valued; it is difficult to measure how much she (Absoluta) is worth. When you are dealing with the beef market, then you know how much a calf costs because

*one arroba<sup>5</sup> has a price parameter, so you have a historical average and you have a clear type of reference: the beef stock market. In the elite cattle ranching sector there is no such price, things are different”.*

With this question and the auction dividends in mind, I spoke with other participants in the elite cattle market. I spoke to the son of a renowned breeder, whose family has been working with zebu cattle for four generations. He explained the millionaire price of those animals from another point of view, speaking about the effects of the prestige and knowledge of the selectors in his cattle:

“You have strong, traditional cattle breeders, great breeders who are on top and you have breeders who have just started. So, what happens? A breeder who’s starting, especially if he is a businessman, has money. But his cattle do not have the same quality that the traditional breeder has. Then what happens? There is an exchange. He goes to the great cattle breeder auction and, for example, purchases an animal for 100,000 Brazilian reais and puts one of his animals, selling it for 20, 15 thousand reais. Sometimes, it’s the previous breeder who buys it. That’s all part of the business. This is a common situation. It is a previous breeder trying to buy back his animal, which is really less worth it. But if it was the guy who bought it, it the guy knows, it is a sign that his animal is a good one. And while he is improving his cattle, he needs to buy from the best breeders, who are the oldest ones”.

The owner of a magazine specializing in Nelore cattle, who has been following the breed for over 20 years, said that any elite cattleman would like to do business with the auction promoter when Parla, Absoluta and Dália were sold for millions of reais. According to him, the reason for that is not only the quality of the breeding animals, which were undoubtedly exemplary, but in particular, to establish alliances with the most prestigious selectors in the market. Moreover, he continued, the breeder in question, knew how “to do an auction”. He knows how to host his guests very well and, at that particular edition of sales of his herd, he attracted interest from various market segments”.

To know how to do an auction, as did the breeder of Absoluta, Parla and Dália, is at the basis of the Brazilian elite cattle ranching. Firstly, because specimens considered elite – those with a valued pedigree, are evaluated in trials which take place at livestock fairs and whose reproductive cells, semen or embryos, are used in order to “improve” national herds - are exclusively sold at auction. The second reason is that during the bidding disputes, sellers and buyers of these cattle, exchange influences - economic, political, symbolic - and also exhibit knowledge about cattle ranching, which result in establishing the basic parameters of the market.

This market mobilizes millions of reais, uses biotechnology, deals with the idea of race, pedigrees, embryos, animals, but also “diamonds”, “pieces of art” and thus produces elites: bovine and human. The analysis of the auctions that follows, describes a set of relations, and the codes, substances, and the economy, which generate value and shape price as they relate zebu cattle and zebuzeiros, elite men and their cattle.

## **The elite auctions**

A neophyte at an elite cattle auction will certainly have difficulty in understanding what is going on. In addition to the many agents who are involved in these events, such as the auctioneers, runners, advisors, “auction house” companies, but also DJ’s, illumination designers, cuisine chefs, waiters, there is an aura of secretiveness involved in the buying and selling processes. Everything is organized in such a way that only

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<sup>5</sup> An arroba is 15 kilos.

those who have been initiated into this field can access the codes needed to conduct business.

Although the auctions are broadcast by TV channels<sup>6</sup>, they are not open to those who received a formal invitation. It may take place in “*tatersais*” of exhibition parks, but the most competitive auctions, as one in which Parla, Absoluta and Dália were sold, often take place at farmhouses. In such cases, entry is even more strictly controlled.

As the elite specimens are usually sold for very high amounts, only a few of the participants, in fact, will bid. There is no problem if a farmer in a particular auction, does not bid. If he is well known and prestigious it is because he has already promoted and participated in several trading sessions before, he has received and given several bids. However, the audience of these events is not made up exclusively of farmers.

Although the elite cattle auctions are events for purchase and sale of animals, they are also meeting points for agribusiness professionals. They are lavish parties with bountiful quantities of food and drink. The auction in which Absoluta, Dália and Parla were sold, for example, was accompanied by a feast of cold cuts, smoked salmon, pasta and lamb burgers, cod, lobster and filet mignon, caramel harumaki with ice cream and plenty of soft drinks, wine, caipirinhas and whiskey.

The guests of honor at these banquets are the elite cattle breeders, politicians and authorities who eventually attend these events. But journalists, business representatives, students of agricultural sciences and even farm employees are also present. They usually have to fight for a place (but not bids) to drink, eat and meet their friends; they are called by the auction house companies “*coxinha eaters*”.<sup>8</sup>

A successful auction is one where there are, obviously, purchasers, lines, disputes for tables, music, lighting, and a plenty of food and drink, which, according to some people, ensures higher bids. And the *coxinha eaters*, at this type of party, are essential. They are often dressed as cowboys, with characteristic hats and boots; drinking, eating, but, as audience, also vibrating with and celebrating each new offer.

Our neophyte in auctions soon learns to distinguish *coxinha eaters* from breeders. There is concern in allocating those who actually will do business on tables near the corral, where the animals are displayed and the auctioneer is located. Bids may only be made after registration. The firms that control the payment of the promissory notes (installments) by which the cattle are paid, are the employers of the runners- who receive the offers - and the auctioneers - who are the narrators of the auction. All these agents know, who the elite breeders are and which are interested in making purchases. These know in advance which specimens will be on sale.

The auction companies send printed catalogs by post containing information about the cattle: their genealogies, the awards won at agricultural fairs, the number of oocytes produced by donors or semen produced by males, as well as data on the animal selector and current owner.

It is through these printed catalogs that it is possible to follow an auction. While the auctioneer extols an animal’s qualities, the public read information about it in the catalog and, when it is sold, they take note of the prices. In addition, these catalogs contain the rules of buying and selling during the auctions: the number of installments, payment methods and descriptions of the rights and obligations of the buyers, sellers and also the auction company itself.

The auctioneers’ s and advisers’ speeches, together with catalogs, music, lights and food help to shape

6 For example, Brazilian TV networks such as Canal Rural and Canal do Boi. Breeders who are not physically present at the auctions, but have been registered with auction companies, are allowed to bid by telephone.

7 Venues where the auctions take place are named “*tatersais*”; they are usually located inside farms or in exhibition centers. In the United States and England these sites are also called *tatersais*. The eighteenth horse breeder Richard Tattersall founded a dynasty of thoroughbred horses. His descendants founded the firm of Tattersall, the first European company specialized in breeding horses and to establishing auctions as the best way to market rare, special and elite animals. (Cassidy: 2002)

8 A *coxinha*, pronounced *coshinya*, is a very popular street food snack. A savory dough shaped into a drumstick around a creamy chicken salad filling, then battered and fried.

the “rhythm of the auction”. As these sessions usually take more than two hours, it is possible to guess in which moment the most desired cattle would be available for purchase to keep the audience on the trading floor. When auctioneers and runners understand that a cow might be sold below expectations, they call the advisors, who are animal scientists and veterinarians employed by the auctioning company to weave additional comments about the reproductive qualities and exceptional family origins of the beast to encourage higher bids.

It is not easy to notice when the bids are ended. This is one of the main mysteries of these events and which gives it an agonistic quality. While the runners are effusive when they receive an offer, run and shout and across the room, the breeders remain discreet and quiet. They communicate their bids through winks, shifting the angle of their hats, when they mutter the prices.

During the performance, breeders and runners try to hide their offers from other interested parties. Of course, while those who are initiated in this market know about cattle and the taste of the other selectors, so they know whom they are bidding against. Even so, each deal is only fully revealed when the auctioneer hits the hammer and announces the identity of the purchaser.

## The elite zebus

The history of the the zebu cattle<sup>9</sup> selection in Brazil helps to understand some of the aspects of the auction I have described. The investment made by elite groups from the Triângulo Mineiro region in cattle imports from India during the first half of the twentieth century was stimulated by the emerging global industry of frozen meat with headquarters in England. It was aided by the regular publication of genealogies and state support ( in the form of rural credit, breeding installation stations and agricultural research centers which led to the adaptation of the cattle to Brazil, especially in the Midwestern). Through their laboratories, farms, associations and auctions, the breeders from Uberaba increased the value attributed to their elite zebu cattle.

Contrary to the generalized belief that Zebu is a unique breed of cattle, it is in fact the name given to a set of cattle types of Indian origin. They are called Gir, Guzera, Brahman, Nellore, Sindi, Indubrasil, among others. More than eighty percent of the cattle slaughtered in Brazil are of Zebu origin, from the Nellore breed. Brazil has developed advanced techniques of in vitro fertilization, embryo transfer, artificial insemination and cloning. Also not only is it home to one of the largest commercial herd in the world, but sells the world’s most expensive elite cattle - which not coincidentally are of Zebu origin.

The Brazilian elite cattle market is a ‘blood supply industry’ like others have been subject of recent anthropological studies (Cassidy: 2002, Franklin: 2007, Grasseni: 2005, Orland: 2003). In these industries elite specimens, with pedigree, constitute reserves of value, both financial, but also of genetic material, of “blood” and of beauty. Elite cattle are strategic for ‘purification’ (Latour 2003) (or at least the expectation) of collectives of animals. This is achieved through targeted matings, intended to control the blood flow and thus, any mixtures and influences.

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9 In the first half of the twentieth century, farmers and traders from the Triângulo Mineiro region sponsored successive expeditions to India aiming to import zebu cattle to Brazil. Sometimes allowed, sometimes prohibited by the State, such imports engendered specific selection and breeding strategies. Few Indian breeders led to the main Brazilian zebu strains, in addition, a few breeders from Uberaba became the owners of these specimens. This fact, among other facts, made Uberaba to be popularly known as “The Mecca of Zebu”. The city hosts the association that controls the racial pattern of these specimens; The Brazilian Zebu Breeders Association (ABCZ) concentrates since the beginning of the twentieth century, artificial insemination centers, universities specialized in agricultural science, agricultural fairs, and, of course, farms and specialized elite zebu auctions. Uberaba is considered a headquarter for the “Brazilian blood stock industry” and also a consolidation project of the national beef industry, which connects farmers and State. The history of importation and selection of zebu cattle in Brazil would yield a single article, that is the reason I have briefly explained here. On this subject, see the studies *Do pastoreio a pecuária invenção da modernização rural nos sertões do Brasil Central* by Medrado (2013) and my own study *Naming the bulls: circulation commerce and trade networks on livesock agribusiness* (2014).

According to the breeders<sup>10</sup> and animal scientists who are specialists, the zebu cattle breed can be bred for beef production, as well as for diverse strategies of cattle “management”. Official guidelines, which are present in husbandry manuals and documents published by breeders’ associations, define the characteristics of a cattle breed. According to them, Nellore specimens such as Parla and Absoluta, for example, should have white and gray hair, a narrow face, large nose, soft leather and black skin. The chest should be wide, coated with meat and fat; forelimbs should be symmetrical and average in size, while the hind limbs are large, with prominent breeches.

They should have preponderant dewlaps and a prominent “hump” in the form of a “kidney” or cashews nut. The ears should be small and the horns straight. The hooves and tail broom should be black. In addition, these cattle must have a lively yet docile temperament and be able to adapt to hot climates.

Other cattle breeds may have similar phenotypic and adaptive characteristics because they are from the same species, have the same origin and have been subject to similar selection processes. However, what sets a racial standard for the Zebu cattle is a set of attributes. Breeds are biological in the sense that their characteristics are inherited. But because these characteristics are the result of human intervention, they also belong to the realm of culture. Breeders, especially the elite cattle ones, through directed selections, attempt to promote the maintenance, over a few generations, of specific characteristics in an attempt to “improve” the national herds.

Elite animals are “show” specimens. They are made to compete on the “stage” of the tournaments. In Brazil, the elite Zebu animals function as a concept for the beef industry. During the tournaments, judges assess the “symmetry” of these specimens, a set of phenotypic attributes, such as, leg height; hump shape and dewlap, rib spring, udders’ or testicles’ diameter, hair color. These characteristics elucidate both “race conformation” and “carcass” quality.

The elite specimens are evaluated in categories of age and weight; they earn awards, which, when placed together, determine the annual rankings of the best cattle. Parla, the most expensive cow in the world, for example, was the great Brazilian Nellore breed champion of the year, in 2009.

For an animal to compete on the stages it must, fundamentally, have a pedigree of three generations depth that has been recognized and registered. The Brazilian Zebu Breeders Association (ABCZ), an institution that promotes breed control of Zebu specimens in the country, issues these genealogical records. Cattle registered as thoroughbred are recognised as members of the breed, but only elite animals are believed to have a pedigree.

In *Lines, a Brief History* (2007), Tim Ingold distinguishes between the concepts of pedigree and genealogy. A pedigree is a sort of itinerary, like a tour in curves of a river. The characters act as things or found sites in this tour; they tell a story; they reconstruct a journey. Genealogies (which can be made by anthropologists or even by large farmer’s associations) put together a fairly consistent structure that connects ancestors and descendants. According to Ingold, life is compressed in genealogical charts. These show the positions of each individual within a more general model, but they do not offer much opportunity for escape or transformation.

In the same vein, Mary Bouquet (1993) argues that pedigree cannot be translated literally as genealogy, as did many anthropologists after Rivers. She argues that the genealogical method is an artifact of British social anthropology. It is the result of the imposition of the primordial concept of material substance, which is able to narrate stories of survival and cultural emergence. However, continues Bouquet, pedigree is a genealogy produced by the natives themselves; it is an instrument that can identify some theories not included in the technical vocabulary of kinship. Pedigrees that originated in the selection of animals, show

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<sup>10</sup> N.T. It is important to consider that the term race, in Portuguese, is both a zootechnical term, used to identify domesticated animals and a term to classify human societies.

much more than abstract lines of descent or ancestry. By recognizing descent from the maternal and paternal lines as criteria for belonging to a specific family group, control over reproduction and heredity is more than implicit: the aristocratic character of blood, far beyond a metaphor, produces specimens of distinction.

That is the reason why breeders, runners and auctioneers, when extolling genealogical knowledge to talk about the breeding qualities of the elite animals, are dealing with more than ancestry and relations of descent. Undoubtedly, genetics, blood, semen, and oocytes make breed, but being Bitelo's daughter, the champion of the "show", provides something that is beyond the inheritance of certain substances. There is also something that is symbolic, rare and distinct that characterizes elite cattle genealogies. Codes and substances (Schneider: 1968) make kinship, and also the pedigree of elite specimens.

For this reason, Parla, Dália, Absoluta, Bitelo SS will never be slaughtered, even if they have exemplary "carcasses". These specimens are both a "blood supply" for genetics, genealogy, breed and the livestock fairs awards, as the result of the knowledge of their selectors. As such they must be preserved. They are diamonds; they are art; they are the consecration of a family. But they may eventually be the parents, the grandparents or the great-grandparents of many other animals who will end up in the slaughterhouse. In other words, in the farms that specialize in beef cattle there may be animals that are direct descendants of Parla, Dália, Absoluta or Bitelo. The ones who are selected to be slaughtered may even have registered genealogies, breed, but they have no pedigree.

The biotechnology that enables the production of descendants of elite cattle is also responsible for a considerable part of market profits. That is why elite specimens are classified as "well-aimed investments". This is attested at the auctions by announcing the amount of oocyte or semen they are able to produce. It is through the sale of semen to artificial insemination centers, and "pregnancies" or embryos, which are brought about in laboratories through in vitro fertilization, that profit is realized.

More than 300 marketable doses may be produced from a single semen collection. They may be purchased either by breeders who wish to produce other elite specimens through artificial insemination or by ranchers who are interested in producing beef cattle. In addition, it is possible to generate several offspring from the same mother and even father, at the same time, with in vitro fertilization. Oocytes (not matured eggs) from the donor meet with the breeding semen and are gestated in the bodies of recipient cows (surrogate pregnancy). Such pregnancies are commonly produced in order to produce future donors (IVF is an expensive procedure and less popular than artificial insemination). Eventually, if the offspring do not have the expected racial pattern, they may be sent to the slaughterhouses.

While pedigree controls the flow of substances and symbols that produce memories and distinction, and biotechnologies are essential for reproduction, the management of the cattle in the farms is also fundamental. Breeders and animal scientists even say that "half of the breed enters through the mouth". Offspring of registered animals that at birth have the potential to compete in the "shows" are treated quite differently from those that will be sent to the slaughterhouse. From birth, they live in the "stables", not in pastures. They are fed with high-protein animal feed and receive medicines and vitamins to make them grow larger than the cattle that are slaughtered. They receive "hygiene" treatment, daily baths, have their hair combed, their hooves polished, especially as the livestock fairs begin.

However, here a caveat is in order. All these attempts of selection control do not necessarily produce "exceptional" specimens. Breeders and veterinarians say that only ten out of a hundred cattle selected to become elite, will become the great champions of livestock fairs.

That's why in the most disputed auctions, everything that makes an elite specimen (pedigree, awards, management, excellence in breeding, semen, "pregnancies", genetics, blood) is transformed through the

bids into monetary value. More than that, in these scenarios other relationships come into play. According to the auctioneer who sold Absoluta these relationships which involve men and oxen are “subjective”. It is about those relationships that I now turn.

### **The elite zebu and zebuzeiros**

It is true that biotechnologies have facilitated agricultural production. Breeding control through genealogical records, the use of inseminations and IVF have resulted in the Brazilian zebu cattle staying more homogeneous, at least in a broad sense. As stated previously, beef and elite cattle breeders have access to the greatest blood, which has undoubtedly facilitated the selection. But there is something else that makes these cattle. Critics and even market enthusiasts say that such animals have the same value of their selectors.

A show animal may have many owners during its life, but it will have only one breeder: the person one who was responsible for its selection, the one who thought out the mating that gave rise to it, the one who developed its pedigree and who has participated in tournaments, in other words, its author. If there is only a few show zebu champions sold in the millionaire auctions, there are only a few breeders who able to develop them as such. It is in this rare, univocal relationship gendering prestige that elite men and elite cattle are mutually made.

The ability to select- and negotiate - livestock is a value in itself and it is almost incomprehensible to lay people who briefly attend the sector events. There are specific ways to develop farm management and they are not shared. It is necessary to have a “good eye” to identify good cattle and to know about genealogies in order to perform well-aimed matings. Moreover, it is necessary to establish what are termed “good relationships” with other breeders: to attend many fairs and judgments, to promote and buy at auctions. The prestigious breeders are the ones who understand cattle and men, the ones who know the selectors, the ones who negotiate and not only buy indisputable quality cattle, but also sell them.

Such talent for selection (and business) is recognized by other cattle selectors - but also by runners, auctioneers, cowboys and jurors who know the sector - and it is what makes a breeder, in fact, an elite zebuzeiro. It is because an elite specimen is created; it does not emerge just by chance, as it were. Breeders with a good reputation in the market are those who know “to make cattle”, “to show”, “to auction”.

I once asked a famous zebuzeiro to explain to me how he selected his cattle. “Intuitively”, he replied, “not through planning, studying or thinking, it is getting it, making it and running it”.

Elite zebu cattle are more the effect of a science of the concrete (Lévi-Strauss: 1968) than the science of laboratories or university departments. When a donor like Absoluta steps into the corral at an auction and the auctioneer says that she is “beautiful,” a “diamond”, the cow becomes more than a “carcass” or a donor of embryos. She is holistic being. The sum of the donor’s attributes are greater than its parts because she is more than a genealogy or the result of careful genetic manipulation. She is the effect of the sensitive intuition of breeders and selectors. As in the process of bricolage analysed by Lévi-Strauss (1968), the production of elite cattle involves both manual labour and speculation.

Paralleling Lévi-Strauss’s analysis in *The Savage Mind* (1968) of the process of creating an art object, the work of producing an elite specimen also results from a confrontation between structure and accident. It is between a model - genetics or animal husbandry - with substances. Absoluta is both a material object and an object of knowledge. She was specifically developed by the breeders and selectors.

An elite specimen attracts the attention of the audiences at shows e auctions not so much because it owned by a well-known breeder, but because of its grandeur and symmetry. Nor is it because it will produce considerable amounts of semen or oocytes. At first glance, eyes turn to that animal because it enchants.

It is not only because it embodies objective characteristics of genetics or economy, but because it contains “something more” that belongs to it, but also belongs to its breeder.

Like art objects described by Alfred Gell (1998), part of the value of elite cattle lies in the technical virtuosity required to produce them. Art objects or elite cattle defy rational explanations because the human intervention in their construction goes far beyond its material form. A great work of art echoes like a miracle, like an enchanted form, which, according to Gell, exerts so much fascination.

It is not difficult to understand the reasons why an elite specimen is a “well-aimed investment” or because the genealogical record ensures the transmission of substances that make a breed. It is, however, difficult to describe a cow in its entirety, the reasons why it is considered “extraordinary”. If on the one hand, these animals undoubtedly are effects of the contingencies of nature, of the mixture of a number of substances that make them what they are, on the other hand, they can only be considered elite due to specific procedures developed by those who select and that can not be performed by just anyone.

During the livestock fairs, well-known selectors who are able to influence the market, who have “good eye”, watch the animals in the corral from afar. Even without knowing their registered pedigree or their breeder, they are able to foresee which will be champions. This ability to observe, according to some, can be inherited in the blood of the zebu cattle breeders’ families. Just as the cattle blood makes breeds and pedigrees, the breeders’ blood is believed to transmit the knowledge about the selection from generation to generation. This capability is also acquired through social interaction with living people. When beginners spend time with other cattle farmers and with the cattle at numerous agricultural fairs, auctions, and judgments and also in the farms, they learn how to select.

These breeders with “good eyes” make cattle - in farms, “shows” and auctions. They do it so because they are involved in mating processes, the constitution of pedigrees, the provision of adequate management, cattle and pregnancies purchase and sales.

Inspired by Merleau-Ponty, in his *Eye and Mind*, Tim Ingold (2011) argues that the viewing experience is not external and objective, but the result of a two-way engagement between the one who observes and the environment that surrounds him. This helps to think about elite cattle ranching. A good selector can identify a promising animal at its birth. This is not due only of the talent of the selector. The cattle in their grandeur and symmetry also produce the gaze of their selector.

Both animals and elite cattle farmers are the result of a cumulative process of knowledge. They are both agents and patients in the process. Men and oxen, breeders and elite specimens are the effect of the selection experience and mutually influence the elite cattle market.

A cow such as Absoluta is both product and producer of its breeder. She is an inalienable good, because the commitment and the work to produce her are never hidden when she is sold at auctions. Each time one of her daughters wins a great prize or is sold for millions of reais at the auctions, Absoluta’s trajectory and also that of her breeder will be remembered. Thus, she will produce more value, and who knows, money, for her donor and her breeder.

### **Values, prices and influences: on trade in auctions**

The practice of selling animals at auctions is not new, and certainly not exclusive to Brazilian elite zebu breeders. In the eighteenth century, auction houses traded thoroughbred race horses in Hyde Park, London (Cassidy 2002). The sales of horses in public arenas, define the term “English Auction” as a way of selling things on the basis of competing bids. Such auctions contributed to the rise of “blood stock industries” of

horses, cattle and sheep, though the control of reproduction and regular publication of genealogies (Darwin 2002, Franklin 2002, Orland: 2003, Walton 1999). Aristocratic British families, like their horses had pedigree, were those who selected and marketed these animals.

Centuries later, aspects of these English horse auctions were imported to Brazil, where they acquired their own characteristics. Through the performance of auctioneers and runners, an abundance of food and drink, the rush for tables and bids, the influence of cattle on breeders, breeders on cattle, cattle on cattle and breeders on breeders they are brought alive. During the auctions, the value of zebu and zebuzeiros can be measured in the form of price. But they also produce bovine and human reputations which are essential for the reproduction of this market.

Anthropologists have written about genealogy of the auctions in the West (Cassady: 1967, Geismar: 2001, Smith 2002); Baudrillard, for example, has described the rituals of buying and selling (Baudrillard: 1981). Others have analysed the production of value of traded goods (Velthuis: 2011, Leach: 1983). The consensus is that auctions, such as the ones that take place in Uberaba, are arenas of special exchange. Buyers and sellers, as they compete with their bids, interact directly with each other and determine the value of the auctioned goods. But in so doing they establish hierarchical and emotional relationship. These are also fundamental, even if they are not exclusively linked to the supposed rationality of the laws of supply and demand that determine price in market economies.

In *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai (2007), after a consideration of the Kula exchanges in the Trobriand Islands, understands the auctions as 'tournament of values'. Arguing that objects have their own stories and trajectories, it is trade, not production, as Marx argued, that determines value. He argues that auctions, through their playful and agonistic activities, are the space par excellence of exercise of a kind of exchange that allows biographies to be exchanged between things and people, and where the negotiation of price goes far beyond the laws of supply and demand.

Through his concept 'regimes of value', Appadurai suggests that the degree of evaluative consistency of a good, which among other things sets its price, is highly variable. This is because it depends on the situation and the levels of shared knowledge by the parties involved. The value of an object is the effect of a political dispute in the broadest sense, by the consumption of specific goods in specific cultural contexts. Auctions, where the rule is "who gives more", effectively ritualize these disputes.

Again, according to Appadurai (2007), auctions are special arenas for buying and selling. Isolated from everyday life, beyond the exchange of goods, they allow for the exchange of expertise. The objects in dispute, which tend to be authentic, with signature - as works of art or elite oxen - are more than goods. They are emblems of value. When they are sold, they produce wealth, of course, but also status and power.

Let us return to the auction described in the opening pages of this article to think with Appadurai. This auction was an exceptional event at which the breeders were "selling off" their production. It was perhaps the last chance for beginners and traditional breeders to acquire elite specimens. But also to create the opportunity to sell the "donor's embryos", and, through the bids, celebrate the breeder who was considered the most important in the market. In other words, the millionaire sales at the auction, displayed not only economic power, but also expertise: knowledge about elite men and oxen.

However, this alone does not explain why these specimens are so costly. It is true that they are rare, unique, exceptional, 'value emblems' (Appadurai: 2007). But it is also known, that with much less financial investment, it is possible to buy embryos and, with proper management, to try to produce individuals like Parla or Absoluta and to compete with them in the judgment "shows". The question that arises is what exactly is acquired in elite cattle auctions. Is it a depository of substances - semen, embryos, blood or genetics? Is it an accurate pedigree? Is it a symbol of an economic and political power? Is it an aesthetic and reproductive concept? Is it a financial investment? What kind of commodity is an elite specimen?

More interesting than answering these questions would be to ponder on all that their breeding and marketing mobilizes, for it is this mobilization that produces value over and above price. It is true, however, that the price - the millionaire figures paid by these animals - is fundamental in defining the outlines and the specifics of this luxury market. Breeders deal all the time with reproductive cells, oxen, management, pedigrees, but also with finance and investment. However, we must emphasize that the purchases and sales in the auctions establish long lasting alliances and that the interchange of influences that price and the idea of ownership alone are not able to explain.

Several anthropologists from different theoretical perspectives (Mauss: 1988, Malinowski: 1978, Gregory: 1982, Appadurai: 2007, Strathern: 2006, Munn: 1986, Weiner: 1986, Godelier: 2001, Viveiros de Castro: 2009) have addressed the idea of value. To a greater or lesser extent, in certain moments of their writings, they have come up against the classic comparison of gift versus commodity, maybe, because forerunners such as Mauss and Malinowski did. But there are also other reasons. If the science of economics when thinking about value, commonly turns to mechanisms of production and an individual's choices, anthropologists are interested in specific systems of exchange. Models such as the Kula, inspired anthropologists to think about the value of the production processes that produce effects both in the things exchanged and the people involved in these exchanges. According to some scholars (Miller: 2013 Appadurai: 2007), there are exchanges of influences between the objects and those who trade them both on the economies of the gift, as on the economies of commodities. This provides important clues to think the Brazilian elite cattle market.

In the elite cattle auctions, dichotomies such as gift versus good, animal breeders versus animals, subject versus objects are eclipsed. As said before, these animals (goods) are unalienable, because cattle and breeders are produced by each other in this market. The trajectory of a cow in the shows or the price for which it is auctioned are never separated from the trajectory of its breeder. And more, the sale of an animal in an auction does not sever the bond between those specimens and their breeders. On the contrary; each new purchase produces new relationships between the animal, its breeder and its new owners.

The fortunes paid for these specimens, accordingly, act as a kind of reward offered both to the breeder (who generates knowledge and relationships necessary to produce them) and to the cattle that embody this knowledge and characteristics of the breed. Furthermore, they operate as a guarantee for the new buyers. These, when purchasing animals for quite high figures, expect that the animals they themselves breed, when auctioned, will be acquired by the very breeders with whom they have negotiated a high price.

From a more economic point of view, this market could be considered to be an oligopoly. A small group of entrepreneurs, through sales and purchases at auctions, and also through investments in biotechnology and management, controls the production and pricing of goods. But there are other issues that the goods produced by this market mobilizes. That is why the auctioneer who sold Absoluta said it was difficult to measure how much she was worth.

One might ask whether the value of any good would not be the effect of a set of relationships. If the trajectory of any artifact is followed, as suggested by Appadurai (2007) and Latour (2012), it will probably be described on the basis of diverse influences. It is worth remembering that the elite cattle market has its specificities; it is above all about "exceptional" goods concerning elite cattle ranching. Absoluta, for example, certainly received influences - of the order of symbol and substance - of Bitelo her father, a ranking Nellore champion (an animal), but also of the Bitelo's breeder (a man), similarly of her sister Parla (the most expensive cow in the world), but also of the breeder of Parla. The same is true of their ancestors and the breeders of their ancestors and each one of their progeny and the breeders of this progeny, and also all that goes to make up the totality, rare and special of an elite animal.

On one occasion, a veterinary surgeon who was unenthusiastic about elite cattle auctions told me that “genetics was priceless”, therefore she could not understand the reason why animals were sold for such high amounts. Indeed, as she argued, a purebred animal, with a genealogical record, and an elite specimen with pedigree, may have a similar breeding standard, they may have also exactly the same genealogy. But breed is just one of the reasons why a breeder pays millions of reais for an animal.

Elite zebuzeiros make their animals unique, special, and “exceptional” and also consider themselves and their peers as such. Either because they are rich and, therefore, can afford to acquire high cost specimens at the auctions, because they carry knowledge about the cattle in their blood, good eyes to identify breed attributes and because of that, they can establish a good relationship with other breeders.

It is through quality and quantity of relationships that cattle and breeders are made in the elite cattle market. There are few cattle and breeders that are able to receive and produce such great influences. This makes value, makes the elite.

### **Some final considerations**

This production of influences among men in cattle, men in men, cattle in cattle and men in cattle does not end in the agonistic scenarios of the auctions. Yes, these sumptuous trading sessions are able to foment a small market, an “elite” market, but their effects go much further.

The most fundamental of these effects is that these zebu, the show ones, as zootechnical and aesthetic models, are not sent to the slaughterhouse. Their reproductive cells are used in matings to consolidate the Nelore breed, the beef that is produced mostly in Brazil, one of the largest animal protein suppliers in the world.

But breeders and cattle produce other influences of a political order. At auctions and on the hustings of agricultural fairs, zebuzeiros, but also auctioneers and runners make statements about the exceptional quality of zebu to the beef market and defend agribusiness as the “mainstay” of the local economy. It is also through relations with the State, in the form of the presence of politicians and authorities in auctions, but also through incentives to produce animals - biotechnology, rural credit - that the breeders reproduce as an elite.

It is worth thinking about one last question: some other major beef exporters such as Australia, United States and Canada also have their blood supply industries. They hold agricultural fairs, judgments, organize pedigrees and also produce “elite” cattle. But why is that it is in Uberaba, Brazil, that the most expensive cattle in the world are sold?

The huge amounts paid for these specimens, which could be explained by the exchange of influences between men and oxen, as argued throughout this article, are responsible for this “exceptionality”. But we know very little about who participates and how this market operates. Although television networks transmit them, the elite cattle auctions remain in an atmosphere of secrecy. Access is restricted to the farms where these auctions occur, the codes needed to transmit the bid to auctioneers and runners, the innumerable monthly installments through which elite specimens are bought, but also the sumptuous parties, help to produce part of the “subjectivity” of purchases and sales and of course the almost inexplicable figures paid by zebu in the country.

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