

THE MAGICAL IMPORTANCE OF PANGOLINS AMONG THE BASUKUMA

By A. C. A. Wright

In August, 1952 I was touring in Kimali Meatu Chiefdom, Maswa District of Busukuma, and on visiting the Chief (*ntemi*) saw a pangolin, which had been impaled on a pole immediately opposite the main entrance to the enclosure. The flesh had already begun to rot and the scales were coming loose. I made some inquiries about the reason for this spectacle, which are as follows :—

The pangolin is known by the Basukuma as *Ndelebalya*, *Ng'akakubonwa* or *Mhulugaga*. The meaning of these names is "the thing which they (the other people) eat," "the wonderful thing to be seen," "rotting cherries." The first two names are easily understood; but for the third name I have still to find a reasonable explanation. (*Mhulu* is a tree with cherry like fruit and *kugaga* is to rot).

The particular pangolin, which was of the arboreal, not terrestrial species, was first seen in Mwamindo parish by a small boy, who ran away and told his elder brothers that he had seen a strange creature. They came along captured it and took it home. Their father was delighted and killed a goat in honour of the event. The next day he took it to the headman of the parish, who killed another goat in its honour and escorted the party the following day to the Chief's kraal. When they arrived, there was rejoicing and the Chief's head wife (*mugoli w'igembe*) smeared the animal all over with butter and sorghum flour. The Chief killed two large goats and held a feast for the visitors and the members of his kraal. He gave the householder who had brought the pangolin a present of Shs. 6/-. After this the pangolin was forcibly unwound, and stretched out straight. (It took ten people to do this). A sharp stake was then driven up its anus through its body and it was mounted in the manner described.

This is the traditional manner of treating pangolins wherever they are found in Sukuma country, though occasionally the captured animal, after smearing with butter and flour, may be released on the advice of the fortune-teller. The impaling was the traditional treatment accorded by the Basukuma in the past to captured enemies; but it must not be thought that for this reason the pangolin is regarded as an enemy. On the contrary it is regarded as a luck-bringer of a high degree of importance and great reverence is paid to it. As the scales (*igula* pl. *magula*) rot off, they are given away by the Chief to visitors to his kraal in exchange for presents made; the market value of each scale being about a shilling. (It will be noted that the Chief does not lose by rash generosity to the original finder). These scales if worn round the neck or leg are considered as a sovereign defence against the bite of snakes and other wild beasts. They are also tied by old men to their limbs during rheumatic attacks, and around the body of young children who suffer from swollen spleen. It is also an important "activator" (*shingira*) in the fertility medicine, which is mixed with the seed for planting at the beginning of the year. The decayed body and bones of the pangolin are finally burnt and the ashes

carefully preserved in a pot in the Chief's house. Small quantities of this ash may be released from time to time to peasants suffering from the attacks of lions. A little of this medicine burnt in the kraal fire is believed to be a most powerful deterrent to lions.

I have heard similar accounts of the importance of pangolin scales and flesh as medicine in several other parts of Busukuma and have little doubt of the general accuracy of this account; but, since a large part of Busukuma is in the treeless condition so aptly termed by Mr. N. V. Rounce "the cultivation steppe", the chances of the average peasant meeting with one of these creatures is extremely remote. It is only on the bush edges, where mankind is still but an infrequent visitor, that the pangolins find it possible to survive. Hence the very high value put on the scales which pass from hand to hand at a mounting value.

Mr. R. E. S. Tanner informs me that something of the same attitude towards the pangolin obtains among the tribes of the Southern Province. I quote from his notes :—

"The Wamatumbi regard the pangolin as a messenger of God and on one being killed usually hold a feast. Elders of Pungatini stated that with them the animal is not killed, but is set free after being used for sooth-saying. The Wayao also use it for divination regarding the future success of their crops. In the Mitomoni-Mahavale area the animal after ritual use is allowed to go free. A scale burnt in a watchfire at night is reported to keep away lions and all dangerous animals. In Ki-Nyasa the name is *Ngaka*, in ki-Yao *Lingaka*."

Thus with local variations, it may be seen that cult and dialectical root *ngaka* are practically the same over a wide area. Whence, it may be asked, comes this association of ideas between this rare arboreal creature of the forests and the fertility of the cultivated lands and resistance to danger? Perhaps the element of luck and rarity may be important, as well as the fact that the flesh is of a porklike delicacy. The idea of warding off danger may well be conveyed by the impervious scales. There is another alternative that its ritual value may possibly be an introduction from external cultural sources.

In an article in the *Illustrated London News* for October, 1952, entitled "An obscure story of Pangolins", Maurice Burton, D.Sc., after describing the custom of "anting" by pangolins, remarks "All pangolins are hunted for their flesh and the two smaller Asiatic species, the Chinese and Malayan, were also much sought after for another reason, that their scales were highly valued by the Chinese for their supposed medicinal properties." It may be that in the widely accepted association among Bantu tribesmen in Tanganyika of pangolins with fertility magic and medicine there is an echo of those early Indonesian travellers, who have left the record of their passage in the sewn plank canoe, the cultivated banana and edible arum, the beer-pipe, the flat-bar zither, the "stepped" drum and the xylophone — all of which are probable Indonesian introductions to East Africa, still used by the resident populations.