SNAKE STORIES FROM KORDOFAN.

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(PLATES I & II.)

(1) A HOUSE INFESTED WITH VIPERS.
(2) FLAYING A SNAKE FOR A *Fiki's* CHARM.
(3) SNAKE-BITE TREATMENT *secundum artem.*
(4) THE LETHALITY OF THE CARPET VIPER.
(5) FRAILTY AMONGST THE SERPENTS.

I. A HOUSE INFESTED WITH VIPERS.

ON 29th March, 1932, it was rumoured in Kadugli that a death from snake bite had occurred in a hut situated behind the British residential area at the foot of the hill. On inquiry the rumour was found to be the truth, and a son and two brothers, who had been eye-witnesses of the accident, were questioned; they gave the following information :—

The family had lived in the hut (Plate I) for 12 years and had suffered no previous snake bite accidents, although the area round about was recognised to be the haunt of numerous snakes. It was a common experience for them to hear the rustling noise made by the *um shedigat* in the neighbourhood of their hut once dark fell, but latterly such noises had been commoner.

Three days before, an old man of about 60 years of age named Daldoom Koor was standing in the compound (Plate II, Fig. I), when he moved his bare foot and put it on a snake, which immediately bit him on a toe. The snake was seen coiling rapidly about and making a noise which the relatives imitated by a long drawn out "*sh*———" sound. One of them killed the snake. The old man did not seem very worried or frightened, but none the less went into his hut, tied his turban-cloth tightly round his leg below the knee and made several slight incisions with a razor in the bitten area. A few minutes after doing this he collapsed. His son gave him a raw egg in water, then some fresh lime juice in water, and after that administered a concoction of *aradeib* pods, which he procured from a large tree growing nearby (Plate II, Fig. II). The old man vomited once or twice within a few hours of being bitten. He complained continually of great thirst; to quench this they gave him hot water to drink as they thought cold water would do him harm. The leg swelled up on the distal side of the ligature and the

is worn on the person. The attributes of the snake, the lion and the leopard are obviously intended to be transferred to, or shared with, the wearer by the process of sympathy. The mechanism is no doubt considered to be reinforced by the fact that the animals concerned are left alive. From the snake *qua* snake the wearer will derive the universal attributes of the serpent, sharp-sightedness, strength, length of life, cunning and deadliness. From the snake in the form of *abu darraga* i.e., the Eygptian Cobra, *Naja haje* (LINN.), the snake most feared by the Sudanese, these qualities will be received in increased degree. The aggressiveness of the snakes of this *genus*, their lethality, their size and quickness, the impressiveness of the swaying raised body with the expanded hood and the ability to spit their blinding venom, all contribute to give the cobras that degree of pre-eminence amongst snakes which gained for them the Pharaohs' brow, and an apotheosis which Oldham[1] has shown to have been practically universal in the ancient world. From the lion, of course, the amulet wearer would derive the strength and courage conventionally accorded to that beast, and from the leopard, no doubt, cunning, quickness, silence of movement and ability to hunt undetected.

The story rings true throughout. The death of the snake which had been flayed of its head-skin was most probably due to injuries of the spinal-cord or viscera from crushing by the log. A snake's spinal cord and column are comparatively delicate structures and form a very vulnerable part of its body. Snakes struck with sticks on the spine may continue to show considerable activity for a while, but as a rule they have received a fatal injury and death will follow in minutes or days. Many specimens collected for Zoological Gardens die shortly after purchase on account of spinal injuries received in capture and handling.

An all-black snake of four *diraas* length in the Sudan can only be of one species, and that is the Egyptian Cobra, *Naja haje* (LINN.), in its melanotic form which is so common in Kordofan, where it is known as *abu kurukuru*.

(3) SNAKE BITE TREATMENT SECUNDUM ARTEM.

The following story was told to the writer at Wad Banda on 22nd September, 1932, by El Tayib Ibrahim es Shatawi.

[1] Oldham, C. F. "The Sun and the Serpent."

KADUGLI JEBALS.
Nuba Tukl compound where the snakes were found and the fatality occurred.

In September, 1931, he went out into the open country to bring in his camels from grazing. Evening came and as he still had not found them he retraced his steps towards the village. When some two hundred yards distance from it he felt a pain in the foot, and knew at once that a snake had bitten him. He hurried on in fear of becoming unconscious, a state he knew to affect those bitten by snakes; he thought it better to die at home rather than in the wilderness.

On the way he stopped and tied his turban-cloth round his thigh and then ran the remainder of the way home. His son, on learning of his father's accident, went out and returned with a root called *oran Zaid*. This he ground to a powder, mixed with millet-beer and gave to his father to drink. About an hour later the bitten man swallowed a raw egg and later some parings of rhinoceros horn in water. Some two hours after taking this he vomited and then fell asleep lying face downwards. He awoke suddenly finding himself lying on his back and immediately vomited blood. An hour later he vomited more blood and thereafter felt reasonably comfortable.

The poisoned leg remained swollen. On the seventh day after the bite, a vendor of medicinal roots was sent for to extract the teeth of the snake from the inflamed wound. He made two cuts with a razor in the affected area, placed a little animal fat on the site of the injuries and then squeezed, producing for inspection immediately afterwards some "red teeth." Thereafter the injured man progressed uneventfully to recovery.

The next day the same *moragi* took out two "teeth," in this instance, white ones, from a little girl of the same village, who had been bitten also by a snake. The girl became well.

Commentary.

Several forms of inspiration are at work in the folk-treatment of snake bite. There is the rationalism behind such procedures as ligation, suction, scarification and burning which aim at limiting the spread of the introduced poison and removing it from the site of inoculation or destroying it there. There is the empiricism of the antidotal type of treatment which aims at countering the evil of the poisoning in the body by a "biochemical" process. This is rarely a pure inspiration however, for amongst the unscientific cold trial-and-error observation is rare and magic plays its part. Next there is the magic in which a contiguity or resemblance

more or less fanciful of the remedy to the snake plays a major part: *similia similibus curantur*. The scapegoat mechanism commonly appears and an animistic conception of snakes and snake-poisoning results in exorcism and transference of *baraka* occupying a position of importance in treatment. There is also a fourth class of treatments, and these are the usual ones. They are a mixture of all three; rationalism, empiricism and magic.

The above story is of interest on account of the numerous folk-remedies employed. First, a rational attempt was made to prevent the poison entering the vital area of the body by ligaturing off the poisoned limb. It will be appreciated that, assuming ligation of the bitten limb to be a helpful measure, the man applied his turban cloth correctly, that is at a place, the thigh, where it could be of real value by compressing the blood vessels against a single bone. The old man, Daldoom Koor, who was fatally bitten in Kadugli, tied a ligature round his leg below the knee, a useless procedure, as there are two bones in the lower leg which prevent the adequate compression of the blood vessels which course in the space between them.

The botanical identity of the root, *oran Zaid*, is unknown, so it is at present impossible to say that it would have no antidotal value. The probability, however, is that it would not. In most parts of the world where snake bite is encountered roots are used in treatment, and so far none has been shown scientifically to be of value. The inspiration is invariably magical. Homœopathically, many roots have a fanciful resemblance to snakes in shape, and sympathetically, roots come from the earth out of which snakes characteristically emerge. Also, as snakes may be, or are, *ginns*[1] (beings which infest the substance of the earth),[2] roots, which derive from the earth, have an additional value. The magical value of a root is enhanced further if it is obtained from a *fiki* or other medium of the transmission of *baraka*. In the root treatment of snake bites in the Sudan it is not usual for the mode of application to be limited to ingestion. More usually a small stick of root is burnt at one end, this end then being applied to the wound. This stick portion is afterwards tied to the affected, or to any other limb. A portion is always eaten. Several factors are probably involved in this procedure. First, the glowing end may destroy

[1] Hughes, T. P. "A Dictionary of Islam," p. 135.
[2] Hughes, T. P., op. cit., p. 136.

poison by heat, secondly, *ginns* are animate with fire,[1] and therefore are most correctly exorcised with fire, and thirdly, the influential root by being kept tied in association with the body exerts a continued, and therefore more powerful effect.

The ground root was mixed for administration with *marisa* or millet-beer. The soporific and anodyne effects of alcohol have no doubt had much to do with the widespread use of massive doses of it in snake-poisoning. None the less it seems reasonable to allot the major inspiration to animism. Snake-poisoning is possession by a *ginn*, and what is more natural than that the beneficent divinity inherent in the sacred liquor should dispossess the spirit of evil of the poisoned body? The unscientific consumption of large quantities of "spirits" in the shape of whisky (*usquebaugh*) and brandy (*eau de vie*) by Europeans when bitten by snakes is well known to be a commonplace.

The bitten man was next given a raw egg. This is a widespread remedy for snake-bite in the Arab Sudan. It is usually said by natives that its mode of action is to make the bitten person vomit, thus ejecting the poison. It did not seem an acceptable explanation to the writer at first, because there was no apparent reason why the ingestion of an egg should cause vomiting. However it has recently come to light that there is a widepsread taboo against the eating of eggs in many parts of the Sudan (Dar Nuba, Butana and parts of the White Nile Province for example) and also it seems indisputable that many Sudanese do in fact vomit if they eat eggs. This is probably an example of allergic intolerance to the egg as a food item, and in the opinion of the writer is associated with the seasonal vitamin deficiency found in the Sudan. Whether the taboo against eggs is magical in origin, i.e., is inspired by the fact that the egg, as a symbol of creation or procreation, has too masculine an influence on women and too feminine an influence on men, or whether the inspiration originated with an appreciation of widespread intolerance to the egg as an article of diet cannot be said; probably both factors were concerned. The serpent has had an age-long and world-wide association with the egg as a symbol of creation, the serpent itself of course having a phallic significance. It is only natural, therefore, that given the desire to remove snake-poison by emesis, no more suitable emetic could be conceived of in

[1] Hughes, T. P., op. cit., p. 134.

magic than the egg, which, in fact, in a proportion of cases, does secure emesis.

The next medicine taken by the bitten man was some parings of rhinoceros horn in water. This again is a common remedy in the Arab Sudan. Parings may be chewed, or drunk in water, or liquid remedies may be drunk from cups made from rhinoceros horn, thereby gaining increased virtue. According to an Omdurman informant the horn is of two sorts, the *hai*, or live kind, and the *mait*, or dead kind. The former is greyish-green, streaked with black or brown, such streaking being indicative of the blood vessels, which originally supplied the base of the horn with blood. The *mait* is greyish-green to yellowish-brown without any streaking, for it comes from the tip of the horn, which is dead. This explanation is probably correct, since the horn of the rhinoceros grows from the skin and not from the bone, and thus will have a rich peripheral blood supply at its root and a negligible supply at the cornified tip. As an antidote the *hai* is of greater value. This is only to be expected because of its blood-content, blood being a fluid instinct with life.

As a symbol the horn (most usually of the bull or ram) is phallic, i.e. it is associated with plenty, fruitfulness, fertility and virility; in short, it is the symbol of regeneration and therefore may be expected to have a value in revivifying the dying, be they moribund from disease, poison or accident. The rhinoceros probably derives a special virtue from his anomalous nature in having one horn only, most horned animals having two. It seems that the classical unicorn is inspired by early travellers tales of the rhinoceros. Thompson[1] states that the narwhal was the inspiration, but on zoo-geographical grounds it seems more reasonable to ascribe to the early Mediterranean peoples acquaintanceship with the African rhinoceros rather than with the Arctic narwhal. No doubt later, narwhal horns would be considered, and rightly so, as unicorn's horns, but the rhinoceros seems more likely to have been the original inspiration. Thompson quotes many instances of the healing power attributed to the horn of the unicorn, usually in poisonings but also as a general panacea. It is worthy of passing note that the Horned Viper, *Cerastes cornutus* (LINN.) is common in the Levant, north-eastern Africa, and the Sudan; and it is not unlikely that the value of horn in treating snake-poisoning may have been reinforced by the fact

[1] Thompson, C. J. S. "Poisons and Poisoners," pp. 47–8.

FIG. I. INTERIOR OF THE COMPOUND SHOWN IN PLATE I. (Here most of the snakes were seen.)

FIG. II. THE ARADEIB TREE, THE PODS OF WHICH FORM THE BASIS OF A FOLK-REMEDY FOR SNAKE BITE.