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Gorillas for Christmas

By Bob Golding

A true short story with photographs about how, on Christmas Day 1970, Father Christmas made an unplanned visit to the two young gorillas in the University of Ibadan Zoological Garden, Nigeria, West Africa and how they reacted to someone they weren't quite sure they knew. It is emphasised that, as a general policy, the Zoo did not approve the portrayal of wild animals as objects for human amusement; the events described below were a one-off.

It was Christmas Day, 1970, on the campus of the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. As a member of the University staff I had been asked by the Senior Staff Club to be Father Christmas that year for the young children of the many families who lived on the campus. It seemed there had always been a Father Christmas. His appearance each year had become established even before Nigerian independence in 1960 and was now an important part of the festive season on the campus. As Christmas Day drew near each year many, if not most, of the very young children looked forward eagerly to the arrival of Father C. It was well known that when he arrived from Lapland each year he always made straight for the University of Ibadan campus as his very first port of call. He arrived quite early each Christmas morning and was then driven around the residential areas, usually in a van of some sort. (Apparently he had once tried to travel there in his famous reindeer - powered sleigh but ran out of snow before he even reached the Tropic of Cancer).



The van driver knew the best stopping-off points. At each one, this exotic, much loved man, the University's very own Father C, spent a few minutes handing over gifts, exchanging Christmas greetings and imbibing the contents of a few seasonal glasses offered by some of the parents. Then, it seemed in no time, it was all over and he had disappeared back to Lapland until next year. But this simple routine always worked well and made a lot of people happy, adults as well as children.

So, now it was Christmas Day again - and this year it was my turn! I had never done such a thing before and was not at all sure I knew how to handle it. Over the last few days the children's gifts had been handed secretly to the manager of the Senior Staff Club by the parents. Such excitement! As with the previous Father Cs, I was loaned somebody's van and somebody else's driver to drive me around. That way I could sit in the passenger seat and bellow 'Ho Ho Ho' through the open window at all and sundry as we drove around the campus.

I wore a full Father Christmas outfit that Christmas morning. I didn't need a false beard as I already had my own bushy black one; I had been given some unknown white powdery stuff to shake into it and into my hair to complete the Christmas illusion. With my Father C hat covering much of my face I hoped I was unrecognisable.

I have to say, though, that after just an hour of going around the campus that Christmas morning, delivering the presents and chatting to the families in a (hopefully) disguised voice, the Christmas illusion was proving a little difficult to sustain. A particular problem was the harmattan. The harmattan is a hot, dry wind which, at that time of year, picks up and transports clouds of reddish-brown dust south west from the Sahara Desert and deposits it over much of Nigeria. During the harmattan, daytime temperatures can be high, and that particular day were very high indeed. As the morning progressed I could feel hot rivulets of sweat trickling down my chest and stomach. My Father Christmas costume was soon soaked; and I was hot - very hot! My driver was another problem. He knew his way around the campus alright, but it was difficult to persuade him to take much interest in what he was doing. I kept having to wake him up when we were ready to move off again. He said he didn't feel well because of something that had happened on Christmas Eve, the night before. However, there was little choice now other than to yell instructions to him every now and then and get on with the job in hand.

As we drove slowly around the campus I became more and more thirsty and, at selected stopping points, found myself replacing my earlier, well-rehearsed 'Ho Ho Ho little darlings' to the children with a whispered but urgent 'Star beer please' to the parents who came out to greet me. Fortunately for me, most of the parents were full of Christmas happiness. They laughed and smiled, went back inside and re-emerged with all kinds of Christmas goodies to eat and drink, including the requested Star beer, my favourite. So, regularly cooled down again to working temperature, I continued my rounds.

Despite the discomfort, I have to say what a joy it was, that Christmas morning, to see so many small faces light up when I handed over their carefully wrapped Christmas gifts. In real life I was fairly well known on the campus, so when exchanging Father Christmas chit chat that morning I spoke in my native Bristolian accent, and in a deep voice, and hoped the children wouldn't recognise me. This approach worked well except for one house where it all went wrong. The house was occupied by a Jamaican family and the children of the house, together with a group of their young friends, were waiting for me outside in the garden area when I arrived. I handed the children their presents, disguised my voice and assumed that, as had been the case so far, I hadn't been recognised. However, I noticed that one little girl, whose parents I knew, remained silent and kept staring at me with a frown on her face. Then, suddenly, she pointed at me and shouted at the top of her voice 'I know who you are - you're Bob Golden from the Zoo!'. Feeling suddenly exposed and vulnerable, I fled back to my vehicle, woke the driver, and was gone.

Before I go any further I feel I should provide, very briefly, some background information that will hopefully enable the reader to put this far-away Christmas saga into some sort of context.

Ibadan was a large, sprawling city situated about 100 miles inland from the coastal city of Lagos, which was once the capital of Nigeria; it was the third largest city in Nigeria and had a human population of between two and three million. The University of Ibadan was established in 1948 as the University College of Ibadan, before Nigeria's independence in 1960. The academic, technical and administrative staff included many appointees from other countries in addition to the Nigerian staff. Departmental teaching and research buildings were located around the large campus, as were many staff houses and apartments, student halls of residence, a church and a mosque, the Senior Staff Club with restaurant and swimming pool, a small lake and water treatment plant and a botanical garden and separate zoological garden, both open to the general public.

The Zoological Garden was originally a small menagerie of indigenous wild animals and was attached to the Department of Zoology as a teaching collection for university students. It retained this status for several years. In 1963 I was appointed Zoo Curator and spent 16 years in post, latterly as Zoo Director. In addition to its original function, the animal collection began to develop as a public educational and recreational facility - a Zoological Garden. In 1974 the University's governing authority acknowledged that the Zoo had become a



Above: Central area of Ibadan in the 1970s.

Right: Queen Elizabeth Hall on the University of Ibadan campus. This was the main women's Hall of Residence.



valuable educational attraction as well as a public interface for the University and separated it from the Department of Zoology as a Public Service Unit. I was made Zoo Director at that time.

The Zoo attracted an increasing number of visitors from far and near. During my period there, visitor numbers increased from around 35,000 each year to just under a quarter of a million; thus the Zoo was the most visited public attraction of any kind in Nigeria.

One of the subsidiary activities that at one stage contributed to the Zoo's public role was my hosting of a weekly children's television programme on Western Nigeria Television (WNTV). Uncle Bob (me) brought a range of animals into the TV studio from the Zoo every week and talked about them to a group of Nigerian school children who were encouraged to touch or hold them and ask questions about them. These children were generally very interested and enthusiastic.

I return now to 1970's Father Christmas and the delivery of the children's presents. I was nearing the end of my slow, hot progress around the University campus. Meeting all

those children that morning reminded me of the international nature of the University staff and the range of countries and ethnicities they represented. There were children from the UK and Europe, from the US and Canada, from India, several African countries, similarly Caribbean countries, Lebanon, Poland and others. What quietly intrigued me was that, in the space of two decades, this new, diverse, international community at the University of Ibadan appeared to have evolved its own miniature, multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural community and it seemed to be working really well. And everyone seemed to love Father Christmas!

Despite my sweaty discomfort, the morning passed surprisingly quickly. I delivered the very last present around lunch time and sat alone in the van for a few minutes, happy to have no more children or parents demanding my attention. I had planned to return home at this point to take a cold shower and have some lunch. However, as I sat there reflecting on the events of the morning and how so few people had recognised me, I found myself wondering if the two young gorillas in the Zoo would recognise me. How would they respond to my very different appearance, even though they knew me so well? Although I was feeling distinctly tired and hot I decided to put this to the test. I called my driver over and asked him to drive me to the Zoo.

Large numbers of visitors came to the Zoo during the Christmas period, with Christmas Day itself being the busiest day of the year. Especially at Christmas and other festive



times of the year, many of the visitors were beautifully dressed in colourful Nigerian attire, including wonderfully flamboyant head ties worn by the women. At that time I had been the Zoo Curator for six years and, after much hard work from the zoo staff and the start of a programme of construction

Above and Right: Zoo visitors around the gorilla enclosure. Note, above, one of the young gorillas sitting in the moat water in the area specifically designed for the gorillas' safe use.



of new animal exhibits, visitor numbers had started to increase dramatically. As we drove to the Zoo's main entrance I noticed that there was a long but moving queue of visitors, all dressed in their Christmas finery, waiting excitedly to pay the modest entrance fee and push through the turnstile into the Zoo.

The driver parked our vehicle under a large, shady tree and I walked up the steps to my office which was located within the Zoo itself. From there I could look out into the zoo

grounds and I was amazed at how many visitors there were. For many of them it was the first time they had been able to observe wild animals in a controlled and safe environment and most seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the experience.

I have written elsewhere about the pair of young western lowland gorillas in the Zoo, how they were brought illegally into Nigeria from Cameroon, confiscated from the people holding them and how I designed a rather special, one-off building for them and our chimpanzees. Only four people - me plus three dedicated keepers - routinely entered the gorillas' space and none of us had so far had any problem being physically close to them without protection. In fact, I look back now on the relationship I had with both gorillas and realise just how extraordinary this was.

I asked one of the gorilla keepers, Michael Iyoha, to accompany me to the ape building and unlock the door to let me into the outside gorilla enclosure. As we walked through the Zoo I noticed that many visitors were staring at me, many with obvious delight. I was still wearing the full Father Christmas garb and it was, after all, Christmas Day, so hopefully no big surprises. As we approached the gorilla building I could see a crowd of visitors standing around the outer side of the water-filled moat that bounded the outside enclosure. The visitors were looking across the moat at the gorillas. We unlocked the staff door into the ape building and went inside (visitors were not allowed inside) to where there was a small safety cubicle. We entered the cubicle and



The three ape keepers, from left Michael Iyoha, Nicholas Eze and Augustine Udoh. The gorilla on the left is the male, Aruna, and right is Imade (pr. I-mah-dey).

locked the door behind us. All doors were constructed from steel bars and mesh and we could see straight through them. From within the safety cubicle we had a clear view of the outside enclosure and from there could safely operate the doors when moving the gorillas from one area to another.

The gorillas had seen me and Michael from their enclosure as soon as we entered the safety cubicle. It was the first time the gorillas had seen me dressed in anything other than everyday shirt and trousers. I had decided not to speak, at least to begin with, as I wanted to see if the animals would be able to recognise me from my appearance only.

Michael and I took our time so that we could better evaluate any unusual or difficult behaviour by the gorillas in response to my presence. It was important to remember that both gorillas, even though nothing like fully grown, were already too strong and heavy to be physically controllable by any one of us, certainly on a one to one basis. Indeed, the time was coming when I intended to put a complete stop to the four of us entering any of the gorilla areas and having direct contact with the animals. While Aruna and Imade



When I sat down, Aruna kept staring into my face. It seemed that, although he had recognised my voice and was largely reassured, my very different appearance was something that he could not easily accept.

with slightly cupped hands; this was what he did when warning or challenging something that was bothering him.

As it was probable I would never again have an opportunity to relate to the gorillas in such unusual circumstances, I decided to explore things just a little further. It was clearly my Father Christmas costume and my change of appearance that was giving rise to the gorillas' abnormal behaviour so, still from within the safety cubicle, I spoke to them for the first time. There was an immediate response. They both came over, albeit cautiously, to the closed mesh door and gazed up into my face, sometimes twisting their heads around to view me from different angles. We spent a further few minutes in the cubicle just quietly communicating with the animals, talking to them while observing their anxiety diminish somewhat. All the indications by then were that it was safe for us to join them so, without further ado, we unlocked the door and joined the gorillas in their enclosure. They both resumed some of their stiff, cautious curiosity as we entered and followed me

knew us very well, and indeed gave many positive signs that they enjoyed contact with us, they were rapidly growing stronger. There was always the possibility that physical confrontation would occur suddenly and unexpectedly. Just one such confrontation between ape and keeper had the potential to change the relationship permanently and, in my view, was best avoided. Although we interacted freely and easily with our gorillas, we were taking increasing care to avoid actions that might result in conflict.

To return to Michael and me in the safety cubicle, it was as we were preparing to unlock the door and join the animals in their outside enclosure that I noticed both gorillas were already behaving oddly. They had stopped a couple of metres from their side of the door, whereas they usually approached the keepers as the door was opened or even made direct contact through the door. Both animals seemed hesitant and anxious and stared intently at me while keeping their distance. I had still not spoken since we entered the ape building. Then Aruna made a sudden short scamper past the door that still separated us, while beating his chest



slowly around, apparently wanting to get closer. In particular, they continued to take long, intense looks up at my face. I noted they were behaving normally with Michael.

I decided to sit down on the edge of the moat. Visitors had by now gathered in a dense crowd on the far side; they wouldn't have seen anything like this before. Aruna immediately sat down by my side from where he could stare very closely into my face for the first time (photo page 6). Imade then sat down on my other side. Both animals began, very slowly and

Above: Both gorillas were initially fascinated by my costume and what was inside the sleeves.

Right: Aruna remained curious about me long after Imade lost interest.

Below: By this time imade was at ease and content just to sit. She also chose to have contact with me. Aruna continued to inspect my face, now in close-up.



thoroughly, to inspect every square inch of my Father Christmas costume (top photo this page). The wide sleeves and what was inside them seemed to fascinate them. Holding a sleeve open, they repeatedly stared intently at my armpit. While this was happening I continued to talk to them and they also kept staring intermittently into what they could see of my face. They still seemed consumed by curiosity.



It was not necessarily a straightforward matter to interpret the gorillas' behaviour. Here, Imade seemed to need to release her pent-up nervousness, perhaps fright, caused by my strange appearance. - see text immediately below.

As the three of us sat there by the moat for a few more minutes, Imade became visibly more relaxed. Suddenly, without warning, she stood up behind me, beat her chest vigorously, hauled herself up onto my shoulders and performed a number of mini jumps, hops and thumps (photo above). It was a sudden, very physical action and I nearly fell backward into the moat! I yelled at her and she slithered back down again. After a couple of minutes she came over to me looking distinctly self-assured and sat down with her body against mine, apparently with nothing more to say or do (bottom photo page 7).

While all this was going on a large crowd of visitors gathered to watch what must have seemed an extraordinary spectacle. Fortunately, Michael had my camera and managed to take the photographs of Father Christmas and the Christmas Gorillas you see here.

Soon after that Michael and I left the gorilla enclosure. My driver finally drove me home where I shed my soggy costume, took a wonderful cold shower and felt clean once again. Yes, it had been a hot, busy, Christmassy, children everywhere kind of day, topped off by my encounter with the gorillas; I couldn't remember ever having had such an extraordinary Christmas morning. However, I was already thinking ahead, although not to next Christmas. No, just to tomorrow, when Father Christmas would be back in the Zoo, this time disguised as the Zoo Director. After all, there were lots of interesting things going on in the Zoo - and it was where he wanted to be!

Happy Christmas everybody! See you soon.

The End.

Bob Golding.

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Postscript. As time passed, Imade and Aruna appeared to enjoy sitting or lying still for long periods in their outside enclosure while in close physical contact with me. They closed their eyes often, sometimes even appearing to nod off briefly into a light snooze. In this photograph, taken in 1972, Aruna (on right in photo) has his eyes closed and my hand clasped firmly in his. I always found this an intriguing, moving, extraordinary experience. Zoo visitors often seemed bemused as they stared at us lying there, quiet and still, huddled together on the ground....


