

# **THE RITUAL SACRIFICE OF PANGOLINS AMONG THE SANGU OF SOUTH-WEST TANZANIA**

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# THE RITUAL SACRIFICE OF PANGOLINS AMONG THE SANGU OF SOUTH-WEST TANZANIA

*Martin Walsh*

## Introduction

This paper describes and provides a preliminary analysis of the traditional ritual fate of the Cape Pangolin, *Manis temmincki*, in the Usangu Plains of south-west Tanzania. Since the publication of Mary Douglas's (1957) account of the role of pangolins in Lele symbolism and ritual these 'anomalous' animals have occupied a special place in the anthropological literature. The Sangu case enables us to look at the beliefs and practices of the Lele and their Zairean neighbours in a wider perspective. Douglas and subsequent commentators have tended to treat the Zairean material largely as a problem in comparative symbolic logic. By contrast, I have attempted to explore alternative approaches to an understanding of the Sangu ritual by raising the question of its historical origins, as well as by examining the zoological correlates of Sangu beliefs about pangolins in greater detail.

My description of the Sangu case is based upon information I collected in Usangu in 1980-82, as well as upon notes made by an earlier researcher, Jacques Bilodeau, and included in his unpublished doctoral thesis (1979). Both of us lived and worked in the village of Utengule, the seat of the hereditary chief of the Sangu, who at that time was Alfeo Mgandilwa Merere. Neither of us studied the pangolin rites in systematic detail, or witnessed them in person. The following account of the pangolin ritual should therefore be treated as provisional and liable to revision in the light of future research. This research should be undertaken sooner rather than later, because the Sangu rites are clearly in danger of falling into abeyance, much as Lele practice has done. The massive influx and increasing cultural dominance of immigrant peoples in Usangu, many of whom kill pangolins for other purposes, represents an obvious threat to the survival of the ritual, as well as of the animals which are its subjects.

## The Cape Pangolin, *Manis Temmincki*

Pangolins are distinctive mammals which feed exclusively on ants and termites and are almost completely covered in scales, hence their alternative name of Scaly Anteaters. Three species are found in East Africa, the Giant (Ground) Pangolin, *Manis gigantea*, the Tree (White-bellied, or Three-cusped) Pangolin, *M.tricuspis*, and the Cape (or Temminck's Ground) Pangolin, *M.temmincki*. Of these the Cape Pangolin has the widest distribution, being found in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, where its typical habitat is woodland and savannah within reach of water, especially with sandy soils. Like the other species, the Cape Pangolin is nocturnal and rarely seen in daytime. It is solitary except during a short mating season, and usually gives birth to single offspring. Apart from such general patterns, relatively little is known about the details

of its behaviour (Dorst and Dandelot, 1970; Kingdon, 1971; Haltenorth and Diller, 1980; Stuart and Stuart, 1988; McColaugh, 1989).

### **The Usangu Plains**

The Usangu Plains lie in the eastern Rift Valley just south of the Ruaha National Park, at an average elevation of 1,000 metres above sea-level. They take the form of a shallow alluvial basin, covering an estimated total area of 15,560 km<sup>2</sup>. To the south and west they are hemmed in by the Southern Highlands and the mountain ranges which rise up from the northern shores of Lake Malawi. The streams and rivers which flow down from these mountains join in Usangu to form the Great Ruaha river which meanders out of the Plains to the north-east. There is one wet season, from December to April. This is invariably accompanied by substantial flooding, and the floodwaters often remain until the dry season is well underway. For half of the year, however, from June onwards, most of Usangu takes on a semi-arid aspect.

In his study of Usangu's avifauna, Procter (1968) distinguished eleven habitats with specific vegetation associations. These are, in the modified formulation provided by Charnley (1994): (1) rivers with riparian vegetation; (2) standing swamps with lush aquatic vegetation; (3) flood-plain grasslands with perennial grasses; (4) drier perimeter grasslands, also dominated by perennial species; (5) *Acacia seyal* var. *fistula* thickets; (6) thorn-bush, varying from dense *Acacia kirkii* thickets to open bushland with a range of tree species; (7) bare areas lacking vegetation; (8) *Commiphora* woodland dominated by *C. ugogensis*; (9) *Acacia* woodland with stands of *A. tortilis spirocarpa* (now much reduced by cultivation); (10) *Combretum* woodland on the southern and north-western margins of the Plains; and (11) 'miombo' (*Brachystegia*) woodland surrounding the Plains. This classification is supported by Charnley, whose recent doctoral thesis (1994) provides a much fuller description and analysis of recent patterns of ecological change on the Usangu Plains.

### **The Sangu and Recent Immigrants**

The indigenous inhabitants of the plains are the Sangu (**avasango**), speakers of an Eastern Bantu language which is closely related to Hehe, Bena and other languages spoken in the mountains to the south of the plains. Since at least the early nineteenth century the Sangu were ruled over by a single chief, the most famous of whom was the founder of the present dynasty, Tovelamahamba Merere (ruled c.1860-1893). The German and British colonial periods saw a gradual diminution of the chiefs' power, until, after Independence, chiefship was abolished as a political office. The immigration into Usangu of large numbers of agropastoralists from the north (especially Sukuma and Iparakuyo Maasai) and agriculturalists from the south (especially Nyakyusa) has put further pressure on the traditional livelihood and cultural practices of the Sangu, who now comprise less than 30% of the population of the Plains (Walsh, 1984; Charnley, 1994).

In Utengule, the former residence of the Sangu chiefs, the office and rituals of chiefship are (or at least were, in the early 1980s) still accorded a significant measure of respect. Although there are many Christians and Muslims in Utengule, a large proportion of the population continue to adhere to traditional beliefs and practice. The most important of these practices are sacrifices and offerings (**amafunyo**) to the ancestors, especially to the spirits of former chiefs and other prominent members of the Sangu royal family. The regular performance of royal ancestor rituals is widely believed to be essential for the well-being of the whole of Usangu and its indigenous inhabitants. Some Sangu even blame their decline and current weakness vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in the Plains upon the failure of recent chiefs to conduct these rituals with the frequency and enthusiasm which they did in the past (see Walsh, 1985).

### **The Pangolin Ritual**

Cape Pangolins (**inxaxa**) hold a special place in Sangu cosmology, or at least in the beliefs of some Sangu. The appearance of a pangolin is treated as an event of considerable significance, requiring a specific set of ritual actions which involve various members of the local community, including the chief, and which end in the ritual sacrifice of the pangolin itself.

It is believed that pangolins fall down to the earth from the sky, **uwulanga**. This is considered to be the abode of the ancestors, **amanguluvi**, who send pangolins down to earth. When a pangolin falls to earth it latches onto an individual person and, according to villagers' reports, will then doggedly follow him or her wherever he or she goes, through the bush and in the village, and even in and out of crowds of other people until the person followed by the pangolin reaches his or her home. After reaching home with the pangolin the chosen person must report this event to Mfumbulwa, the Sangu chief's ritual specialist, **umunjajila munya mafunyo**, who leads the royal sacrifices and offerings (this is an inherited office whose recent holders have all shared the same family name, Mfumbulwa). He or she tells Mfumbulwa and others "a visitor has dropped in on me" (quite literally!). Mfumbulwa then buys a black cloth and turban for the person concerned and informs Merere, the Sangu chief, of what has happened. The ritual process for dealing with this unusual event is thus set in motion.

The person who has been chosen and followed by the pangolin is treated as though he or she were a parent of new-born twins. Among the Sangu, as among many neighbouring and closely related peoples, the birth of twins is thought to be an abnormal occurrence which also requires special ritual treatment. Parents of twins are secluded in their house for a period after the birth and must undergo a series of rites before they can be reintegrated into normal society. Likewise, the person who has been selected by a pangolin, is, together with the pangolin, immediately confined to his or her house and must participate in rites which are said to be analogous to those undergone by the parents of twins. Neither Bilodeau nor I recorded the details of these rites, but they are reported to involve singing and dancing inside the house in which other community members participate, including, on occasion, Mfumbulwa himself.

The songs are said to be the same as those which are sung during twin-birth rituals, some of which are abusive in content. The men and women participants, including the human subject of the rites, dance naked after throwing down their clothes. The pangolin is also said to join in the dancing, standing on its hind legs as it does so. Even more surprisingly, some pangolins are reported to shed tears profusely while they are dancing, though this is not always the case. If the pangolin cries in this way it is interpreted as an omen of good rains in the coming year. If its eyes remain dry then it is taken as a sign that drought will ensue.

According to one of my informants, an elderly woman, the period of confinement lasts for a whole day. The next day, the person followed by the pangolin has to dress in the black cloth and turban provided by Mfumbulwa, the ritual specialist. He or she then goes down to the nearest river (in Utengule this is the River Mambi) together with a group of elders (presumably led by Mfumbulwa) and taking a sheep with them. They first sit by the river and sway from side to side, after which the sheep is killed and the meat is roasted over an open fire and shared out. A hole is then dug for the pangolin and it is made to sit in this on top of the fleece of the newly slaughtered sheep. The hole is then covered up with earth and the pangolin buried alive. This concludes the pangolin ritual.

Another informant, a middle-aged woman who had participated in the pangolin ritual, told me that the first period of seclusion and dancing lasts for two days. Then the pangolin is killed (she did not say how) and buried together with the black cloth and turban provided by Mfumbulwa and the clothes thrown down by the naked dancers. The confinement of the human subject then continues for another two days before the ritual is ended.

Bilodeau, however, was told that the period of confinement in both pangolin and twin-birth rituals lasts for three weeks. At the conclusion of this period the subject or subjects are ritually treated (he does not report how) and thereafter and for the rest of their lives are considered to be 'diviners'. In the case that he was told about the pangolin was killed by someone dressed in the black cloth (usually provided, according to Bilodeau, by the Sangu chief after being notified of the impending ritual by Mfumbulwa). The dead pangolin was then wrapped in the same black cloth and buried (Bilodeau, 1979).

It is difficult to say whether these different accounts reflect variations in the performance of the ritual or lapses in the memory of the informants. Pangolin rituals are not held very often. Bilodeau's brief description is based upon a ceremony that he was told took place in 1957. I only elicited accounts of three pangolin rituals, one of them said to have been held in 1956 or thereabouts (possibly the same ritual as that mentioned by Bilodeau) and two others at unspecified dates in the past. More intensive questioning and follow-up of actual subjects and participants would no doubt produce a longer list and fuller record. The infrequency of pangolin rituals might account for informants' failure to remember them as well as any real variations in practice which may have arisen. It is more difficult to say whether this pattern of occurrence itself reflects the infrequency with which pangolins are sighted or the infrequency with which they choose to follow humans and in particular Sangu. In the

one and half years in which I lived and worked in Usangu I did not see a pangolin or hear of anyone else who had done so during that time.

### **The Role of Pangolins in Sangu Cosmology**

Why do the Sangu hold what appear to be such strange beliefs about pangolins and why are they the subjects of a ritual which leads ultimately to their sacrifice? There are at least three different ways of approaching this question. The standard anthropological approach is to examine their role in Sangu cosmology and ritual practice as a whole. I do not intend to explore this issue in great detail here, except to point in a few directions which such an analysis might take. As it happens, there has been considerable debate among anthropologists on the symbolic and ritual role of animals (as well as plants and other natural objects) in human society, and one of the most-discussed cases concerns the Tree Pangolin, *Manis tricuspis*, and its role as the object of a (now lapsed) fertility cult among the Lele of Zaire (Douglas, 1957, 1963, 1990; Willis, 1974; Lewis, 1991). This debate can provide us some hints as to how an analysis of the Sangu case might proceed.

The classic interpretation of the pangolin's role in Lele belief and ritual is that like many other animals with apparently anomalous features and behaviour it is 'good to think with'. This is to say that its unusual characteristics lend themselves readily to symbolic interpretation and incorporation within other aspects of the symbolic and ritual life of the Lele. These unusual characteristics, as perceived by the Lele, include the rather strange appearance of the pangolin (its scaly body and tail being more reminiscent of a fish's than a mammal's), its defensive reaction when approached (curling up into a ball as though offering itself for sacrifice) and the fact that it gives birth to only one young at a time, like most humans but unlike the fish and reptiles which it resembles. The Lele see an inverse relation in the contrast between pangolins and other animals and the contrast between the parents of twins and other human parents. Where pangolins are anomalous in having single births, parents of twins are anomalous in following the more common animal pattern of multiple births. As a result, and by a kind of inverse logic, pangolins are (or were) ideal objects for a fertility cult which also drew in Lele notions of chiefship - chief's being considered as symbols of fecundity for all of the people and land under their control.

As Bilodeau has already suggested, it would not be difficult to apply the same kind of analysis to the Sangu case. As one of my informants noted, describing pangolins to a Nyakyusa man in Utengule, they are indeed unusual animals. She proceeded to tell him that they lay eggs, have skins which are rather like tiled roofs, and can retract their heads and roll themselves up into a ball. Although none of the other people I spoke to in Utengule referred to the ways in which pangolins give birth, the link with twin-birth rituals and the association between pangolin tears and the appearance of rain (another informant opined that the fall and arrival of a pangolin *per se* presaged good rains and therefore an abundance of food) are sufficient to construct an interpretation similar to that which has been applied to the Lele case. The Sangu chief is likewise considered to represent the fertility of his people and land, and the main function of royal offerings is to ensure that this fertility is maintained, especially by asking that the rains

come on time and fall in sufficient quantities. Chiefs, parents of twins and twins themselves are all buried sitting on stools, in contrast to the rest of the population who are buried in a horizontal position. We have already seen that pangolins are, at least sometimes, buried sitting on a sheepskin. The black cloth and turban, whether they are buried with the animal victim or not, have clear associations with sacrificial practice: sacrificial animals are usually black in colour, while black cloths are also prescribed wear for people attending to the royal graves or offering sacrifices on them.

One of the Sangu folktales recorded by Bilodeau reinforces the association between pangolins, chiefs and fecundity. In this tale a young woman, who refuses to follow her sisters by marrying a wild animal, is pursued instead by a magical tree (called **ilidagala**) which becomes her husband. At night the tree is transformed into a chief by shedding its outer form in the shape of a pangolin. At dawn it becomes a tree again after calling for the pangolin to return and cover it. This strange relationship continues until one night the woman, who by this time has a child by her tree-husband, kills the pangolin by burning it on a fire. The next morning the magical tree is unable to resume its usual daytime form but remains as a chief. People rejoice at their discovery of the chief and the woman's sisters divorce their animal husbands and join her as wives of the chief. This concludes the tale, which though not specifically related to the Sangu pangolin ritual, implies that the sacrifice of pangolins is necessary to restore the normal balance of the world and the status of chiefs as guarantors of its fertility - the alternative being an upside-down world in which animals rule instead (for further analysis of this tale in terms of the development of female sexuality and gender roles see Bilodeau, 1979).

However, while there is something attractive about this kind of explanation for the pangolin's role, it also has a number of shortcomings. One of them is that it is not explicitly formulated by the Sangu themselves, or at least was not by any of those that I spoke to. It therefore relies heavily upon the anthropologist's imagination. Recent discussions of the Lele case have also pointed to other difficulties. It is not at all clear why Lele fertility rituals should focus solely upon the Tree Pangolin, *Manis tricuspis*, and ignore the Giant Ground Pangolin, *Manis gigantea*, which appears to be equally 'good to think with'. It is also not clear why the symbolic significance of pangolins should vary among closely related peoples, including some who think that pangolins are just 'good to eat'. The theory of classificatory anomalousness alone is insufficient to explain these facts, although many anthropologists are unwilling to admit this (see the recent debate between Lewis 1991, 1993a, 1993b; de Heusch, 1993; Douglas, 1993; and Fardon, 1993).

### **The History and Spread of Pangolin Rituals**

Whereas modern anthropologists tend to focus upon the meaning and use of symbols in the particular society they are studying, an alternative approach is to examine their wider occurrence and to trace their historical development, including the history of the rituals of which they form a part. This 'diffusionist' approach was popular among nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists, and still is among psychologists and others, but has been widely discredited. The main reason for the

earlier failure of this approach was lack of evidence and the methodological weakness of its main proponents, who were happy to construct the history of ritual and symbols by picking facts at random from past and present cultures all over the world. However, recent developments in historical linguistics and the development of other, complementary, sources of evidence about the past are beginning to give a new lease of life to historical reconstruction. This suggests a different angle from which to tackle the questions raised above.

Pangolin rituals of one kind or another are found among a number of Bantu-speaking peoples in Zaire, including the Lele, and many others no doubt remain to be described. The known historical connections between these peoples and those of south-west Tanzania, as well as their comparative proximity, give rise to the very real possibility that the Sangu pangolin ritual was not a local invention, but derived at least in part from the practice of others. There are two main ways in which the ritual, or important features of it, could have been so derived. It could have formed part of the Sangu's Bantu inheritance or, alternatively, it could have been borrowed by the Sangu or their more recent Eastern Bantu precursors, most probably from people or peoples living to their west.

At present there is insufficient evidence to decide between either of these two alternatives. The common Bantu inheritance hypothesis is probably the weaker of the two. Although the Sangu name for the Cape Pangolin, **inxaxa**, derives from a reconstructed proto-Bantu term (\*-kákà) for one or more species of pangolin (see Guthrie, 1970), more than two thousand years of history separates the Sangu from their Bantu relatives in Zaire and the peoples who have similar pangolin cults. This is a long time for the pangolin cult to have persisted in what appears to be comparative isolation. None of the Sangu's immediate linguistic relatives, members of the Southern Highlands group of languages (including Wanji, Kinga, Pangwa, Manda, Bena and Hehe), are known to have similar practices. Neither are any of the Eastern Bantu speaking peoples of which the Southern Highlands group forms a part, with the possible exception of the Matumbi, members of the Rufiji-Ruvuma linguistic group (see Wright, 1954, for the Matumbi case, and Nurse, 1988, for the linguistic classification of the Sangu and their Bantu neighbours). On the other hand it must be said that the absence of pangolin rituals among many of these peoples is by no means confirmed, and the possibility that future ethnography (or more careful search of published and unpublished materials) will unearth a regional genealogy for these rituals cannot be entirely ruled out.

At present the stronger hypothesis is that the Sangu, either alone or with others, borrowed their pangolin ritual from other peoples some time in the past. The Sangu have certainly borrowed at least one other 'cult' or dance society in this way: the women's **uwuxala** society, evidently a fairly recent borrowing from the Sangu's western neighbours because many of its songs are still sung in a mixture of languages, especially Sangu and, so it is claimed, Nyiha (for a description of this dance society among the Kimbu see Shorter, 1972 and 1987). If the Sangu borrowed their pangolin ritual, then the known geographical distribution of other pangolin rituals suggests that they also took its main features from peoples living to their west. The apparent absence of pangolin rituals among peoples in the Nyasa-Tanganyika Corridor,



between Usangu and the Zairean border, creates difficulties for this argument, though again this might be more a function of inadequate ethnography than of anything else. Only further comparative research will be able to settle this question, as well as provide some indication of the historical time-depth of the pangolin ritual in Usangu.

When rituals have a long genealogy and/or have been borrowed then it is quite likely that some elements of them will not be immediately intelligible to current practitioners. This is clearly the case with the Sangu pangolin ritual. Although it might be objected that some practitioners (for example Mfumbulwa, the ritual specialist) might be able to give a more detailed interpretation, there is no guarantee that this will be anything like the original interpretation (assuming that there was one), given the propensity for human knowledge and therefore interpretation to change over time and often to suit contemporary understandings and circumstances. Ritual actions often have a longer history than the interpretations which are given to them. At the same time ritual actions may be modified in the light of current interpretations. It is extremely unusual, however, to find a neat fit between rituals and their interpretation, especially in a society like that of the Sangu where ritual practice and knowledge are not tightly controlled from the centre (Mfumbulwa's role in this respect is as much a function of popular demands and pressures as of personal knowledge and control, while the Sangu chief's authority over these matters is clearly even weaker still). From this point of view the anthropologists' search for an ahistorical explanation of ritual and symbol is doomed from the start. There is therefore no good reason for us to assume that we can explain the Sangu pangolin ritual and beliefs about pangolins purely on their own terms.

The search for a historical explanation does not rule out an important role for local innovation, the development of new practices and interpretations and their interaction with one another and the old. At some point in the past the pangolin ritual was an innovation (though where and when we cannot yet say), and no doubt it has been modified considerably over time. The close parallels between Sangu and Zairean beliefs and practices suggest that many of these were not separate innovations but are historically related. The challenge for future researchers is to find out how.

### **Sangu Ethnozoology and Scientific Zoology**

A third approach to understanding the Sangu pangolin ritual and associated beliefs, or at least some elements of them, is to examine whether or not they reflect scientifically observable characteristics of the Cape Pangolin and its habits. This approach is complementary to those already discussed above, and recognises that pangolins may not just be unusual animals which are 'good to think with', but that there may be a real zoological basis for various aspects of the pangolins' behaviour as reported by the Sangu, and that the pangolin ritual has been reworked around some of these. There are, of course, obvious points at which Sangu ethnozoological knowledge conflicts with its scientific equivalent. The statement that pangolins lay eggs is, for example, consistent with the belief (not otherwise explicitly stated) that they bear a closer resemblance to fish and reptiles than to other mammals, whereas there is no doubt in the zoological literature that pangolins give birth like other placental mammals.

Four main features of reported pangolin behaviour before and during the ritual deserve further consideration in this regard.

### 1. *The rare appearance of pangolins in Usangu*

I have already commented on this in another context above. One explanation for the comparative rarity of pangolin sightings may lie in their predominantly nocturnal habits. This has certainly proved an obstacle to their scientific study, and zoological knowledge of pangolin behaviour is correspondingly weak. The Cape Pangolin is reported to be partly diurnal, though it usually spends the daytime in burrows or under dense thickets (Dorst and Dandelot, 1970). The Sangu of Utengule are mixed farmers and relatively few of them herd cattle at great distances from the village. Even fewer of them are hunters. It is also quite possible that they are averse to approaching pangolins or reporting sightings of them in view of what might happen to them if they do (similarly, fathers of new-born twins sometimes travel away from Utengule to escape the ritual prohibitions and procedures which they must otherwise undergo).

Another explanation for the comparative rarity of pangolin sightings may be that the Cape Pangolin is itself comparatively rare in Usangu, or at least in the cultivated areas around Utengule. It is quite likely that the burning of bush for cultivation has driven them into less populous areas. It is also possible that the ritual sacrifice of pangolins in the past has further reduced the local population of *Manis temmincki*. Whatever the case may be, the rarity of pangolin sightings and lack of knowledge about their reproduction has clearly provided ready material for the workings of the Sangu imagination, and been converted into the belief that they fall from the heavens. It is difficult to imagine a commonly observed animal being the subject of such beliefs and similarly elaborate ritual treatment: if nothing else this would constitute a major public nuisance.

At least one other kind of creature is believed by the Sangu to fall from the sky. This is a small red tick, **inxadupa**, which suddenly appears in numbers on the ground following the first fall of rain at the end of the dry season. It is easy to see why Sangu believe it to fall from above. The belief that the appearance of a pangolin (or its shedding of tears) presages good rains suggests that there may also be a seasonal pattern to pangolin sightings, namely that they tend to be in the long dry season. One of my informants stated that there is some association between pangolins and rivers and it may be that during the dry season they are more likely to come down to rivers like the Mambi and thereby come into contact with people. The Cape Pangolin is known to prefer woodland and savannah habitats within reach of water, and is said to be fond of water, being a capable swimmer and sometimes wallowing at the water's edge (Kingdon, 1971).

### 2. *The attachment of pangolins to humans*

On first hearing, the statement that pangolins attach themselves to individual people and follow them into villages and to their homes is difficult for an outside observer to believe. Closer inspection of the literature, however, reveals this aspect of Sangu -

pangolin contact to be much more credible than at first it seems. According to Kingdon (1971), Cape Pangolins tame rapidly and captive animals distinguish between people they know and strangers. The same author also relates the case of a Tree Pangolin, *Manis tricuspis*, which was released from captivity in Kampala and continued to visit its former captors regularly over a period of about six months, although it did not take any of the food or drink which it was offered but apparently fended for itself. Its visits were during daylight and, as Kingdon remarks, its behaviour is difficult to interpret. The reported behaviour of Cape Pangolins in Usangu is even more difficult to interpret, because presumably little opportunity arises for the kind of imprinting which might take place in captivity. It is possible, as suggested earlier, that only a small proportion of casual human - pangolin contacts result in this kind of attachment, while other sightings go unreported. It may also be the case that some Sangu who see pangolins feel obliged by their understanding of the ritual import of this event to approach the animal and either wittingly or unwittingly encourage the animal to latch onto them. Whatever the explanation for the Cape Pangolins' behaviour may be, there is evidently good reason to take the Sangu accounts seriously, and as a starting point for further research on this and related species.

### 3. *Pangolins dancing on their hind legs*

This aspect of pangolin behaviour during the Sangu ritual is readily intelligible in terms of what is already known of the locomotory habits of pangolins. Although this is not their usual form of locomotion, various *Manis* species are reported to stand and walk slowly on their hind legs, occasionally using their tails and forelegs for balance (Dorst and Dandelot, 1970; Haltenorth and Diller, 1980; Stuart and Stuart, 1988). This capacity to stand and move on two legs appears to be most developed in the Cape Pangolin: according to Kingdon (1971) it has relatively insignificant forelegs and is capable of bipedal walking *and* running, carrying most of its weight on its hind legs. It is therefore not surprising that the Cape Pangolins of Usangu can sustain comparatively long periods in an upright posture during the pangolin ritual. Whether and in what way they 'dance' remains to be elucidated: it is possible that this comprises no more than a swaying motion, or a shuffling of the tail and feet to maintain balance. It is also possible that the human dancers encourage the pangolin to stand and move in this way, though I was not told of any physical contact between them and it may be a purely imitative response on the part of the pangolin.

### 4. *Pangolins shedding tears*

According to one Sangu informant who had participated in the pangolin ritual, the pangolin sometimes shed tears profusely while it is dancing. I can find no reports of similar behaviour in the zoological literature. As suggested earlier, the pangolin's 'crying' may be a symptom of distress or simply a response to the stress of its exertions, though not all dancing pangolins respond in this way. The Sangu interpretation of this behaviour as an omen of good rains is explicable in terms of the perceived association between the appearance of pangolins and the future likelihood of

abundant rain, and hence abundant fertility in the farms and pastures upon which the Sangu depend.

Sangu observations about Cape Pangolin behaviour, when carefully analysed, can be treated as contributing to the scientific knowledge of this little known species and its relatives. At the very least they provide pointers to further research. The Sangu themselves have chosen to incorporate their ethnozoological knowledge of pangolins into a wider ritual complex which embraces their understanding of twin birth, human and natural fertility in general, and the symbolic significance of chiefship. In terms of our earlier discussion, the incorporation of this ethnozoological knowledge into the pangolin ritual appears to be a local innovation. Certainly the known pangolin rituals of the Lele and other peoples of Zaire do not share these features, though they do deal with the wider issues of fertility and chiefship and incorporate ideas from their own systems of ethnozoological knowledge. This brings us closer to understanding what might be specific to the Sangu pangolin rituals and which elements might have been inherited or borrowed.

### **Other Fates of the Pangolin in Usangu**

Not all Sangu know about the Sangu pangolin ritual. The notes I made on the subject in Utengule suggest that this is especially the case among younger people who have no direct experience of it. One man, a member of the Sangu royal family and son of one of the leading participants in royal offerings (himself a grandson of the first Merere), told me that pangolins are killed and buried in cattle enclosures as a charm to prevent the cattle from being 'startled'. I do not know whether or not this is a common practice among some Sangu, perhaps in the areas north of Utengule where cattle-keeping is a more important source of livelihood.

It is, however, reminiscent of Sukuma practice, at least as described in the literature. According to Wright (1954), who found a pangolin impaled and rotting on a stake outside the homestead of a chief in north-east Sukumaland, pangolin scales and the burned ashes of their bones and bodies are highly valued as charms against the attacks of snakes and wild animals. They are also used to treat various physical ailments as well as being a component in crop fertility medicine. Presumably the Sukuma who now live in northern Usangu are quick to kill any pangolins they see for these and similar ends.

Nyakyusa immigrants I spoke to claimed to be ignorant of pangolins and their possible magical or ritual uses. Sangu informants, however, were incensed by the fact that a group of Ndali (close relatives and neighbours of the Nyakyusa, and like them immigrants to southern Usangu) had killed and eaten a pangolin near Utengule in 1980. The fact that the Ndali (and allegedly the Nyakyusa, the two peoples not always being distinguished by Sangu) thought of pangolins as 'good to eat' was considered a serious threat to Sangu ritual practice and, by implication, the well-being of the country.

All of the practices described in this paper, including those of the Sangu themselves, constitute a threat to the continued existence of Cape Pangolins in Usangu. It seems unlikely, however, in view of its reported infrequency, that the ritual sacrifice of pangolins by the Sangu has ever endangered their survival, especially in the inner Plains away from the main centres of settlement and cultivation. The main threat is probably now posed by the killing of pangolins for magical charms and food. This threat is presumably much greater now than it ever was in the past, given the recent rate of immigration and population growth in the Plains (see Charnley, 1994, for a detailed analysis of the impacts of these and other developments upon pastoral resources in Usangu). In this respect the Sangu are quite justified in complaining about the indiscriminate practices of the Ndali and other outsiders. The disappearance of Cape Pangolins in Usangu would destroy an important component in the natural balance of the land. This is a problem not just in Usangu, but throughout Tanzania, and lies behind the choice of the pangolin as the symbol of the Tanzania Wildlife Protection Fund (see McColaugh, 1989). If pangolins do survive in numbers outside of Tanzania's National Parks and Reserves it will probably be as much due to their nocturnal habits as anything else. It will certainly not be due to their apparent friendliness to humans or, as the Sangu see it, their propensity to offer themselves for sacrifice.

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