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Reference gorillas13\_22Jan2017

# The Christmas Gorillas

*A true short story with photographs about how, on Christmas Day 1970, Father Christmas paid a surprise 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*

**By Bob Golding**

**Updated version January 2017**



It was Christmas Day 1970 on the campus of the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, West Africa. I had been asked by the University's Senior Staff Club to be Father Christmas that year for the young children of the staff who lived on the campus. There had always been a Father Christmas, ever since the University was established before Nigerian independence in 1960. Each year he arrived from Lapland and, together with a driver and an overloaded, gift-carrying, reindeer-less vehicle of some sort, delivered Christmas gifts to the children around the University campus while sweating profusely and visibly into his thick red trousers and topcoat. Our Father Christmas never quite got used to the tropical heat.

This exotic, lovable man, our very own Father C, spent a few minutes at each residence handing over gifts, exchanging seasonal greetings and imbibing the contents of the odd glass or two. And before you could blink he had disappeared again back to Lapland until next year. This had always worked well and made everybody happy.

This year it was my turn. The children's gifts had been handed secretly to the Staff Club Manager by the parents over the last few days on the basis that they would be delivered personally by Father C to their little darlings. Such excitement! Like the previous Father Cs, I took a driver with me so that I could sit in the passenger seat and bellow 'Ho Ho Ho' enthusiastically through the open window at anybody we met as we drove around.

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.

I have to say 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! I should have known... 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, which he did very slowly after each stop. He seemed tired, or maybe he had a hangover from 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 found myself rather modifying my earlier, well-rehearsed 'Ho Ho Ho little darlings' approach and replacing it with a whispered but urgent 'a Star beer please' to the parents who came out with their children to greet me. Fortunately for me, most of the parents simply radiated Christmas happiness and cheer that morning. 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 back 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 when I arrived. I handed presents to the resident

children and, as before, assumed my Bristolian accent when I spoke. However, I noticed that one little girl, whose parents I knew, remained silent and kept staring at me with a frown on her face. Suddenly she stood up and shouted 'I know who YOU are – you're Bob Golding from the Zoo!'. Feeling suddenly and unexpectedly exposed, I fled back to my vehicle, woke the wretched driver, and was gone.

Before I go any further I feel I should provide some background information that will hopefully enable you to put this far-away Christmas saga into context. I shall be telling you something about the young gorillas at the University Zoo but before I do that I want to tell you how they came to be there.

Ibadan is a large, sprawling city situated about 100 miles inland from the coastal city of Lagos, which was once the capital of Nigeria. Ibadan is now the third largest city in Nigeria and has a human population of over three million. Nigeria became independent in 1960 and a decade later the University of Ibadan, as a Federal Government institution, was still enjoying comparative stability, progress and international respect. In addition to the Nigerian staff, there were academic, technical and administrative staff from many other countries. As well as the departmental



Sunday visitors to the University of Ibadan Zoo. The new gorilla and chimpanzee building, with a water moat barrier around the outside enclosures, was very popular with visitors, as were the 'swimming' gorillas - one can be seen in this photograph.

teaching and research buildings located around the large campus, there 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. At that time I was the Curator of the University of Ibadan Zoological Garden, having started work there seven years earlier. I was to stay in Nigeria for 16 years, latterly as Zoo Director, leaving in 1979.

The Zoo came into being before Nigeria became independent; it was

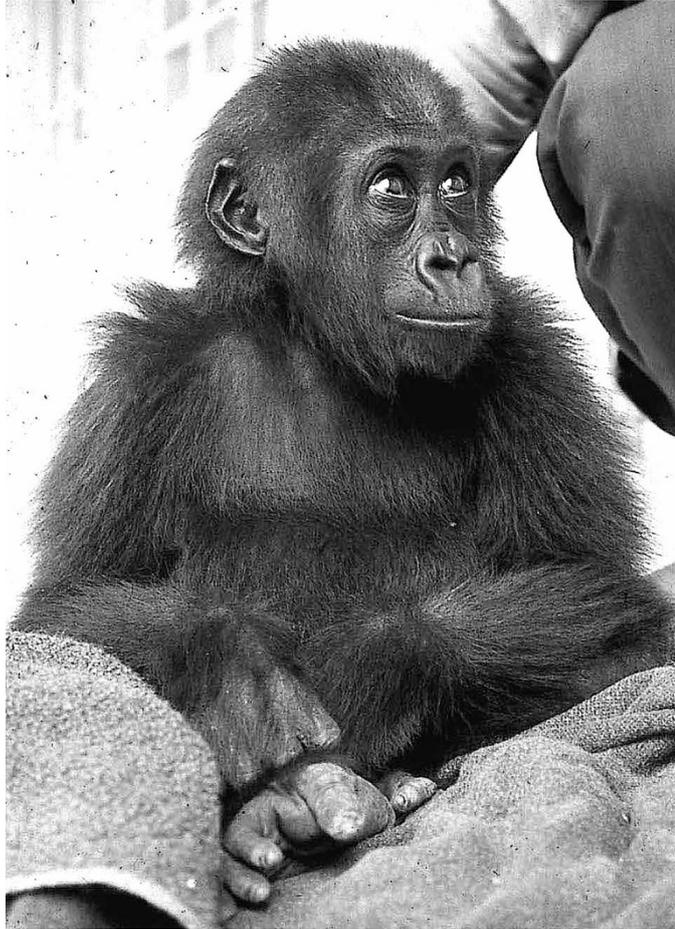
originally a small collection of indigenous wild animal species and was attached to the Department of Zoology as a teaching collection for University students. It retained this status for several years. During my 16 years there the University's governing body recognised that the Zoo was an increasingly effective and important educational attraction and a valuable public interface for the University. One of the subsidiary activities that contributed to the Zoo's public role was, at one stage, 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. Many of these children were very enthusiastic, asked lots of questions and couldn't wait to get up close and handle the animals. I was told later that the programme had been very successful and attracted a lot of interest.

In the 1970s the University decided to separate the Zoo from the Department of Zoology in order to establish it as a separate Public Service Unit. Its subsequent development was to include facilities for zoo visitors as well as for University staff and students. It was to be administered by a new Zoo Management Board consisting of academic staff from the Faculty of Science and chaired by the Dean of Science. As part of these changes, I was appointed Zoo Director. By the time I left this post in 1979 to return to the UK, the Zoo had diversified and grown in size, had many new exhibits and was attracting nearly a quarter of a million Nigerian visitors each year, more than any other public attraction of any kind in Nigeria.



Aruna on the day he was brought to the Zoo for sale. Note the burns to the left side of his chest. His age was estimated to be around 30 months.

In December 1964 a pair of young western lowland gorillas (see *photographs pages 4 & 5*) was brought to the Zoo for sale by a group of Asian traders who said they had obtained the animals in Cameroon, the country bordering



Imade the day she was brought to us for sale. Although they appear calm in these photos, both gorillas were very nervous and showed signs of having been beaten and badly treated.

Nigeria to the east. We realised immediately that the two animals were almost certainly being held illegally. (When I say 'we' I am referring to colleagues in the Department of Zoology, to which the Zoo was still attached).

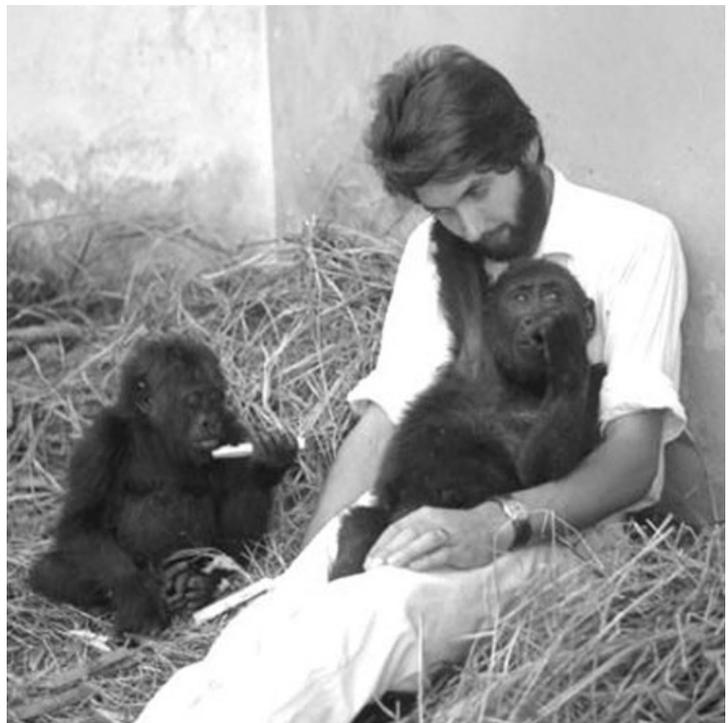
Two species of gorilla, each with two sub-species, are recognised. While separately and differently distributed, they are together indigenous to a very large area of West and Central Africa. Gorillas were, and are, protected internationally by laws that address their status in the wild and the many issues that could affect their very survival. The traders insisted they had official documents proving they were the legal owners of the gorillas and that they had permission to export them from Cameroon into Nigeria. On inspection, however, it soon became obvious that their documents were worthless forgeries.

My colleagues and I agreed that, as a matter of urgency, we should contact appropriate officials from the Governments of both Nigeria and Cameroon, inform them of the gorillas' sudden appearance in Ibadan and seek their formal advice and guidance on an acceptable way forward. While these discussions were taking place the four traders were persuaded to leave the gorillas with us in the Zoo. I believe they agreed to this - reluctantly - because they realised that the animals were not in the best of health and might deteriorate further if left with them; also because they were finding it impossible to control the gorillas or confine them to their cheap rented rooms in the the middle of Ibadan town. I was told that, because of this, the traders were being physically threatened by frightened and angry neighbours.

After two or three days of rather frantic telephone calls my colleagues and I were successful in making the necessary contacts and, after much

discussion, the University was given authority by the Nigerian Federal Government to confiscate both gorillas on its behalf and hold them in the University Zoo pending further investigations. This was followed a few days later by a Government instruction that the gorillas were to be retained permanently at the Zoo.

All this no doubt sounds fairly straightforward and reassuring. However, dealing directly with the Asian traders was a memorable experience. There was uproar when, firstly, I told the men we were confiscating 'their' gorillas with immediate effect, and we had to ask the Police to intervene and provide us and the gorillas with some protection. The four men, with Police agreement and supervision, then insisted on appearing in the Zoo two or three times each day to ask about the gorillas while our discussions with the Government continued. As each day passed, The Terrible Four became more and more outraged, eventually demanding 'their' gorillas back or else. When, shortly afterward, a conclusion was reached with the Government, I informed the four men that the gorillas would now be held permanently at the Zoo on Government instruction. The men were absolutely incensed and again the Police had to be called. Before the men were finally taken away by the Police they yelled loud abuse at me and fixed me with looks of such anger and hatred that I shall never forget them. These people had, of course, expected to make a large sum of money by selling the gorillas to us or to some other organisation.

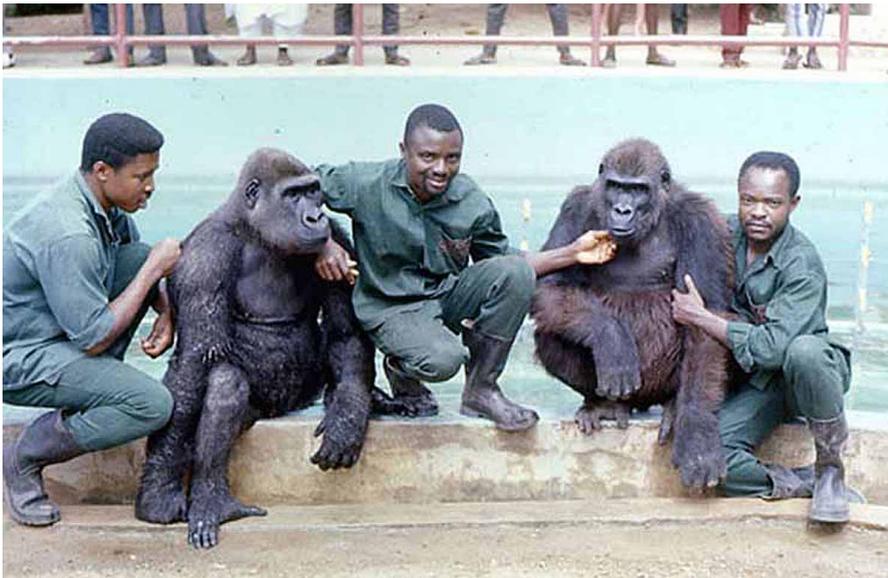


Within a week or so of arrival both Aruna and Imade began to settle. Slowly, as they became used to new carers and an infinitely more sympathetic environment, they began to relax and respond.

After this final wild encounter with the four men, I drove home, locked my doors and placed a loaded shotgun under my bed that night. Anything seemed possible and I just wanted to be sure I would live to tell the tale. However, the men never reappeared and indeed I never set eyes on them again; I later thanked the Police for their assistance. Despite this unpleasant diversion, my urgent concern now was to address the immediate demands arising from the unexpected arrival of the two young gorillas.

The zoo staff named the male gorilla Aruna, pronounced Ah-roon-ah, and the female Imade, pronounced Ee-mah-deh. It was estimated that Aruna was around two and a half years old and Imade around one and a half years when they arrived. They were both in rather poor physical and mental condition and I requested the University's Department of Veterinary Medicine to carry out as thorough an examination of both animals as possible; it proved impossible to gather reliable information about their origin but it seemed most likely that their mothers had been shot somewhere in Cameroon and the youngsters taken from the bodies.

For the first few days after their arrival, both gorillas avoided physical contact with people and sometimes even attempted to bite those of us who tried to touch them. It was clear that they had been very badly treated by their previous handlers. There was an infected burn across Aruna's left chest; there was also a discernable weakness in both of Aruna's legs that the veterinarians thought may have resulted from an earlier poliomyelitis infection (the strength and almost normal use of his legs returned gradually over the following two or three years).



These three zoo keepers were normally the only ones who cared for the gorillas and chimpanzees, serviced the ape building and spent time with the animals. From left senior keeper Michael Iyoha, keepers Nicholas Eze and Augustine Udoh.

on a daily basis. During the time we spent with the two animals we attempted to deal with their emotional as well as their physical needs. In plain language, this involved sitting quietly with them for long periods, often in physical contact, developing our ability to communicate with them and simply keeping them calm, interested and occupied. We tried to provide gentle guidance and reassurance to them as part of the gradual process of increasing their understanding of their new world; and we tried to establish some sense of stability and security in their day to day lives and in their

After less than a week, during which I spent long periods with them in their temporary quarters, both gorillas had calmed down tremendously and increasingly sought contact with me (see photo p.6). I designated three Zoo Keepers to be the only persons, in addition to myself, who would care for, and come into direct contact with, the gorillas

relationships with us, their four carers. It was rewarding to observe that both gorillas responded very positively to our efforts.

The unexpected acquisition of the two young gorillas gave rise to discussion within the University of Ibadan community and elsewhere concerning their long term future, although some of the points discussed and questions asked were of questionable validity. Were the two animals likely to breed together in our Zoo when they were sexually mature? Should we attempt to cooperate with, for example, other zoos outside Nigeria that already held western lowland gorilla breeding groups with which they might be integrated? Should we prepare a long term plan aimed at 'releasing them back into the wild' right here in Africa? If they were to remain in our Zoo, a new building for them would be essential; how were we to obtain funds with which to design and build this?

My own view was influenced by the weakness in Aruna's legs; there had to be doubt that he would hold his own with other gorillas, even of a similar age, and whether in captivity or in the wild. It was highly desirable at that time for both gorillas to continue to have access to the excellent veterinary services available in the Department of Veterinary Medicine at the University. Additionally, assuming we could raise the funds to accommodate the two animals properly in our Zoo, they would be a major attraction for Nigerians of all ages and backgrounds and help us inform and educate the public on Nigerian and African wildlife, habitat conservation and related matters. As far as Aruna and Imade breeding together was concerned, I believed this was unlikely; and they never did, although they got on very well together.

In summary, I felt that Aruna and Imade should remain with us in Ibadan where they would be well cared for and where they could help us deliver important conservation messages to the general public. Thankfully, all the University decision makers involved agreed and it was a huge relief when we were told that the University Vice Chancellor would ensure that the University would fund the new ape building. What stupendous news!

During discussions, the interesting and perhaps controversial point was also made that the gorilla carers should relate to the young animals primarily on the basis of the animals' immediate, apparent, captive needs rather than as part of a contrived programme designed, for example, to prepare them for a 'return to the wild' or perhaps for a future elsewhere.

Very briefly, I should mention that, before the new ape house was built, I carried out much research regarding certain essential design details. A particularly challenging consideration arose because at that stage I was not

sure if our apes would enter, and immerse their bodies in, the water in their proposed water moat barriers or, if they did, what the consequences might be. The final moat design, however, made allowance for most eventualities and the amazing use of water by the gorillas, without any accidents, has since given rise to much comment and discussion. The new ape building was opened in early 1970 and the Christmas Gorilla events described here took place on Christmas Day 1970. I shall make no further detailed references here to the new ape building as the focus of this current story is what the gorillas got up to that Christmas Day.

So, to return to Father Christmas and the delivery of the children's presents that Christmas morning in 1970. I was nearing the end of my slow, hot progress around the University campus. The staff and their families came from many countries in addition to Nigeria itself. There were children from the UK and Europe, from the US and Canada, from India, Africa, the Caribbean and many other countries. What quietly intrigued me that morning was that, in the space of two decades, this new, diverse, international community at the University of Ibadan had apparently already 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, although perhaps that was easy to understand...

When I was walking around the campus in my Father Christmas outfit earlier that morning, I noticed that a few friends and acquaintances whom I casually bumped into didn't recognise me initially beneath my costume and white hair and beard. In some cases it was only when I spoke to them that, somewhat embarrassed, they took a second look at my face and recognised me. As I neared the end of my Christmas gift delivery tour, I found myself wondering if the gorillas would recognise me in this costume and how they would react to such an encounter. Although I was still feeling distinctly tired and hot I decided that, when I had finished with the Christmas presents, I would put this to the test.

After we had delivered the very last present around lunch time, I took a short break and then asked my driver to take me to the Zoo. Christmas Day was the busiest day of the year for the Zoo and large numbers of visitors arrived during the entire Christmas period. I should point out that our nearly quarter of a million zoo visitors annually consisted almost entirely of Nigerians. Especially at Christmas and other festive times of the year, many were beautifully dressed in colourful Nigerian attire, including a huge diversity of 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 of new animal exhibits,

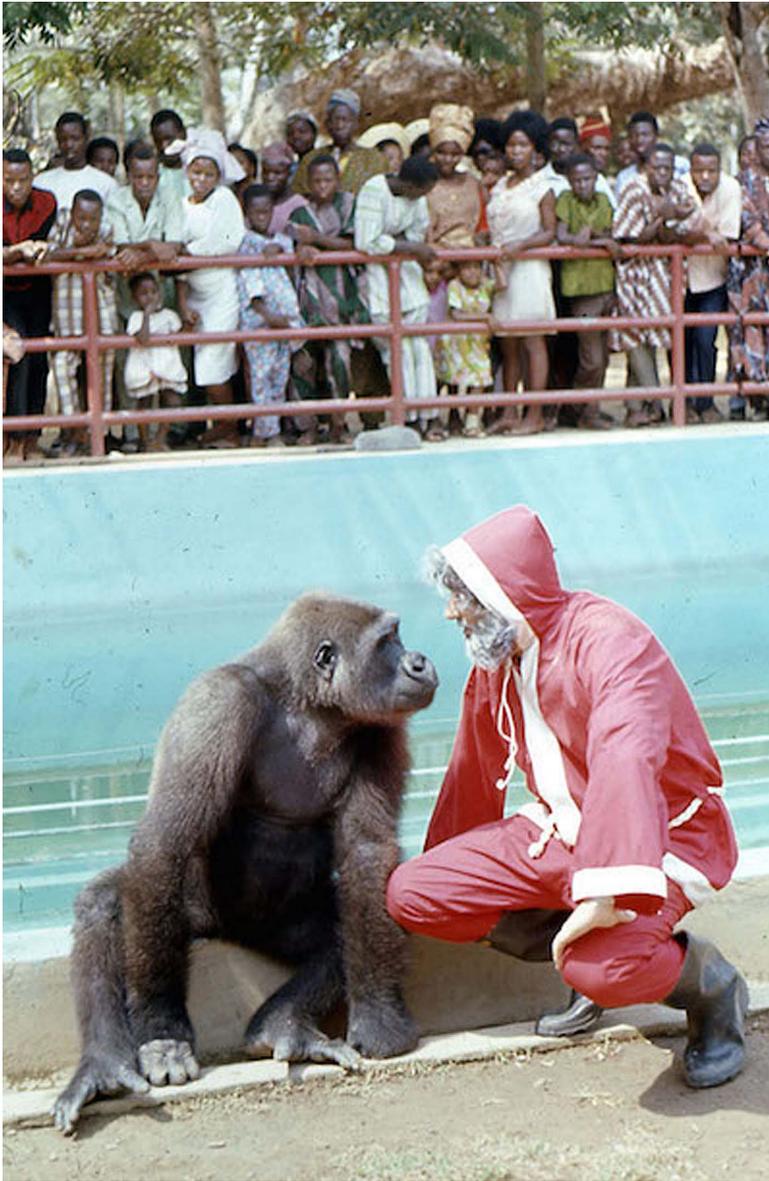
visitor numbers had started to increase dramatically. As we drove to the Zoo's main entrance I noticed, with pleasure, that there was a long but moving queue of visitors, all dressed in their Christmas finery, waiting excitedly to pay the modest entrance fee and push through the turnstile into the Zoo.

The driver parked our vehicle under a large, shady tree and I walked up the steps to my office which was located just 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 undoubtedly 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 asked one of the gorilla keepers, Michael Iyoha, to accompany me and unlock the door to let me into the outside gorilla enclosure. As we approached the ape building I could see a crowd of visitors standing behind the public barrier rail that ran around the outside of the moat; they were all looking across the water in the moat at the gorillas. As Michael and I reached the building I could see Aruna and Imade moving around in their enclosure on the inner side of the moat. We unlocked the staff door into the ape building and went inside (visitors were not allowed in there) to where there was a small safety cubicle. We entered the cubicle and locked the door behind us. All doors were constructed from steel bars and mesh and we could see straight through them. From within the cubicle the ape staff had secure visual and physical access to the inside and outside gorilla enclosures and from there could safely operate the doors when moving the gorillas from one area to another.

The gorillas had seen Michael and me from their outside enclosure as soon as we entered the safety cubicle. It was the first time the gorillas had seen me so attired, indeed the first time they had ever seen me in any form of clothing in which I could not be immediately recognised by sight. I had also decided not to speak, at least for now, as I wanted to test how important my voice was to my being recognised.

Michael and I took our time so that we could better evaluate any unusual or difficult situation as it developed. It was important to remember that both gorillas, even though nothing like fully grown, were already too strong and heavy to be controllable by a keeper on a one to one basis. Indeed, the time was coming when I intended to put a stop to the four ape carers (including me) from entering any of the gorilla enclosures while the apes were also present. While Aruna and Imade knew all four of us very well, and indeed gave many positive signs that they enjoyed contact with us, they were rapidly



Aruna kept staring into my face at close quarters. It seemed that, while on the one hand he had recognised my voice and was reassured, my quite new appearance was such that he could not entirely reconcile.

the keepers to make contact through the mesh, or directly as the door opened. They seemed hesitant and nervous and stared intently at me, but without showing any sign of recognition as they normally did. I had still not spoken since we reached the ape building.

Aruna suddenly made a little running scamper past the door that still separated us, while beating his chest with slightly cupped hands; this was what he did when warning or challenging something that was bothering him. The mild but discernable hostility displayed by both animals as I approached them was not surprising; they largely ignored Michael or at least related quite normally to him.

growing stronger. There was always the possibility that physical confrontation would occur suddenly and unexpectedly, especially if a keeper mishandled a situation or gave the wrong signals. It could take just one such confrontation between ape and keeper for the ape to realise for the first time that it had superior strength and for the relationship between the two to become unstable and therefore potentially dangerous. Although we interacted freely and easily with our gorillas, we avoided 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 enclosure (something that was entirely routine and happened every day), that I noticed that both gorillas were already behaving oddly. They had both stopped a metre or so from their side of the door whereas they normally came straight to me or

As it was possible that I might never again have an opportunity to be with, to relate to, the gorillas in these unusual circumstances, I decided I wanted 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 I began to speak in a normal voice that the animals could hear for the first time that day. There was an immediate response from the gorillas. They both came right over to the closed mesh door and gazed into my face very intently, sometimes twisting their heads around to view me from different angles. We spent a further fifteen minutes or so communicating with the animals, talking to them while observing their anxiety diminish visibly. All the indications by then were that it was safe for us to join them so, without further ado, we unlocked the door and walked in.

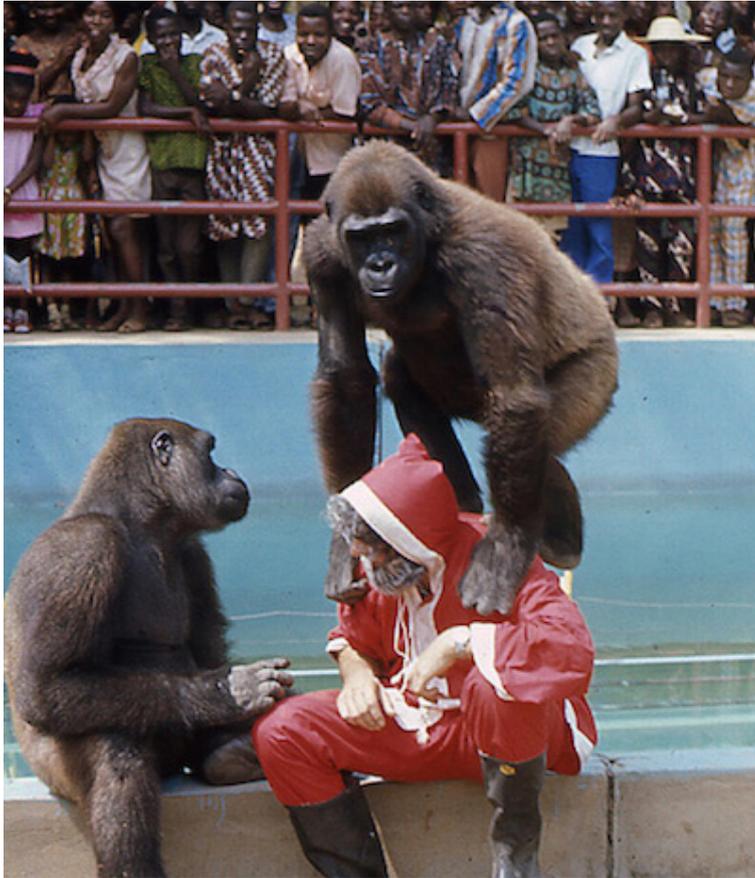


Both gorillas had by now started to relax. They appeared to find my Father Christmas costume fascinating and were particularly interested in opening up the sleeves and examining in some detail what was inside.

The gorillas resumed a little of their stiff, cautious curiosity as we entered, but they made no threatening gestures to either of us. Although by then both animals seemed to have concluded that I was in some way familiar to them and that I was not a threat, they still seemed perplexed and intensely curious as to who or what I was. They followed me around slowly, apparently wanting to get up close and personal to this strange creature in strange clothes. In particular, they continued to take long, intense looks at my face.

I decided to sit down on the edge of the moat to enable the gorillas to examine me more closely. Visitors had by now gathered in a dense crowd on the other side of the moat. They had presumably never seen anything like this before. What was happening? What was Father Christmas doing walking around in the gorilla enclosure and actually talking to the gorillas?

Aruna immediately sat down by my side and again stared into my face (*photo p.11*). Imade then sat down on my other side. Their caution by then seemed to have reduced greatly and both animals began, very slowly and thoroughly, to inspect every square inch of my Father Christmas costume (*photo above*).



Imade gave the strong impression that she wanted to teach me a lesson for causing her recent distress. She suddenly climbed up onto my shoulders, gave me a good shaking and thumped me with her feet.

behind me, beat her chest vigorously, hauled herself up onto my shoulders and performed a number of mini jumps, hops and thumps (*photo this page*). It was a sudden and very physical action and I nearly fell backward into the moat! I shouted at her and she slithered back down again. If she had been my small daughter, my interpretation of what she did, based on her behaviour and demeanour and the context, would have been that she wanted, in a light hearted way, to teach me a lesson for causing her all that earlier stress, when she really wasn't sure whether I was friend or foe. Beating her chest and climbing onto my shoulders seemed to have relieved her of the last of that tension and left her in a more composed and self-assured mood. She now sat quietly on the ground, carefully avoiding my gaze but looking distinctly relaxed, apparently with nothing more to say or do.

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, people everywhere kind of day, but I couldn't remember ever having had such an extraordinary Christmas morning. I was already thinking ahead and was very

The wide sleeves and what was inside them seemed to fascinate them. Holding a sleeve open, they repeatedly stared intently into 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 beneath my hood and white beard and hair. They still seemed consumed by curiosity.

Michael had my camera and managed to take the photographs shown here of Father Christmas and the Christmas Gorillas. As the three of us sat there by the moat for a few more minutes, with both gorillas continuing to examine my outfit, Imade seemed to become more and more relaxed, even playful. Suddenly she stood up

much aware that this Father Christmas would be back in the Zoo, disguised as the Zoo Director, long before next Christmas. Tomorrow, more like it. After all, there were lots of good things going on in the Zoo - and it was where I wanted to be!

Happy Christmas everybody!

See you soon...

*The End----- Completed December 2016-----Updated January 2017*

**Postscript.** Aruna and Imade (*photo below*) appeared to enjoy sitting or lying still for prolonged periods in their outside enclosure while in close physical contact. 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, too, often seemed bemused, uncomprehending as they stared at us lying there, quiet, still and self absorbed; they sometimes stood there for several minutes, apparently trying to understand something they had never seen before – this unlikely little group of creatures, huddled together on the ground, apparently lost in a different world.

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