



Hunting the Pangolin

Luc de Heusch; Mary Douglas; Ioan M. Lewis

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COMMENT

Hunting the pangolin

In his recent article 'The spider and the pangolin' (*Man* (N.S.) 26, 513-25), Professor Lewis poses an interesting question: why is it that in Central Africa it is sometimes the little pangolin (*Manis tricuspis*), and sometimes the large pangolin (*Manis gigantea*) that is attributed symbolic value? As he notes, both have fundamentally similar connotations. The pangolin invariably appears as an animal-hybrid: part fish (it is covered in scales) and part human (it is a mammal and gives birth to only one offspring per gestation). He suggests that the large pangolin (a terrestrial species) offers the same possibilities to the imagination as the little pangolin (a tree-dwelling species). We know that Mary Douglas described the central ritual role of the little pangolin among the Lele of Zaire where, as an 'animal-spirit', it is the guarantor of human fecundity. But why then, asks Lewis, do the Lele, while believing both species to be sacred, *reserve the first for this religious purpose?* Why do the Lega reverse this priority and, finally, why do the Komo only revere the large pangolin and ignore the little pangolin completely? He suggests that the preference held by the Lele (and also by their neighbours the Bushong) for the tree-dwelling species (*Manis tricuspis*) can be explained by the importance of the forest to this culture. By contrast, the Komo, who associate the large pangolin with crocodiles and fish, establish a symbolic link between this animal and water. That is why their attention is directed to the large pangolin, a non-arboreal species which is known to swim. The Lega raise the same problem as the Komo. These differences reflect 'varying weightings in these cultures' cosmologies between forest and water as spirit abodes'.

This analysis fails to go to the heart of classificatory thinking in these societies. Even though it does not swim, the little tree-dwelling pangolin belongs, in the eyes of the Lele, to the class of fish because of its scales. Besides, we cannot systematically oppose the forest and the water, since these two domains are not at all distinct among the Lele. On the contrary, one contains the other; it is in the middle of the forest that the spirits whose preferred abode is water reside (Douglas 1957: 49, 50): 'Water creatures are all associated with spirits'. And fur-

ther: 'Creatures which have the same outward characteristics as aquatics but live on the land (the pangolin) ... are also associated with the spirits'.

Where then are the different criteria which favour selection of the large pangolin (terrestrial) over his tree-dwelling homologue? Professor Lewis contests my earlier conclusion about the taxonomy of the animal among the Lele: 'The cosmogonic wealth of a small pangolin is obviously greater than that of its bigger counterpart' (de Heusch 1985: 34-7). I will therefore attempt to clarify my thinking here. Like Mary Douglas, I took seriously the Lele affirmation that the little pangolin is a singular animal. Its body is covered in scales and it has the tail of a fish; but it is also a mammal that climbs trees. It thus belongs, symbolically or literally, to the water and the earth, yet is able to distance itself from these elements by climbing skywards. The earth-bound pangolin (*Manis gigantea*) clearly does not possess this ability. In addition, the little tree-dwelling pangolin (and not the large terrestrial one) has a particularly human cultural characteristic: it is the only pangolin to manifest signs of shame (*buhonyi*) by lowering its head like a man in the presence of its mother-in-law (Douglas 1975: 302).

Associated with water, earth and air, the pangolin also shares attributes of humanity. It is therefore the perfect mediator between the natural categories on the one hand, and between nature and culture on the other. In other words, the little pangolin is symbolically *overdetermined* in relation to the large pangolin, which is why the Lele make it central to their cosmology and consider it a 'chief'. As such, it resembles a *sacred king*, a similarity which is even clearer among the neighbouring Bushong. The sovereign appropriates this animal which symbolizes fertility and is charged with cosmic connotations. Note, in passing, that differences exist in Central Africa between a *sacred king* and a *big man*. Vansina suggested to Lewis that there is a symbolic similarity between the pangolin and the *big man*, but I believe this applies, in Central Africa, only to the large pangolin. It is certainly true of high-ranking members of the *buamé* society who are associated with this species among the Lega of eastern Zaire and who can effectively be considered to be *big men*. But the *pangolin-men*,

whom the Lele associate with the little pangolin, are essentially ritualists.

Lewis declares that he does not understand why, when comparing the status of *Manis tricuspis* among the Lele with that of *Manis gigantea* among the Lega, I relate the former to a cosmic code and the latter to a sociological code. An article published in 1953 by Biebuyck, and cited by Lewis, mentions the identification of the large pangolin with the maternal uncle. But in order to appreciate the Lega adage according to which the terrestrial pangolin (and not the tree-dwelling pangolin) is a maternal uncle 'who extends the burrows very far' (Biebuyck 1953: 910), one must consult a study made by Biebuyck that does not appear in Lewis's bibliography: *Maternal uncles and sororal nephews* (Report of the Second Joint Conference in the Social Sciences in East and Central Africa, Kampala, 1953). We learn that the kinship system of the Lega is the Omaha type, and that the Lega have ties and avuncular relationships with seven categories of maternal uncle! It is this entire social construction which the digging animal, the large pangolin, represents. So, this time it is the terrestrial species that wins over the tree-dwelling species, which is its younger brother. If the holders of superior rank in the *bwamé* (the *kindi*) are associated with the *Manis gigantea*, it is because their social function is to reunite people, to maintain the cohesion of the group (Biebuyck 1973: 224). On the mythical plan, the large pangolin appears as a cultural hero: he is the one who taught men to roof houses by superimposing leaves in the image of the scales that cover its body (*idem*). There is no reference to fecundity in this sociological portrait, whereas this value is dominant in the rituals of the little pangolin among the Lele.

The symbolic position of the large pangolin is a little different among the Komo, another eastern Zaire population. Here the little crocodile and the large pangolin are evoked during the ritual of circumcision. The two amphibians, that are neither true quadrupeds nor true fish, intervene in a rite of transition: circumcision, the origin of which is aquatic (de Mahieu 1980: 38). Yet in no way can the large pangolin be assimilated as a water spirit. De Mahieu notes: 'Like the sautians, it [the large pangolin] is situated between water and the earth because its scales are like those of a fish, even though it is a warm-blooded quadruped. What's more, it is the particular attention attached to its scales and its feet which precisely confirms and causes this position. The former, which make it impossible for it to be a true quadruped, are jealously kept by the guardians of the rites amongst their attributes. They are used to decorate the body with drawings made in kaolin. The latter, together with the part that marks the transition from the body to the tail (*tshin'a nkondo*), prevent it from resembling fish and as with

crocodiles are designated by the term *bokutu* and are the object of taboos more strict than the rest of their body' (1980: 39). De Mahieu notes that it is impossible for him to determine why the Komo make a clear distinction between the large pangolin (*Manis gigantea*) and the two other species of *Manidae*. Let us try to answer this. If the large pangolin is preferred to the little pangolin in this symbolic discourse, it is surely because the former is truly a terrestrial and aquatic creature, while its tree-dwelling homologue is assimilable to fish only metaphorically (because of its scales). In a Komo initiation story, the animals swim upstream against the strong current and suddenly the large pangolin says 'I'm staying here'. So it climbs out of the water and rejoins the aardvark, its uncle, another anteater that digs very deep burrows (de Mahieu 1985: 201). Thus it is the passage from the water to the earth, the domain of men, that is so strongly marked. This characteristic is completely absent from Lega symbolism which insists, to the contrary, on the underground character of the animal that metaphorically builds the network of the Omaha kinship system beneath the earth. A maternal uncle among the Lega, the large pangolin is nothing more than the nephew of that large burrower, the aardvark, among the Komo, who more specifically use the former to represent the passage from water to earth.

These speculations do not obey one unique system. The large pangolin of the Lega belongs entirely to the culture for which he is a kind of monitor; this is apparently not the case with the Komo. Nor does it seem reasonable to ignore the diversity of symbolic usages of the large pangolin, or to reject as irrelevant the opposition between the terrestrial species and the tree-dwelling species that is present in every context. The Lele use *Manis tricuspis* and not *Manis gigantea* for ritual purposes to establish mediation between the village, the domain of men, and the forest, the domain of animals and spirits of nature. Transcending all the barriers between the species and their respective domains (water, earth, air), the little pangolin is truly situated at the intersection of the animal world and the human world thanks to a code that we will qualify as resolutely cosmological, and that has its place here as myth. The Komo make the *Manis gigantea* (and not the *Manis tricuspis*) a forbidden animal following a code of the same nature, but less rich, which is content to present this animal as a mediator between water, the place of origin of circumcision (that is to say, of culture), and earth, the domain favoured by men. The Lega resolutely assign the domain of culture to the same animal, the large pangolin, without any reference to its aquatic properties. It is the burrower, the animal which metaphorically digs the underground tunnels of kinship, that is honoured here. The latter symbolic system,

placed under the authority of a veritable society of *big men*, men of prestige charged with the maintenance of order but without religious office, uses to the full a sociological code.

I hope therefore to have returned the pangolins to their proper place and to have answered the criticism of my eminent colleague who seems to believe that all Zairois think of the pangolin in the same way.

One last word about the little Lele pangolin. I would like to draw attention to the fact that the rules of admission to the cultural association of the *pangolin-men* favour village endogamy, while the network of matrimonial alliances, born of preferential marriage to MMBDD, unite exogamous matrilineal clans whose sections are shared amongst several villages. I note that from this point of view the function of the pangolin cult is centripetal: 'It affirms the need to maintain within the village a network of endogamous alliances between the same clans. The small pangolin causes men and women who, by virtue of virilocal marriages, were born outside it to return to the village founded by their ancestors'. (de Heusch 1985: 36). There is no fundamental disagreement between Mary Douglas and myself on this point, contrary to what Professor Lewis claims. Amongst the patrilineal Lega, the large pangolin assumes an inverse function: he re-assembles within a vast ritual community a network of villages solidly defined by their lineage unity. In both cases, however, the pangolin is a powerful factor of social cohesion.

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At the seminar in which Ioan Lewis gave his paper on the pangolins (*Man* (N.S.) 26, 513-25), a baffled student asked what it had to do with post-modernism. Adding that he intended no insult and that he fully realised that the original

work was a long time in the past, he wanted to know how to reconcile the study of animal classification with current sophistication about ethnography. Evidently the subject has been dropped from the contemporary syllabus for anthropology, although it used to be in the mainstream. The student's polite scepticism as to whether classification was really going on at all and how it would be possible to study it can be answered by the record of standardised rites and remedies being practised with reference to these animals and to standardised conversations about them. The question of feasibility of this kind of study is easily settled but it remains to persuade anthropologists that classification is an important field.

Most anthropologists are interested in the intellectual and symbolic life of the people they study. Symbols depend on classification, so how can they avoid being interested in it? In studying classification a person can remain in an eclectic muddle or settle for one of three basic approaches. The naturalist approach explains the features of a particular system of classification by the taxa themselves; the idealist approach stays in the realm of ideas; the third is the constructivist approach taken for granted by most social anthropologists. The first two (to which probably the majority of other western scholars subscribe) work well enough in a limited academic perspective, but each leads to its own respective blind alley, as I now briefly describe.

The naturalist fallacy works as if the furriness of furry animals and the scabiness of fishes leap to the eye and tell the native taxonomist to class furry creatures or scaly creatures together. There is no way that the naturalist approach can surmount the classificatory habits of our own culture, or explain the classing together as 'charcoal animals' opuma, bear, eagle, deer and swan because they have black paws, muzzle/beak, tail, etc. (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 147), since their charcoal-coloured tips do not jump out at us and scream to be assigned as members of one class. If the naturalist viewpoint were correct, the task of ethnoscience would only be a matter of tracing the salient features of botanical and zoological species as recognised by the natives of a particular region. The naturalist approach is a version of the 'natural kinds' fallacy in which species are treated as if self-classifying: in this approach differences between taxa which are obvious to us form the basis of biological classifications which provide the model for other classifications. This fallacy raises fascinating problems in ethnoscience about classifications that are common throughout human society, and classifications that differ, problems which David Hull has dealt with summarily in 'The inductivists' nightmare' (Hull 1992). Nature cannot provide the basis of classification systems; there are no natural kinds, or if there are, biological species cannot be included. Correcting

this error, the anthropological study of classification has to be the study of principles of selection, that or nothing. Consequently, an ethnobotany or an ethnozoology that takes no interest in kinds of social classifications is deficient. This is one reason why a theoretical approach to classification is needed in anthropology. The reviewers of *Implicit meanings* whom Lewis cites as having scoffed at my concept of taxonomic anomaly (p. 522) berated me for the naturalist fallacy, as if I held that anomalies are in nature.¹ The idea is so out of programme for me that I shake my head and wonder if Lewis has not also observed that reviewers can be hasty and prejudiced.

The idealist fallacy expects symbolism to be interpretable without reference to nature or praxis, that is, without reference to local exigencies and settled habits of collaboration. According to this approach, symbolic systems and the classifications on which they rest are made in the mind and it is only by examining the mind and the relations between ideas that symbolism can be understood. This approach is appropriate and acceptable enough in linguistics, because by definition words and texts are largely separated from the scene of use. It still flourishes in 'Lit. Hum.' branches of criticism and in the research on *Mentalités* favoured by the *Annales* group of French historians. Warned by philosophical objections to its *a priori* bias, anthropologists should be extra wary of the idealist approach, since we know how deceptively easy it is to fabricate similarities (Douglas 1967). In the tradition of linguistic anthropology it may be acceptable to pick out bits of symbolic structures here and there (as for comparing spiders and pangolins), but it can lead nowhere. Pierre Bourdieu has surely done enough to lay the idealist fallacy to rest. It is easy to become confused about symbolism. Lévi-Strauss follows the established French bias in his leanings to idealism. The English social sciences have a tendency towards naturalism. Edmund Leach, if asked straight out, would surely have denied that anomaly can be found in nature. However, his 'theory of anomaly' and of 'mytho-logic' (Leach 1976; Leach & Laycock 1983) rests on the assumption that ambiguous or anomalous items could be identified quite simply. He and his close followers wrote as if anomaly occurs as naturally in the things to be interpreted as furriness or scaliness or charcoal tips occur in nature.² I have written so much against the naturalist fallacy and on classification as the basis of reasoning that I become repetitive (Douglas 1986; 1987).

The third approach, which I believe to be right and am here calling constructivist, is in the broad tradition of anthropology developed at the turn of the century by the group of French anthropologists contributing to *L'Année Sociologique*. Since Durkheim and Mauss wrote on

Primitive classification (1903), anthropologists expect the symbolic system to show the imprint of the social system in its classifications (see Douglas 1975: 203-9). Mainstream British anthropologists by and large have accepted that the classifications of society and the classifications of religion have one origin and that the two sets of classifying activity proceed from the one collective project. The connexion between religious symbols and society is often stated in terms of a mysterious and privileged mirroring, projecting, reflecting, metaphorising or expressing. However, artificial problems and misleading answers are indulged by that mode of thought and it is safer and more interesting to assume that the connexion is made by the direct process of organising. David Hull and I have just published a volume on this theme, *How classification works* (Douglas & Hull 1992). That organising implies classifying is compatible with the traditional way of anthropological thinking about classification, and it has strong implications for symbolism and other topics in which anthropologists will always be interested.

Though I have made much use of the word 'anomaly', it is always within a cultural theory of cognition, always aligned with the traditional idea that anomaly is the product of classification and inheres neither in nature, nor in an *a priori* compartment of the mind, but in the life of the organised collectivity. What is anomalous in one system is normal in another. Classification of any one domain, whether of the elements, the physical environment or any of its furnishings, is a projection of the classifications that are used for organising the society.³ I maintain that a comparative approach to the illusion of self-evidence (Douglas 1975: 276-318) is interesting for anthropology, and that the explanation of its irregular force and the variety of forms it takes will be explained by comparing local classifications of insiders and outsiders, and attitudes to equality and ranking.⁴

The two early essays on the pangolin (Douglas 1955; 1957) were written before I had worked out the synthesis I presented in *Purity and danger* (Douglas 1966), before the theory of totemic classification had been reviewed by Claude Lévi-Strauss and before the famous saying that 'animals are good to think' had been uttered. As the polite student said, it all goes back a very long way. The introductory prefaces in *Implicit meanings* were meant to develop the constructivist, collectivist approach to symbolic systems outlined in *Purity and danger*. My intention was to insist that classification comes out of efforts to organise: through the implicit meanings carried in the system of classification 'society itself is achieved' (1975: 4). Consequently, variations in classification systems would be explained by the variations in the organisation served by the classifying activity. This is why Lewis is absolutely right to examine closely the Lele social

organisation and to bewail the fact that equivalent comparative material for the region was not and has not since become available. When an animal is singled out for what the late Ralph Bulmer called 'special taxonomic status', we are alerted to the projection of social organisation upon other forms of life. How this congruence is achieved at several levels has always struck me as important for cognitive science. I have recently argued that it is part of an elementary process of mutual control by reference to dangers incurred through disregarding the way that nature is organised (Douglas 1992b). Bulmer's brilliant analysis of the mediating role of the cassowary among game animals and the pandanus nut among wild plants, though it is now twenty-five years old, is still unsurpassed as a demonstration of this approach (Bulmer 1967).

Lewis believes that a fully satisfactory theory of symbolism should be able to explain the distribution of spiritual and physical powers between a pair of spider species in the Apulia region of Italy and also between two species of pangolin in Central Africa. I do not believe that that is in itself a silly question. But I would expect to answer any question about special taxonomic status only through detailed information about the social organisation and habitat of the people who have produced the taxonomy, their behaviour and their main hopes and worries, and the terms in which they scold and exonerate one another. This is what I tried to demonstrate in proposing that the Lele description of the pangolin as friendly representative of the forest corresponded to the role of village son-in-law, in the same sense as that in which for the Karam, as Ralph Bulmer suggested, the cassowary corresponded to the role of cross-cousin. Because the social organisation is so relevant, Lewis is right to raise questions if he is not happy about the quality of the data on which I based my hypothesis.

He twits me for getting endogamy and exogamy mixed up (p. 523). I can see that the two may be easily confused if you are dealing with descent groups but it would be crass incompetence not to know whether a territorial unit such as a village takes its spouses from within or without its boundaries. I am not sure that my critic quite understands what a virilocal marriage rule does to rearrange the population across villages in a matrilineal descent system. This I would be happy to explain to him with charts and tables. In my original argument I presented the descent rule qualifying for entry to the pangolin cult as having the effect of recalling to each village the nephews whose mothers had gone out to follow their husbands. Case histories back the argument. I fear that Lewis has misunderstood Luc de Heusch's subtle commentary on the Lele system of marriage, which does not invalidate my data, though it does correct my

idea of the system of descent. I am grateful to Luc de Heusch for writing on his own behalf.

I have recently had occasion to return to my early writings on animal classification (Douglas 1990; 1992a; 1992b). Each time I felt that they raised the right questions about classification in general. But now I notice that there is something I ought to retract. I owe Lewis an apology for having given him an unworthy question for the peg on which to hang a very stimulating essay. As he correctly says, I concluded the 1957 paper by drawing attention to the contrast between two similar species, the small tree pangolin and the giant terrestrial pangolin, saying that I did not know why they paid cult to the first, and not to the second. That was a misleading problem to raise at that point. As I mentioned in the latter day footnote, I had already answered it by presenting the small pangolin as an anomaly defined in Lele terms. Lewis believes that I have defined it anomalously in my own terms. There is nothing I can do about his disbelief in my reporting except refer to what I wrote: the Lele said the small pangolin is the only mammal they know that has fish scales and lives in trees (or words to that effect).

Lewis is quite right when he finds that, according to what I reported about the range of human-animal contrasts in the Lele cosmology, the pangolin is a potent bridging symbol which fits well into several different dimensions. When he says this animal is positively endowed, even 'over-endowed, rather than negatively under-endowed, as a potential symbolic vehicle' (pp. 518, 521), I wish I had expressed it half so well: this is exactly what I was trying to say. I think it was what I did say, and anyone interested can check. There is nothing here for me to answer or disagree with. I do not think that I ever said the pangolin symbol was negative or residual. According to Lele statements the pangolin shares their own ideal of civilised behaviour, it is modest and unaggressive, when accosted it bows its head in respect, it transcends the watery environment to which its fishlike scales bear testimony, and it lives in the trees. As a sky-dwelling mammalian ex-fish (Douglas 1975: 33), if this entirely benevolent being is constructed in Lele cosmological ideas as a contrast with another animal, the counterpart would be the leopard, aggressive and predatory, liable to attack villages, armed with evil ritual power (1975: 301).²

The more important reason why my question was a bad cue for Lewis's excursion into symbolic analysis is that Lele do not pair the giant land pangolin with the small tree pangolin. Above species level they see the important relationships between animals as based on habitat, not genetics. To the extent to which they do make pairs, they might pair pangolin with leopard, a contrast set of moral opposites, death-dealing leopard versus fertility-bearing

pangolin, but this is implicit. The pairing of the two pangolin species would be an artefact of the anthropologist's use of zoological classification. I should apologise for the casual question which started the rash comparison of zoologically identified pairs of taxa which are not explicitly paired in the culture being described.

Lewis's account of the cult of the tarantula spider in the Apulia region of Italy identifies one tarantula spider with a poisonous bite, and another, quite harmless when seen as a spider, but which, when seen as a spirit, is the centre of the tarantula cult. He is not disturbed by the arbitrariness of picking two species of spider out of the range of animal life known in Apulia, nor by the greater boldness of seeking to compare them with two species of pangolin picked out of the known range of animal life in central Zaire. But perhaps he should worry, or at least he should tell us whether it is he or the natives of Apulia who class the two species of spider together.

In spite of this defect in his argument, the parallel that Lewis draws between the two Lele pangolin species and two spider species in Italy is suggestive. One culture would seem to sort its fauna into opposites, leopard and pangolin wielding respectively bad and good ritual power; and the other would seem to sort two spider species into similars, one wielding physical and the other spiritual sanctions. We are being invited to consider whether the Lele favour pairing opposites and the natives of Apulia favour pairing similars. Do the Lele organise the rest of their cosmology on a basis of paired adversaries? Does the whole Apulia region cosmologise by dealing out complementary spiritual and physical powers? Are we comparing two polities, one based on adversarial and the other on collaborative relations? Is the argument about a Zairois cosmos based on rival independent chieftains, and an Italian Catholic cosmos corresponding to complementary priests and kings? Always too suggestible, my imagination runs riot. What kind of information would we have to gather to pursue these seductive comparisons? Certainly we would want to examine the whole range of animal and plant and human classifications in each culture being compared and we would need at least as much detail about the social organisation of the people of Apulia as I have provided about the Lele. To take Lewis's idea really seriously we should ask for the range of popular sacred animals in other regions of Italy, to fill out the comparison with neighbouring pangolin cults which de Heusch has collated for central Zaire.

On a point of disagreement, I do not think that it makes sense for Lewis to complain that 'Douglas offers no evidence at all for her entirely speculative and rather far-fetched assertion' that the Lele pangolin cult allows the initiates to turn around and reflect on the limitations of human understandings. Of course, the idea is entirely

speculative, and written in a speculative book (Douglas 1966); if a speculation depended on evidence it would not be speculative. In this case the possibility of a self-critical epistemology is suggested by the inevitable awareness of overlapping, mutually contradictory and usually dispensable ritual regulations. I do not believe that philosophical speculation is the privileged monopoly of westerners. As they study and revise the various remissions, absolutions, purifications and forgivenesses that they allow each other, the people who can think up a pangolin cult can be given credit for some thoughts on the provisional character of their knowledge.

I have not answered nearly all of the intriguing questions raised by Lewis. He knows that his article touches on profound matters and will surely believe that I am grateful to him and to the editor for the opportunity of reflecting on them here.

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¹ To correct the balance, I have also been taken for a dyed-in-the-wool *a priori*, perhaps because of the ironic phrase 'the *A priori* in nature' (Jacobson-Widding 1979: 14).

² Others have taken licence from Leach to detect anomaly without identifying the rest of the classification system in which the ambiguous item is supposed to occur (Hoffman 1977; Laycock 1983).

³ I find it disappointing that so little comparative work has been undertaken in what was at one time a central interest in anthropology from Frazer to Lévi-Strauss, and a favoured perspective of British social anthropology. The most interesting recent research that I have seen on the relation between classification and social structure is an article on varieties of taxonomy in New Guinea (Lancy & Strathern 1981).

⁴ My current work on perception of danger and risk acceptability (Douglas 1986; 1992c; Douglas & Wildavsky 1982) attempts to develop the field on the lines started in those essays.

⁵ I am not sure why Lewis is quoting back at me my analysis and conclusions. The equivalence which he observes between the pangolin in the forest and the priestly pangolin

cult members in the village is very much emphasised in the original text. The leopard as most conspicuous carnivore is constructed in parallel equivalence with the sorcerer. See Douglas 1975: 299-301, and the diagram.

I am flattered that my library-based discussion (*Man* (N.S.) 26, 513-25) of tarantism and pangolin symbolism should have prompted such interesting further reflexions from Mary Douglas and Luc de Heusch and for the latter's serious consideration of what I saw as the problem of the two pangolins. As I tried to stress at the outset of my article, like Mary Douglas, I believe that what matters in animal symbolism is not the zoological characteristics taken as significant in Western scientific classification but the properties and behaviour attributed to animals in a given system of symbolism. (Of course, there may also be certain interesting common features between the two systems of classification.) How classification relates to the social order, however, which is Douglas's abiding concern, seems far from unproblematic - an issue to which I return later. A recent reference in the *Economist* (29.2.1992) to the Latin American Capybara provides an interesting example of how our own cosmological preoccupations can skew animal classifications. This creature, which looks like a large guinea pig and is classified by zoologists as *Hydrochoeres*, a rodent, was apparently first noticed splashing about in rivers by the churchmen who accompanied the Conquistadores and consequently classed by them as 'fish'. On this basis, to this day Capybaras are reportedly consumed during the forty-day fast of Lent. Venezuelan ranchers are reported to make a profitable sideline by killing quantities of this peculiar 'fish' (which lives in herds) and transporting the salted, sun-dried carcasses to Caracas for consumption, with other more orthodox fish, during Lent.¹

Naturally, I fully accept Douglas's pertinent criticisms of the material I utilised on tarantism. De Martino's (1961) remarkable account (like those of subsequent ethnographers I have read) does not contain the systematic information that would be required to understand the wider Apulian animal categories which frame the characteristics attributed to the tarantula spider. Clearly, we need many more data, especially if we are to pursue Douglas's imaginative ideas about how tarantula symbolism might relate to deeper principles in the structure of the Italian Catholic cosmos. We are also at one in our evaluation of the conceptually positive, bridging role of the small Lele pangolin - which Luc de Heusch adumbrates further in his contribution. Obviously, too, I am not in a position to dispute Douglas's account of how the Lele actually describe the little pangolin. Where I would take issue with her, however, is in her assertion that given its characteristics as seen by the Lele,

Manis tricuspis is therefore an anomaly. Clearly it is for her; but what evidence is there that the Lele so regard it? For that matter, do the Lele have a general concept which translates appropriately as anomaly, and if so, what are their general ideas about anomalies? As Douglas says, she has indeed made great use of 'anomaly', an analytic construct which often seems to intersect with her equally well-used explanatory slogan 'matter out of place'.

As I tried to demonstrate in my article, one does not need to invoke the concept of anomaly in order to understand the symbolic and social importance of the little Lele pangolin. I notice also that de Heusch does not use the term in his further explication of the significance of these Central African pangolins where he follows the method I advocate of examining comparatively the diverse treatment of the two pangolins in different cultural contexts. While de Heusch develops an intriguing and rather convincing interpretation of the prominence of *Manis tricuspis* among the Lele, I do not think that he disposes entirely of the issue of the lesser status of the giant pangolin which he seems to assess by a mixture of emic and etic criteria. We are still left with the fact that *Manis gigantea* is a sacred spirit animal (like the Lele porcupine). In my view, we require more first-hand data from the Lele on both pangolins before we can fully accept de Heusch's ingenious analysis.

Although I do not really agree with his characterisation, I now understand what de Heusch means when he describes Lele ideas about the pangolin as part of a 'cosmic code' in contrast to the 'sociological code' which he thinks applies in the case of the Lega. It seems to me that both terms can be applied to characterise both cultural logics. Of course, Lele ideas about the pangolin and other animals are cosmological, but they are also profoundly sociological in their import: as de Heusch acknowledges, the Lele employ the little pangolin for ritual purposes to mediate between village and forest and amongst both Lele and Lega, 'the pangolin is a powerful factor of social cohesion'. At the same time, the large pangolin clearly occupies a central place in the Lega cosmology as a culture-hero who taught men how to build thatched houses. Moreover, not only is he identified with the maternal uncle 'who extends the territory' and is a 'source of sustenance' but he also symbolises 'the true agnate, child of the earth' and is thus 'greater than the elephant ... who represents those who are assimilated' rather than members of the group by birth (Biebuyck 1953: 910). The little pangolin, in this case, is seen by the Lega as resembling his 'big brother' (*Manis gigantea*) whose example he should try to follow (Biebuyck 1953: 910). While I agree with de Heusch that these few decontextualised Lega sa-

yings reported by Biebuyck appear to associate the large pangolin with the earth, I do not think we can possibly conclude – without further evidence – that it is not also associated with water as the linkage with crocodile and some fish species would suggest. As far as the Komo are concerned, Professor de Heusch's argument that the large pangolin is here preferred to the little pangolin because the latter is *only* metaphorically assimilable to fish (which, of course, was quite effective in the Lele interpretation) seems dubious. Why should metaphor work in one case and not the other?

The real difficulty in this excursion into the Central African world of the pangolin is that we do not possess sufficiently detailed ethnographic evidence to answer the questions which the existing data raise. Without question, Mary Douglas comes nearest to providing a full and convincing account but, *pace* her assessment, she leaves still hanging the issue of the big pangolin. For the rest, one is driven to speculation and hypothesis, as de Heusch's interpretations illustrate. Is it too much to hope that de Heusch might encourage one of his research students to develop a comparative project, based on new field research, on the symbolic meaning of the pangolin(s) in these Congo cultures?

A final point. As she emphasises, Douglas seeks ultimately to explain these variations in symbolism in terms of social forces in a tradition which she traces to Durkheim. She thus argues, as I recalled, that the positive emphasis on exchange which she detects in Lele society leads to a positive view of taxonomic anomaly as evidenced in the Lele celebration of the little pangolin. But this cannot follow *automatically* since other Lele taxonomic 'anomalies' (including the baboon, scaly tail and tortoise, etc.) are, according to her, regarded by the Lele as dangerous and polluting. If Professor Douglas is going to continue to insist on the explanatory power of *anomaly* she must thus show how some anomalies within the same culture and cosmology and the same social system are treated negatively while others, like the pangolin, are viewed positively.

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