

The Absent Elephant



This true short story introduces the reader to the little known African forest elephant. It also relates how, in London, a young elephant on its way by air to Nigeria, West Africa, changed for ever the lives of a British man and an American woman who had yet to meet but who have since moved on together to deal with some quite unexpected developments (2017).

by Bob Golding



One day in October 1976 I found myself high in the skies above the Sahara Desert in Africa. Nearly seven miles high in fact. Even from that height the particular patch of the earth's surface below me looked a little scary. It looked dry, remote and wild, with no sign - at least from where I sat - of human presence or activity. As I moved across it, the colours of the land varied, from rust-red to golden brown with quite a few shades in between. Every now and then I could make out what seemed to be areas with jagged shadows cast by rocky outcrops that might have been hills or mountain tops. I gazed down but recognised very little of what I could see, just an endless, distant, starkly beautiful landscape.

I was sitting in a very comfortable seat in a large jet aeroplane, the sort of aeroplane that is normally used to carry countless numbers of passengers around the globe every year, perhaps on business or for a faraway vacation. It was flying roughly north - south, having started its journey in London, and was now heading down to Lagos in Nigeria, West Africa. This flight was quite different, though, from any I had experienced before. For example, there was a complete absence of sound from within the aircraft - no squeals or shouts from bored or hungry children, no clattering crockery from food trolleys, no sudden blasts from loudspeakers somewhere, not a human voice to be heard. The aircraft's flight crew were up in the nose of the aircraft somewhere, but I could neither hear nor see them. There was just the steady, subdued, background roar of the four jet engines.

You may have guessed by now that I was sitting alone in a large cargo aircraft, for me a new and strange experience. With the exception of my own seat there were no seats to be seen, and most of the fittings and fixtures such as overhead luggage racks and clusters of toilets that take

up room in a passenger aircraft were also missing. The result was a cavernous space, a flying warehouse, and it was stacked with machinery, equipment and crates containing all kinds of cargo. There were bicycles, refrigerators, lawn mowers, television sets and Heaven knows what else packed on that plane. It was rather like sitting in an airborne B & Q or a HOMEBASE store, plucked from a city trading estate somewhere.

My solitary seat was positioned on the left side of the aircraft, toward the front and next to a window. I had been told it was for my use only. This seemed a superfluous comment as there was not another passenger in sight, not a soul to be seen. If, during a flight, you liked to talk to your fellow passengers sometimes, or chat up the stewardesses - or stewards for that matter - this was not the place to be.

Sadly, I wasn't enjoying the flight. Something was missing from the stacks of crates and packages all around me, something I had travelled to London specifically to collect and take back with me to Nigeria, something I had decided, at the last minute and with a heavy heart, to leave on the tarmac at the airport.

That something was a wooden crate containing a live elephant.

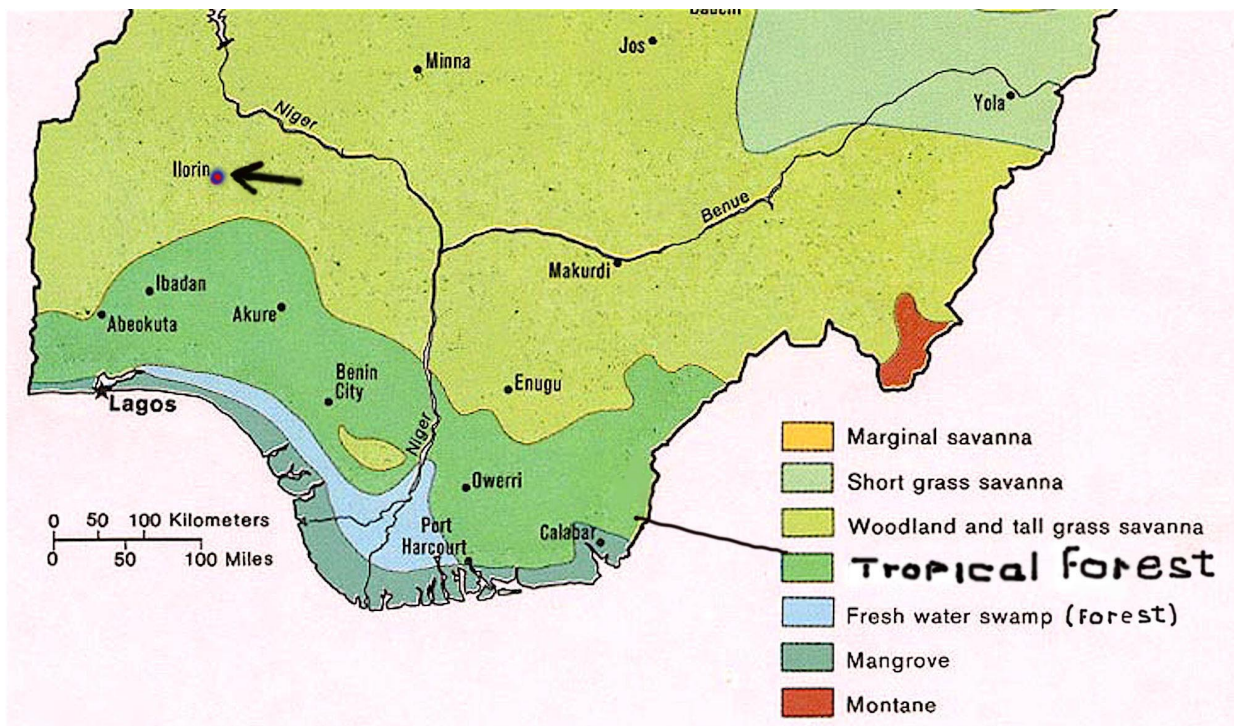
Let me explain the background to this lonely journey across the African skies, a journey that had its roots back at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria where I was Director of the University's Zoological Garden. The University Zoo was a very popular and rapidly growing public attraction, used increasingly by the University as an interface through which to inform and educate the general public about Nigeria's and Africa's wildlife. When I took up my post there in 1963, a young female African elephant named Dora was already resident in the Zoo. She had been acquired two or three years earlier from a location somewhere north of Ilorin and north also of the presumed northern boundary of the original tropical forest zone. Her mother had almost certainly been killed by hunters for her meat rather than for ivory. This young elephant was sent to the Zoo in Ibadan and was successfully hand raised there. A second female elephant, named Bodunrin, was brought to the Zoo in 1963 when she was around two weeks old. As far as it was possible to tell, her mother had also been killed by hunters, but in the Upper Ogun area of Nigeria, again to the north of Ilorin.

Photograph of molar tooth of African elephant, almost certainly *L. africana*



Generalised drawing of lower jawbone of African elephant showing two molar teeth, one on each side





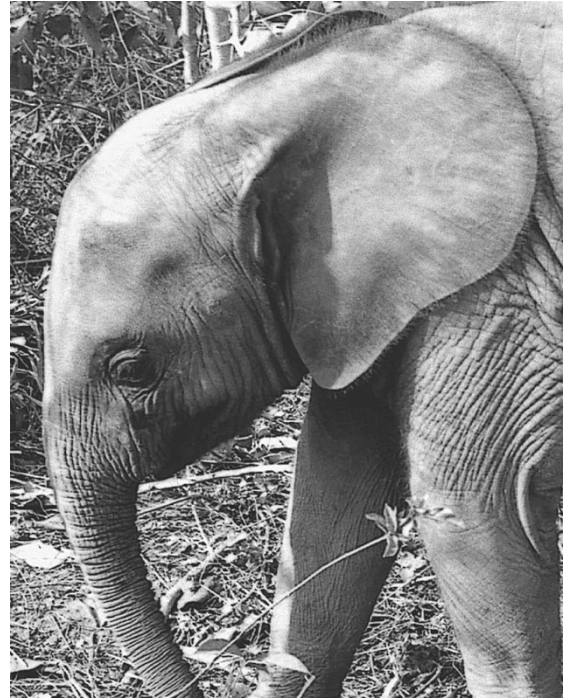
Showing the original tropical forest zone in southern Nigeria and its presumed northern limit (green / yellow interface on map). Most of the forest has now been felled. The two forest elephants (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) at the University of Ibadan Zoo were taken when very young from two separate areas north of Ilorin.

Bodunrin was kept initially in the garage and adjacent garden of the Head of the University's Zoology Department where she could receive the frequent attention she needed during those early weeks. In due course she was moved to the Zoo and introduced to Dora. Both young elephants had been handed over to the Zoo with the knowledge and agreement of the relevant Nigerian wildlife authorities.

I can reveal that there was something very special about those two young elephants: they were African forest elephants and they remain the only forest elephants I have ever seen or worked with.

The African forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) now appears to be widely acknowledged as a full and separate species of elephant. Recent research claims to show that the forest elephant and the better known African savanna elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) have been separated for three million years. Apparently this re-assessment of the taxonomy of the forest elephant seems likely to be accepted and the uncertainties of the 1960s, when there were widely-held differences of opinion on the matter, thus hopefully ended. Unfortunately, the distribution of *L. cyclotis* still seems unclear, perhaps partly because of the alleged existence of further 'types' of African 'forest elephant' yet to be formally identified.

I was fascinated by having two forest elephants in the University Zoo and by the fact that both had been taken from the wild in Nigeria. They were,



Left *Loxodonta africana* and right *Loxodonta cyclotis*. Both are young animals. Note that the lower external ear lobe or pinna of *L. africana* is more angular and extends further forward than that of *L. cyclotis* which has a generally smaller and more rounded pinna. The distance between the eye and the external auditory canal is proportionately greater in *L. cyclotis* which also has a longer and narrower mandible, a tendency to hold the head lower and the higher number of toe nails discussed elsewhere.

of course, young animals but some of their physical characteristics already differed clearly from those of African elephants of similar or greater age I had seen in zoos and safari parks in Europe or North America or indeed in the wild.

For some time a number of features had been described for the forest elephant that were said to distinguish it from the savanna elephant. These included smaller size, longer and narrower mandible, head held at a lower angle, tusks straighter and pointing downward, side profile of head more rounded, external ears more rounded and covering a smaller area of the head, five toe nails on the front feet and four on back feet (see images above).

I was confident that the relevant features of the two elephants in the Zoological Garden in Ibadan conformed to those set out above for the African forest elephant. In particular, they had five very well defined toe nails on the front feet and four on the back feet and in this regard were different from all other African elephants I had ever examined, in zoos or elsewhere. I could only assume this was because most, if not all, of the African elephants exported to zoos and safari parks around the world were savanna elephants that originated mainly in countries in East and southern Africa.

It seems that very few African forest elephants have been kept in zoos anywhere in the world, although obtaining reliable information on this is

difficult. I made enquiries again recently (2016) and my impression is that, while Abidjan Zoo in the Ivory Coast may have a single forest elephant, this species is probably kept in only a handful of zoos worldwide, possibly including one or two non-African zoos. Any African zoos involved are likely to be located within or near the natural range of the forest elephant and to have acquired their elephant/s locally.



Bearing in mind that an elephant's toe nails are relatively easy to observe and count from a few metres away, I made a point of examining the feet of every African elephant I was able to get sufficiently close to when, in the 1960s and 70s, I visited zoos and safari parks in North America and Europe. I can say that every African elephant I viewed had four toe nails on each front foot and three on each back foot, and that the relative size and arrangement of the nails was very similar for each animal.

On a lighter note, I can also confirm that the process of examining and photographing the feet of unfamiliar elephants in an unfamiliar zoo in a foreign country is not always straightforward or without incident. I certainly wouldn't recommend it as a regular hobby. My wife became hesitant about accompanying me to a zoo or safari park on one of my Elephant Toe Nail Counts. She was always pointing out how distinctly odd I must look to other zoo visitors as I squatted or semi-crawled around among them in the zoo's elephant building while trying to get as close to the animals as the safety barriers would allow. The aim, of course, was to observe, and take photographs of, the elephants' feet and I generally preferred not to request assistance with this from zoo staff. There were indeed two or three occasions when visitors actually reported me for allegedly suspicious behaviour. On then being challenged by a zoo official, I had to stand there, gesticulating wildly in a foreign language, trying to explain what I had been doing. On one occasion, however, in an Italian zoo, my gesticulations and verbal counter-attack worked superbly well and the confrontation ended in much noise and laughter all round.

The capture locations of our two forest elephants at the University of Ibadan Zoo were perhaps surprising, bearing in mind that much or most of southern Nigeria had, by the time of their capture, been cleared of forest; surprising also because of the increase in the human population in Nigeria. Most of southern Nigeria was once covered with tropical forest. According to a recent publication by the UN, Nigeria lost nearly 80 per cent of its old-growth forests between 1990 and 2005, the

highest rate of natural forest loss anywhere on the planet. The remaining tropical forest in Nigeria continues to decline at world record rates due to high human population growth rates, conversion for subsistence and industrial agriculture, and logging. In the 1960s small areas of forest still remained in southern Nigeria, but felling continued at a fast rate. It is presumably still possible that small numbers of forest elephants remain in southern Nigeria, although it seems likely that this species has succumbed, or soon will, to habitat alteration and increased human activity in that area. Even the Cross River National Park in south eastern Nigeria is now under real threat from road construction.



Dora in the foreground. We were able to gather plenty of suitable woody branches, green leaves and grasses for the elephants throughout the year.

Bearing in mind the generally pessimistic outlook in the 1960s and 70s regarding the future of the forest elephant in Nigeria, it was clear that the two females in our Zoo were important and valuable animals and should be looked after carefully. It was suggested that our Zoological Garden should develop a long-term plan aimed at establishing a captive, or semi-captive, breeding group of forest elephants somewhere in southern Nigeria, preferably within easy reach of Ibadan. The aim would be to establish, probably with other parties, a long-term source of forest elephants with which to slowly repopulate any re-established and protected areas of forest in southern Nigeria and possibly in other countries. Unfortunately, we were unable to attract sufficient funding for this suggestion although it attracted much interest from various wildlife officers and others involved with wildlife conservation in certain Nigerian State Governments. Thus it remains for those wildlife officers and relevant politicians to perhaps consider the matter further as and when appropriate.

A relevant point here is that the conclusion of research published recently throws new doubt on the future of the forest elephant; it concludes by stating that not only does it take more than 20 years for female forest elephants to begin reproducing, but that they give birth only once every five to six years. This reproduction rate means that



Forest elephants Bodunrin left, Dora right. The University of Ibadan's Zoological Garden grew rapidly as a visitor attraction and public interface and a sanctuary where the public could observe wild animals in safety. By the time I left there in 1979, the Zoo was attracting nearly a quarter of a million visitors each year, more than any other public attraction in Nigeria. Photo 1964.

population growth is around three times slower than that of the savanna elephant.

One day in 1973, in our University of Ibadan Zoological Garden, the spirit of one of the slogans painted in large letters on the front of many of Nigeria's mammy wagons descended upon us, determined to prove its point. That slogan read 'No Condition is Permanent'. It all started when Dora developed a problem – inflammation, perhaps infection - around the base of one of her small tusks. The precise nature of the problem was unclear but the tusk was obviously causing Dora pain and she did her best to prevent it from coming into contact with anything hard, even when feeding. This situation continued for several days, with no sign of improvement. It became clear that action was necessary. Two British veterinarians from the University's Department of Veterinary Medicine, who had already worked with some of our zoo animals came over to the Zoo to discuss the problem and suggest a way forward. After a couple of days of observation and discussion, the vets decided it was necessary to examine Dora's tusk more closely before deciding what further action to take. They pointed out that it would be necessary to give Dora a general anaesthetic before the examination.

On the morning of Operation Elephant a number of zoo keepers and interested colleagues gathered around the elephant enclosure and looked on with much interest and curiosity as Dora was injected with the

anaesthetic. During the next few minutes Dora grew gradually less steady on her feet and two or three keepers and I followed her around, pushing hard against her to prevent her from suddenly falling over and possibly injuring herself. We also wanted her to go down with her suspect tusk on the upper side for ease of access by the vets during their examination. Finally, Dora's legs began to buckle, but we were able to ensure that she sank relatively gently to the ground. She rolled into a natural position on her side with the suspect tusk on the upper side. Pretty well perfect so far!



The two veterinarians started to examine Dora's problem tusk and for some time it seemed that everything was orderly and going well. A couple of the zoo staff helped the vets by holding some of the items they were using so, as the vets leaned over Dora, working away at her head end, there was a little relaxed to-ing and fro-ing around the prostrate elephant. A huge clump of tropical bamboo nearby provided valuable shade as they worked.

Then... Disaster! I cannot find words that adequately convey the impact of what happened next. Dora died! Yes, died! She simply stopped breathing and lay dead on the ground before us! As we all tried to absorb what had happened, many of us were shocked into a state of bulging eyed disbelief.



As the vets finish their examination of the organs and tissues of the dead elephant Dora, the pieces are placed in piles ready to be carted away. This was a tragic day as Dora's death made it less likely that we would be able to establish a breeding group of African forest elephants in Nigeria. 1973.



The vets were also shocked - and mystified. They decided to carry out an immediate post mortem examination to see if they could identify a cause of death; they set about examining the body where it lay. When they had finished a couple of hours later, Dora lay there with her internal organs and various body parts in piles for all to see.

As far as I remember, the cause of death was never clearly established. The vets assured me that everything, up to the death itself, had gone to plan as far as they were concerned and that all appropriate procedures had been followed. It was suggested that the elephant was perhaps allergic to the anaesthetic or that there had been some other unexpected and unusual reaction to some of the materials used during the examination.

I had to decide quickly what to do with those piles of dead elephant pieces, including the enormous intestine. I certainly wanted the material removed from the Zoo immediately, before it started to decay, which wouldn't be long at those high tropical temperatures. Although we didn't have the facilities immediately available to part-prepare the skeleton as a possible future museum exhibit, I decided I would try to locate some remote part the University campus where the body parts could be buried for possible retrieval later.

Then someone had the brilliant idea of trying to contact some of the local professional butchers in town and employing them to cut into pieces everything that was no longer needed, while leaving the skeleton undamaged. My zoo driver and the head zoo keeper drove quickly to the main meat market in Ibadan town and returned with four professional butchers, each carrying a selection of wicked-looking knives. They were astonished to see, at close quarters, what awaited them - a dead elephant, or 'erin' in the Yoruba language; quite a change from the hundreds of cows they slaughtered and butchered every week. As the vets declared each mound of flesh finished with, the butchers hacked into it and cut it into smaller pieces which were then carried away on a trailer to a quickly-negotiated burial place. One of the butchers cut Dora's trunk into two separate pieces and sat quietly on the ground holding and gazing at them, apparently fascinated.

While this clearing up work was taking place, I became aware of the great sadness that had descended on the zoo staff and indeed everyone else there. It was difficult to absorb what had happened. I

was deeply dismayed; in addition to the immediate and obvious reasons for this, Dora's death left us with a solitary female forest elephant, Bodunrin.

The death of Dora brought about a fundamental change of emphasis in our need for one or more additional elephants. The thought of the now



solitary Bodunrin living and developing in total isolation from other elephants was entirely unacceptable. Elephants are social animals and usually live in complex family groups where they interact with other elephants throughout most their lives. It was important to provide Bodunrin with at least one companion elephant - and not necessarily a male forest elephant - as soon as possible

as this would be likely to have a positive influence on her wellbeing and her breeding potential when adult.

Despite making contact with likely sources of supply or information, I heard of no further elephants becoming available within Nigeria - and this remained the situation up to September 1979 when I left my post there. This did not necessarily mean, of course, that there were no forest elephants remaining somewhere in Nigeria.

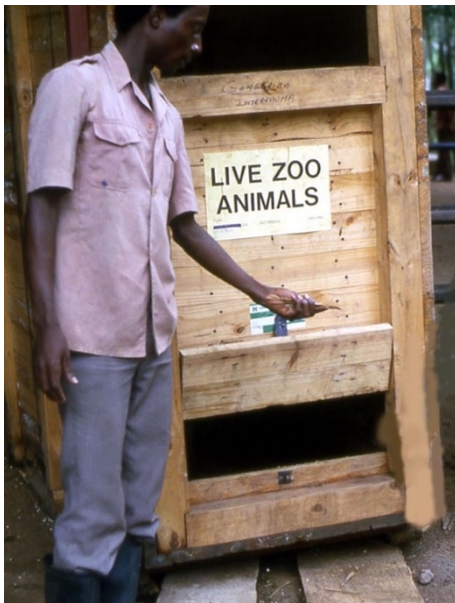
It took well over two years to locate and negotiate the purchase of another acceptable elephant through a respected international zoo animal broker. In 1976 this animal, a young female African savanna elephant from southern Africa, became available and was soon ready for its journey to London and then to Nigeria.

I have been asked occasionally if, in importing elephants from a different part of Africa, there was a danger of them escaping from our Zoological Garden and either being 'lost' and living in the wild in Nigeria or being absorbed into Nigeria's wild elephant populations, thus perhaps introducing unwanted genes into those populations. A comparison was made with the deliberate release into the south Florida countryside of many Burmese pythons, ex-pets that have now bred and increased in numbers and become a significant problem in wild Florida.



Briefly, the answer is that the two situations are quite dissimilar. In the case of the exotic pythons released into the wild by their irresponsible owners, these snakes are able to disappear into the tall grasses, scrub and waterways of south Florida almost immediately they are released. They live subsequently as wild snakes and are difficult to find, capture and remove from the wild habitat as well as having a very much faster reproduction rate than elephants. In the case of one or more imported elephants in our Zoological Garden, there was simply no possibility whatever of such large and conspicuous animals casually 'escaping', or finding their way through trading estates, across busy roads, through areas of dense housing, etc, without being pursued by zoo and veterinary staff, police etc within a very short time. In any case, the nearest wild elephants were a hundred plus miles from Ibadan.

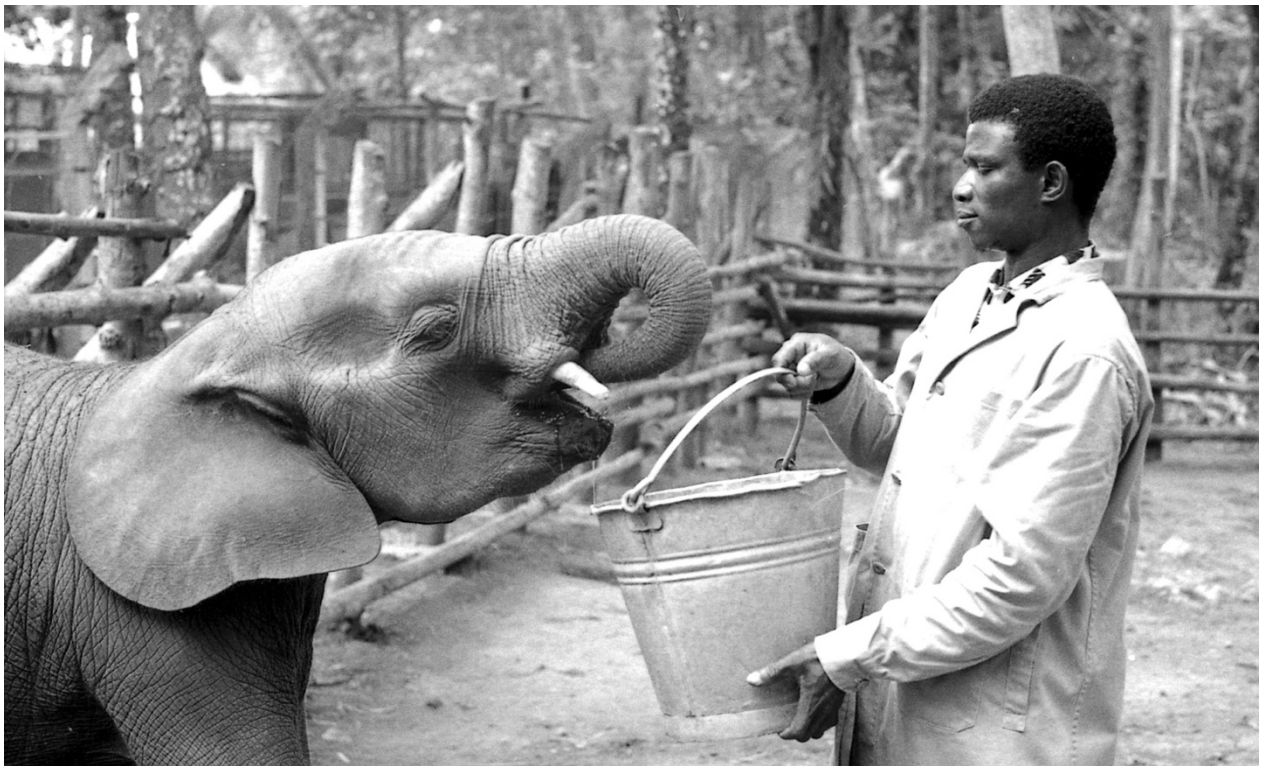
We began to make the rather complicated arrangements to fly our newly purchased elephant from southern Africa to Nigeria. For a number of quite unavoidable reasons we first had to fly it to London and it was arranged that it would then spend a few days with a very experienced and helpful zoo near London, simply to break the animal's journey and to check its health. I was then to fly to London from Nigeria, collect the elephant, fly back to Lagos with it and accompany it by road to Ibadan.



The crate that contained our 'new' savanna elephant, sent by air and received without mishap on the second

Thus one morning I found myself, as arranged, waiting at Luton Airport near London. The truck carrying the elephant in its wooden crate arrived from the collaborating zoo on time, an hour or so before the aircraft was due to take off for Lagos, Nigeria. The crate was offloaded onto the tarmac, very near the waiting aircraft. The young elephant seemed relaxed in its crate and took food and water. I was assured that, during its short stay at the zoo, it had been allowed out of the crate and into a temporary enclosure for exercise.

As those of us involved in this operation stood around the crate talking and waiting for a fork lift truck to lift the crate up to the aircraft's loading



Dora being given a drink by the zoo's head keeper Daniel Osula. In the background can be seen a strong but temporary fence and enclosure that was used to keep our two elephants separate during the period when we were persuading them to like each other. Photo 1964.

bay, the elephant suddenly dropped down inside the crate onto her underside with her legs folded awkwardly beneath her on the straw bedding. She lay there for some minutes without moving. She then tried to get up onto her feet but was unable to do so - she seemed unable to move her legs into a position to support her.

I considered the situation. Elephants mostly stand while sleeping although they may have different sleep patterns when very young. They also sleep while lying on their side, but usually for relatively short periods. In a prone position an adult elephant's body weight may crush and damage its internal organs if in that position for too long. It was



Senior zoo keeper Michael Iyoha gives Dora freshly gathered woody vegetation and large quantities of suitable green, wild leaves and grasses.

quite impossible to be sure that, in dropping to the floor of the crate, the elephant was seeking to sleep or rest or was actually unwell. No veterinarians were available within the time we had before take-off and in any case the zoo's vets had earlier declared the animal fit to travel. I remained concerned that the elephant still seemed quite unable to get back on its feet. And importantly, after

the still memorable death of Dora, I wanted to be absolutely sure of returning to Ibadan with a healthy elephant.

I calculated that the flight from London to Lagos, time spent loading the elephant total at least ten hours and quite possibly more. After much thought I came to the firm conclusion that to consign the elephant, in its existing questionable state, to another ten hours in its crate was a risk I was not prepared to take. I thus decided to fly back to Nigeria without the elephant!

I quickly agreed with our helpful friends that they would take the elephant back to their Zoo near London and do whatever was necessary for it to recover. I had to get back to Nigeria as soon as possible and as my cargo jet was by now ready for take off I had just enough time to climb up into the aircraft and find my solitary seat.

This is, of course, where we came in, back on page one of this story, when I was sitting on the aeroplane on the way back to Nigeria without the elephant. As I said then, I didn't enjoy that flight. I thought about the zoo staff and indeed many others in the University of Ibadan who would be so disappointed not to have the new elephant. However, I was absolutely sure I had made the right decision in leaving the animal in London.

The plane landed at Lagos airport around the middle of the afternoon and, after going through the Immigration and Customs procedures, I found some of my zoo staff waiting for me outside the airport building as previously arranged. They had driven down the one hundred or so difficult miles from Ibadan and had with them a truck with which to transport the crated elephant back to Ibadan, as well as food and water to sustain it during this final stage of its journey. I spent a few unhappy minutes explaining to them what had happened. They were, understandably, very disappointed. As I said to them, however, provided that the health of the elephant we had left behind improved, it might well be possible to try to fly the animal down to Nigeria again soon.

(Soon after this I was informed that the elephant was driven back quickly to the zoo we were working with near London and removed from the crate, still weak and unable to stand. However, it recovered its strength within a day or so and soon returned to normal health. No clear reason was found for its condition and behavior in the crate at Luton Airport but who knows what would have happened if I had taken it on board the plane with me? The happy ending was that the zoo animal

broker who had arranged the purchase of the animal was able to fly out with it herself some months later, when it travelled well, remained on its feet in its crate and arrived in Ibadan in good health. The air cargo company insisted that the owners of an animal such as an elephant must provide a responsible person to be with the animal at all times).

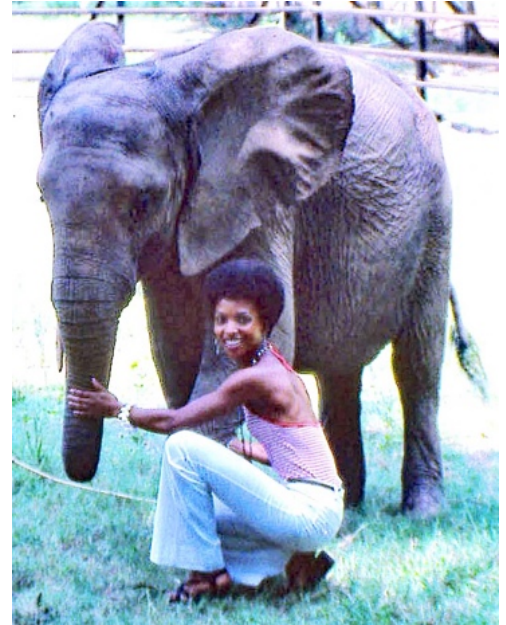
My personal vehicle and driver were also waiting for me at Lagos Airport. Had I arrived back with the elephant as planned, the elephant, zoo staff and I would have stayed together in vehicle convoy during our slow drive back to the Zoo in Ibadan. However, without an elephant to deal with and slow us down, I told my driver to drive me straight back to Ibadan without delay and arrived home much earlier than originally planned. I lived on the University of Ibadan campus and as soon as I reached home I had a shower, changed my clothes and decided to walk the short distance to the Senior Staff Club for a much needed beer.

The Senior Staff Club was the social centre for the University's internationally sourced academic, technical and administrative staff. It had a restaurant, bar, swimming pool, tennis courts and was where the senior staff, Nigerian and from all over the world, spent a lot of their leisure time. Some really excellent live bands from Lagos played there some Saturday nights and we held the most amazing gatherings when everybody danced, danced, danced into the following morning. Nigerians can make fantastic music. And Nigerians can DANCE! To this day, I miss it all so much...

It so happened that at that time I was the Social Secretary of the Club and knew personally or by sight most of the people who used it regularly. As I walked into the Club my eye caught a glimpse of a young woman sitting and talking with others near one end of the bar. I took another glance. I had not seen her before. I noticed her big smile as she talked to the people with her. Hmm. She was strikingly pretty but very skinny, as though she could do with a few large cheese burgers and chocolate puddings. Although she wore a brightly coloured Nigerian wrapper, a kind of long native skirt, and was black, I knew she wasn't Nigerian. I had lived in Nigeria long enough by then to be able to recognise some of the subtle differences in dress, appearance and physiognomy of a lot of Nigerians, and this young woman's face was quite unlike anything I had seen so far. Hmm. I wanted to know more.



I bought a beer at the other end of the bar. Instead of sitting down, though, I remained standing for a while and then gently sidled along the bar until I was close to where Miss Prettyness sat, smiling and chatting away. As I grew closer she suddenly laughed and spoke to her companions so that I was able to hear her voice for the first time; it was loud and had an American accent! Hmm. I became even more curious. A friend of mine was one of the people in her little gathering and I looked around and greeted him. We exchanged pleasantries and then, to my delight, he introduced me to Miss Prettyness. Her name was Peaches something ('Did you say Peaches?'), she was from North Carolina, US of A, had been visiting a friend in northern Nigeria and was trying to decide whether or not to apply for a temporary teaching job in Nigeria or return immediately to the United States. She had arrived in Ibadan that very day. And she had brought her cat with her from North Carolina! Hmm!



Peaches at the University of Ibadan Zoo in 1979 with a young African female savanna elephant. She eats properly now. (Yes, I mean Peaches).

After some small talk I asked her if she would like to go with me that evening to one of the restaurants in town that served food for



Peaches and me in Bristol, late 1980s.

expatriates ('What's an ex-pat-riate?'). Yes, she would like. I picked her up later that evening from my friend's house where she was staying. She had by then scrubbed up, put on a long white dress and brushed her hair into one of the most massive, in-your-face Afros I had ever seen. She looked stupendous! And she was delightful! I drove us into town to a Lebanese restaurant.

I am pausing briefly here, dear reader, just to mention that, on these remaining pages, I shall extend the focus of this story to reflect on how the non-arrival of that young elephant at Lagos Airport in 1976 gave rise to so many important changes in my life; and how those changes, and the memories of Nigeria from long ago, still colour my thoughts and affect my everyday life. I shall also tell you a little about what was lying in wait for me that evening in the

Lebanese restaurant as well as what followed. I have never before set out on paper this very personal story of Bob and Peaches and am not quite sure how to do so without making those who read it cringe occasionally. However, there are also parts of it that, hopefully, will be cringe-free, so I am going to give it a try.

Over dinner it emerged that Peaches liked and had kept snakes, one of my own consuming interests and something that no other woman I had ever met had expressed the slightest interest in. We then discovered we had the same Birthday ('What?' Really?). We talked and talked and eventually left the restaurant to return to the University campus.



I met Peaches in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1976. Her Afro was difficult to ignore...

As we walked out into the hot, busy street and back to my car, I already felt as though I had stepped into a fresh new world brimming with new possibilities and opportunities. Some new force seemed to have tweaked my personal chemistry and I felt as though my world, my future, had been reprogrammed. I hadn't felt like that for a very long time.



We still live in this house in Bristol. The palm trees came with us (as seeds) from Nigeria in 1979.

I can look back now and say, without hesitation, that Peaches and I were soul mates from that very first evening in 1976. We have been together ever since and in every sense. And all because that elephant at London Luton Airport went down in its crate and had to be left behind, thus ensuring my early return to Ibadan and the unexpected meeting that changed two lives.

Three years after this, in 1979, I resigned my post and left Nigeria - with Peaches - to return to the UK; for a number of

reasons I had decided that, after 16 very fulfilling years in Nigeria, it was time to leave. Fortunately, I had been able to secure another zoo post in the UK. However, neither of us had any clear idea of how Peaches would get on living and working in the UK. She was very American, and a black American at that, perhaps with a background and instincts that would make it difficult for her to interact with, and become close to, my friends, my family, my country, my world.

We didn't have to wonder about those things for very long. From the day that we touched down at London Heathrow Airport and drove along the M4 motorway to our new home in Bristol, I have observed and shared the quite remarkable emergence of a young black American woman who communicated successfully, often brilliantly, with virtually every person she met, of whatever nationality, sex or race. Peaches moved almost seamlessly into my world and into the culture of the UK. She worked tirelessly, and as a force for good, within and around our very own multifaceted human adventure. We married in 1981.

A short but illuminating conversation was reported to us by Peaches' mother. It took place in Peaches' family home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, when news of our sudden marriage in Kingston-upon-Thames, UK, reached Peaches' family in America. Peaches' great aunt was heard to say to Peaches' grandmother, whom I had met, 'Has Peaches really married a white man?' 'No' came the reply, 'She's married an Englishman!' Grandmother's face was apparently dead straight.

Peaches was granted UK citizenship and thus holds dual US / UK citizenship. She has moved from one achievement to another. She has become involved in a galaxy of activities to do with improving the lives of one group or another, of someone or other. She has become much involved with the world of business and in improving business practice. The skinny, unformed young woman I met that day at that bar in West Africa has emerged, like a tropical butterfly, into the brightest sunshine.

When we met, in 1976, Peaches had recently graduated in Zoology from the University of North Carolina but



Peaches in her High Sheriff attire showing Prince Charles around at an event in Bristol in 2010. Peaches had to be present when members of the Royal Family were in Bristol and was Regional Director of Prince Charles' charity Business in the Community (BITC).

had had little opportunity to start a structured career until she settled with me in the UK. Soon after our arrival here from Nigeria I was appointed Park Director of the Cotswold Wildlife Park at Burford, in Oxfordshire. We lived on the upper floor of a lovely old Manor House in the centre of the Park from where we could look out of our windows across large, green enclosures with rhinos, zebras, ostriches and many other exotic animals roaming around.



I very soon asked Peaches to try her hand at some marketing work for the Park. Although such work was entirely new to her it seemed to me that it suited her personality. It turned out that she was indeed brilliant at it. During the following year the Park's visitor attendance figures shot up to a record high and, for this and other reasons, the Thames and Chilterns Tourist Board awarded me, as Park Director, the Hedley Lawrence prize for services to tourism in that area.


A year or so after this a friend of mine advised Peaches to apply for the post of Co-Presenter of a new, eight week, BBC TV wildlife series, 'Wild Britain', being planned by the BBC's Natural History Unit. Peaches was used by then to handling quite a few different wild animal species, including snakes, which were to be included in the new TV programme. After discussions and an interview at BBC Bristol, she was appointed to the post.

Peaches worked for, and was later appointed Regional Director of, Prince Charles' charity Business in the Community (BITC) in Bristol. On one memorable occasion, during a live television programme, Peaches gently and amusingly interrupted a speech by Prince Charles to point out that the flower in her hair was not an orchid as he had just said but a hibiscus. Looking pained as only he can, the Prince said 'Oh I'm so sorry!' Everybody laughed, including Prince Charles.

In 2009 Peaches was appointed OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) for services to ethnic minorities in the South West; the medal was duly pinned to her lapel by HM the Queen at Windsor Castle. In 2010 she was awarded an MBA (Master of Business Administration) by the University of the West of England, Bristol.

The quite remarkable pinnacle in her career was to be made the High Sheriff of the City and County of Bristol for the year 2010- 2011, the first black woman ever to hold this appointment in over one thousand years. The function of the High Sheriff is to represent the Queen at a whole host of public occasions, events and ceremonies held throughout the

year within the City and County of Bristol. As spouse and Consort of the High Sheriff for that year, I was expected to follow Peaches around, looking intelligent and attentive, at the myriad formal and informal occasions and events of every kind that Peaches had to attend. I wasn't particularly good at this, partly because I was recovering from a health problem at that time and partly because I wasn't particularly good at it. However, one event that gave me huge pleasure was helping to organise the High Sheriff's Annual Concert in the beautiful Bristol Cathedral. We selected the orchestra and the music for the evening and eventually persuaded the internationally renowned base-baritone singer, Sir Willard White, to be the main soloist. The evening was a delight and Bristol Cathedral was absolutely packed with a highly appreciative audience.

A few years after we left Nigeria for the UK (I was still greatly missing aspects of my life in Nigeria), we decided to hold a special, larger-than-usual joint Birthday Party in Bristol. We hired suitable premises and invited a whole horde of very nice people. We enjoyed seeing friends we hadn't seen for years, many from or ex Nigeria. I was eventually asked to speak about how Peaches and I had met and I gave the gathering a much abbreviated version of the story I have set out here. As I spoke about my life in Nigeria, a thousand images started tumbling around in my memory and, as ever, began to stir my emotions. 

Suddenly the image of that elephant, prostrate on the bottom of its crate on the tarmac at London Luton Airport, flashed before me and hung there. Yes, of course, that little elephant had caused the whole thing - bless it! I continued 'So, dear friends, I would like to end by proposing a toast to The Absent Elephant, the elephant whose absence from the plane that day in 1976 really did change my life, and Peaches' life too!'

Guests smiled and giggled as they raised their glasses, but the fact is that I still sometimes repeat that toast to myself – very quietly, when I am sure nobody is listening. Because those words are as meaningful today as they ever were....

The End

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June 2017 Thank you for taking the time to read the story above. In doing so you will have learned how I met my wife, Peaches, in Nigeria. We have been together since that day in 1976, more than forty years ago. However, having told you a little about her, I now have something further to report, something totally unexpected that has happened recently.

I cannot go into details, but a few months ago Peaches began to receive quite surprising letters, emails and messages from the most surprising sources. To summarise these, Peaches was asked from a very high source if she would consider accepting the appointment of the next Lord-Lieutenant of the County and City of Bristol, an appointment that normally remains in place until the holder becomes 75 years of age!



Quote: *“The Lord-Lieutenant is the British monarch's personal representative in each county of the United Kingdom. Historically, the Lord-Lieutenant was responsible for organising the county's militia but it is today a largely ceremonial position, usually awarded to a retired notable person in the county.”*

There were, of course, many aspects of this totally unexpected proposal that Peaches and I needed to consider and discuss. The bottom line, however, is that Peaches has now accepted, and taken up, the office of HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bristol and I have agreed to support her as I am able. The media became very excited about her appointment and, as usual, placed great emphasis on her being the first black woman to be this, do that.....whatever. The fact is, however, that neither Peaches nor I go around in our personal, day to day lives looking to make a big deal of race-related issues. This is probably because, within our very different backgrounds, in our different ways, in different places and over time we've both seen a lot and done what we could and have moved on now to build lives that are almost entirely free from the demons of race.

I do believe that Peaches is perfectly placed to represent the Queen here in Bristol in a balanced manner and across a wide range of human activities, perhaps introducing updated concepts or values here and there. I certainly have no doubt that she will use her new office to explore ways in which she can bring people together and help make this world a better place.

And so, with much anticipation, some trepidation, and in touch with our limitations as well as our strengths, we take on this extraordinary new challenge. Please wish us luck – particularly Peaches!

Bob Golding, June 2017

