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# In the Beginning Were Two Chameleons



*A true short story with photographs of how, between 1963 and 1979, the author built up a collection of living reptiles at the Zoological Garden, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, West Africa, and then built a reptile house where zoo visitors could observe them in a safe and relaxed environment. The story also touches on the general development of the Zoo during that period.*

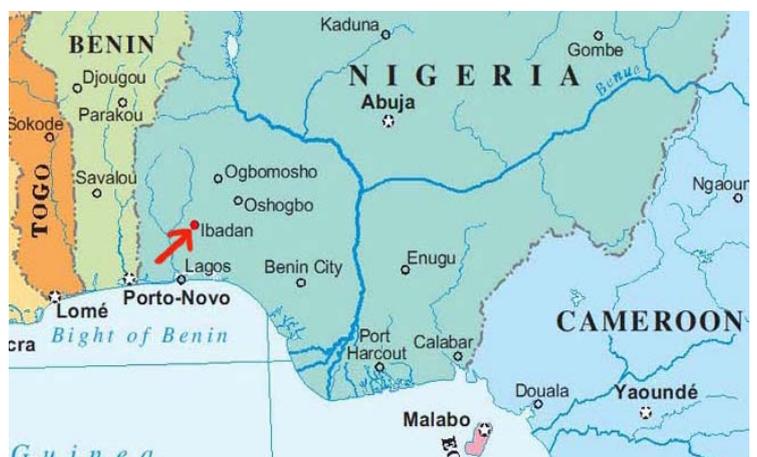


## By Bob Golding

One day, in the spring of 1963, I was reading the London Daily Telegraph newspaper at my home in Bristol when an advertisement caught my eye that was to change my life significantly. It set out an opportunity for a suitably experienced person to take charge of a small zoo attached to the Department of Zoology at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, West Africa. A telephone call confirmed that this was a newly established post for a role that the University had only recently identified – the further development of the Zoo as an educational attraction for the general public rather than as just a teaching and research facility for students and staff.

I had already spent six months in what was then known as the British Cameroons, the country immediately to the east of Nigeria, on an animal collecting trip with Gerald Durrell, the animal collector and writer, a trip described by Durrell in his book 'A Zoo in my Luggage'. I had found the wildlife of that part of West Africa fascinating and was thus intrigued by what seemed to be a most unusual opportunity. I decided to apply for the post. Just two or three weeks later I was invited to London where I was interviewed by a panel that included staff from the University of Ibadan as well as London-based colleagues and advisers. The following week I was delighted to receive a telegram offering me the post of Curator of the University of Ibadan Zoological Garden.

With the University covering our travelling and relocation expenses, I flew to Nigeria with my wife and two small daughters in September 1963, aged 25 years. Several large crates containing our pots and pans, clothes, books, and all manner of life's day to day bits and pieces followed us as sea cargo. Little did I know I was to spend the next 16 years there developing the



**Nigeria, West Africa, showing Ibadan with its University and Zoological Garden.**

University's Zoological Garden, initially as Curator and later as Director; or that I was to experience a cascade of events that made life challenging at times but which also brought

me great joy and satisfaction, showed me new ways of doing things and equipped me with a valuable resilience to some of life's demons.

The University of Ibadan had been established during the latter part of the British colonial period and, at the time of Nigeria's independence in 1960, was Nigeria's only Federal Government - sponsored University. However, it was already highly regarded nationally and internationally and its non-Nigerian senior academic, technical and administrative staff had been appointed from countries around the world. The number of Nigerian senior staff was rising rapidly and the first Nigerian Vice-Chancellor, Professor Kenneth Dike, had already been appointed by the time I arrived there.

The University's Nigerian staff, from senior academic and administrative staff to junior staff such as drivers and cleaners, consisted largely of men and women from across southern



**Queen Elizabeth Hall on the University of Ibadan campus.  
This was the main women's Hall of Residence, 1977.**

Nigeria - from Calabar to Enugu, from Benin City to Ibadan itself, as well as some from further north. Thus several different native languages were spoken among the Nigerian staff. The main native language of the Ibadan area, Yoruba, was the native language most commonly in use, but standard English - the official language - was spoken by educated Nigerians, including the University's academic and senior staff and students. However, Nigeria's real lingua franca was Pidgin English, a hybrid language that had developed to enable people from different areas and speaking

different native languages, to communicate with each other and which is still widely used by less well educated people across much of Nigeria. Pidgin English varies a little from one area to another and can include more or fewer elements of the local native language in each area. I always found it astonishing to be told - authoritatively - that over 200 native languages were spoken across Nigeria and, furthermore, that they were true languages rather than dialects.

Examples of Pidgin English are:- How are you today? – *How you bodi?* You're talking too much – *You dey talk plenty.* Man I'm drunk - *Man I don shayo.* What is happening? - *Wetin dey appen?* Sometimes, when two Nigerians held a really passionate discussion in fluent Pidgin English, the language assumed a vibrant and amusing life of its own and the exchange of sliced-up and hybridised words often ended in much laughter from everyone present.

The University of Ibadan Zoological Garden had come into being just a few years before I took up my post there. A small collection of indigenous wild animals of various species had been acquired by the University's Department of Zoology as a research and teaching collection and had been housed on adjacent land. I have already mentioned that, before my appointment, the University administrators had decided to make these animals accessible for viewing by the general public on payment of a small charge to cover at least some basic costs. And so the Zoo was born. However, while many members of the

Nigerian public had responded to this and had come to view the animals, the animal collection remained something of a menagerie, with outdated, unimaginative animal enclosures, the animals poorly presented and little interesting information available to zoo visitors. Thus the 'visitor experience' was nothing special or exciting. Within the University generally, however, and the Faculty of Science in particular, the Zoo was seen as having considerable potential to involve and inform the general public about Nigeria's wildlife and its conservation.

I can confirm that during the following years the Zoo did, indeed, develop rapidly and become a major public amenity. Between my arrival in 1963 and my departure in 1979, the University administrators separated the Zoo from the Department of Zoology and formally redesignated it a Public Service Unit, a change that had my full support. As such the Zoo became responsible, under a newly appointed Director (yours truly), to a newly-formed Zoo Management Board chaired by the Dean of the University's Faculty of Science. Public interest in the Zoo grew by leaps and bounds. In 1963 the annual visitor attendance figure was somewhere around 30,000 or 40,000. By 1970 it had risen to 158,000 and when I left Nigeria in 1979 the figure was just under 250,000, more visitors than attended any other public attraction of any kind in Nigeria. The Zoo became a wildlife centre where ordinary Nigerians could observe wild creatures at their leisure and in complete safety, handle certain animals including snakes, hopefully learn something about nature conservation and have an entirely different, enjoyable and interesting experience.

One of the advantages of the Zoo being located on the campus of the University of Ibadan was that it was accessible to the hundreds of undergraduate and other students from over much of Nigeria rather than to zoology students only. Thus the Zoo's conservation and related messages were understood and absorbed by some of the most educated and potentially influential young people in the country.

The zoo staff included many animal keepers as well as a driver, night-watchmen, gatekeepers, an office clerk, an accountant, a secretary and others. A few junior staff were shared with the Department of Zoology. I had direct access to the University's excellent Chief Engineer and his Maintenance Department for work such as building construction and maintenance.

The Head Zoo Keeper, Daniel Osula, was born in the Nigerian mid-West and had been at the Zoo for several years when I arrived there. Mr Osula was very experienced in the routine operation of the Zoo and spent much of his time supervising the other zoo staff and giving support as well as instruction to the animal keepers. Every Friday morning he went out in the Zoo's pick-up truck with a driver and another keeper and spent several hours visiting the various markets in Ibadan town; he purchased foods for the animals such as yam, sweet-corn, banana, plantain, rice, live goats, meat, eggs and other items. Mr Osula was well respected and had a quiet authority over all the zoo staff.

Between 1963 and 1979 my work as Curator, then Director, of the Zoological Garden brought me into close contact with a wide range of West African wild animals, from gorillas to pangolins and from hornbills to cobras. I have already written a number of short stories about my experiences involving some of these creatures. This story - In The Beginning Were Two Chameleons - focuses on reptiles and how, as a starter, I set up a small exhibit of chameleons, followed by a snake enclosure and then, finally, an entire multi-species reptile house that became one of the most popular attractions in the Zoo.



Male agama lizard (*Agama agama*).

When I took up my post in Ibadan I was disappointed to discover there were only a few reptiles in the Zoo. There was an African python (*Python sebae*), and a slender-snouted crocodile (*Mecistops cataphractus*); each was housed in a very inadequate concrete enclosure in the Zoo where they attracted little interest from zoo visitors due to their depressing accommodation and the way in which they were displayed. There were also a few specimens of the forest hinged tortoise (*Kinixys homeana*) which were kept in a small, walled enclosure.

Soon after my arrival in Ibadan I began to familiarise myself with some of the indigenous reptiles, commencing with those encountered on the University campus itself. To me, one of the delights of living in the tropics is a heightened awareness of the abundance and diversity of life around one. Lizards are among those small reptiles that, if one sits still for a while, whether close to home in one's garden or further afield in the bush, suddenly appear from nowhere, silently, on a nearby wall or rock-face, or catch one's eye as they dart from one hideaway to another.

One of the most unavoidable lizards within and outside the University of Ibadan campus, and indeed in much of Nigeria, was the agama lizard (*Agama agama*), small groups of which seemed to be almost everywhere - on walls, fences, tree trunks and boulders, anywhere they could sunbathe and also have a clear view of any approaching danger. As they basked they made small, intermittent movements, darting one way then another in little bursts of energy they seemed quite unable to suppress. They held their heads high as they gazed around, often bobbing up and down as though performing a few excited press-ups. Perhaps for this reason these lizards always seemed such energetic, positive, cheerful, little creatures, and good to have around. 'Be happy', they seemed to say. 'Look at me - and be happy'.



Young agama lizard.

Adult male agamas can reach 30cm (24" in) length and have a dark blue body with an orange head which, in the breeding season, glows a particularly striking shade of near-orange. Females are smaller and are generally brownish or greyish in colour with yellow or pale markings. Agamas find much of their food while on the ground and could often be seen in one's compound, pausing occasionally to grab and munch a caterpillar or beetle.

Among other lizards were the geckos that scuttled around the lights on the outside wall of one's house or apartment at night while trying to grab night-flying moths or other flying invertebrates; there were shiny, smooth-scaled skinks that seemed to pour themselves effortlessly along the ground; also large, ferocious-looking monitor lizards with powerful jaws and long, forked tongues that flickered in and out as they walked. There were also

chameleons, although none was brought to the Zoo for sale for some time after my arrival. More of this later.

As far as snakes were concerned, many species of snake are native to that area of south western Nigeria and some of these were well established on the University campus. The campus was over 1,000 hectares in size and much of it was taken up with buildings equipped



**Black cobra (*Naja nigricollis*), 8ft 4in (2.54m) in length, killed on the University of Ibadan campus.**

for teaching and research, student halls of residence, housing for staff, sports fields, a social club for the senior staff, separate Botanical and Zoological Gardens, a church and a mosque. There was even a lake with a water treatment plant that produced clean water for the University campus. However, the campus also included uncultivated land and private and communal gardens that provided habitats for snakes and other wild creatures. Despite the presence of people and vehicles moving around in many parts of the campus by day, snakes of various species, including highly venomous

mambas and cobras, were encountered fairly regularly as people went about their day to day business. Snakes, alive or sometimes dead, were brought regularly to the Zoological Garden by University staff or visitors from outside the campus who hoped we would buy them or who wanted us to identify them.

I soon became known by residents on the University campus as the snake man who actually kept snakes in his house and could sort out most kinds of domestic snake problem. I was sometimes asked to go to the residence or compound of a member of staff in order to capture and remove a snake that had somehow found its way into someone's bedroom or cupboard or, on one occasion, was coiled very neatly around a light fitting in the kitchen, the family cook having disappeared without trace.

I remember receiving a report of a large black snake having been seen in a tree in a staff member's compound on the campus; I was asked to go and deal with it. This snake turned out to be a black cobra (*Naja nigricollis*) around two and a half metres in length! Together with a couple of my zoo staff and armed with long, thick leather gloves and other venomous-snake-handling items, I drove to this man's compound. Unfortunately, however, a small gathering of young men had already spotted the snake and pelted it with stones until it was hit and dropped out of the bushes to the ground where it was immediately beaten to death. Interestingly, during the chase and before the snake was killed, it regurgitated a number of



**Bird (probably hens') eggs regurgitated by a black cobra (photo above left), apparently having been swallowed at different times and thus now at different stages of digestion.**

partly digested bird eggs - almost certainly domestic chickens' eggs - that it had consumed recently (see *photo page 5*).

Another incident occurred one day when Mary, a friend whom I had known in the UK and whose husband John was now a lecturer at the University of Ibadan, was doing some gardening on a small patch of land attached to their ground floor apartment on the University campus. Mary was alone at home at the time and was kneeling down and trowelling happily away, thinking about the gorgeous bunches of flowers she would eventually gather from the seedlings she was planting. Then, quite suddenly, she glimpsed a small, scaly, reptilian head with rather large eyes that had just emerged from the weeds and dead leaves she was collecting up for disposal. Almost as she caught sight of the head it struck and grabbed her thumb in its mouth! The snake – for indeed that's what it was – then withdrew and disappeared very quickly again among the plants and garden debris. Mary said later that it all seemed to happen in the blink of an eye; she was absolutely shocked, especially as she had been left with a few small, bleeding perforations on her thumb where the snake's teeth had penetrated her skin!



**Young Blanding's tree snake (*Toxicodryas blandingii*).**

However, although she had had a brief but clear view of the snake that had bitten her, she had absolutely no idea of its species, or whether or not it was venomous.

Fortunately, a neighbour was within shouting distance and was able to drive Mary immediately to the staff Doctor's surgery on the University campus. The Doctor was very concerned but was unclear about what he should do. He kept some snake antivenom in the surgery's fridge but, without knowing the identity of the snake in question, he was reluctant to inject Mary with this in case it was the wrong antivenom for this particular snake and perhaps do more harm than good. In any case, Mary hadn't yet shown any obvious symptoms of a venomous snake bite so he was prepared to wait before taking any further action. Mary remained distraught and sat in the Doctor's surgery under medical supervision as she waited to see what the effects of the bite would be. Was she going to be very ill, or even die?

The first I knew about the incident was when Mary's husband, John, appeared suddenly in my office in the Zoo. He was, understandably, extremely agitated and upset. He had been telephoned and told what had happened and had come immediately to find me. He told me the story very quickly and asked if I would go with him now to their garden to see if I could find the snake and identify it. We rushed out to his car and he drove through the campus so fast I thought we might never make it. On arrival at the little patch of garden, I could only see one or two places where a snake might be hiding. A large plant pot was my number one suspect and, indeed, as I lifted the pot I saw a small snake, around 50cm (20in) long, lying there on the ground. I recognized it as a young Blanding's tree snake (*Toxicodryas blandingii*). This species is venomous but it is generally agreed that its venom is not dangerously toxic to man. It is also a back-fanged speckies, so called because its fangs are simply grooved - as opposed to being hollow - teeth, and are at the

back, rather than the front, of the upper jaw. Thus a back-fanged snake normally has to bite a victim with its back teeth before any venom is injected.

We decided we should take the snake with us to the Doctor's surgery to show Mary; I quickly placed it in a large glass jar that John brought out from his apartment. We then drove at speed to the Doctor's surgery. Mary peered at the snake but couldn't be sure it was the snake that had bitten her. She showed me her thumb and the site of the snake bite. There were three or four pin-sized puncture points where the snake's teeth had penetrated the skin. However, all the indications were that they had been made by normal, solid teeth right at the front of the snake's upper jaw. There was no swelling around the site of the bite and Mary was showing none of the symptoms of a venomous snake bite of any kind. My cautious view was that Mary had not been injected with venom by this or any other snake. There was tremendous relief from Mary and everyone present; Mary was advised to go home where she recovered rapidly and completely.

Live animals were brought to the Zoo for sale on a fairly regular basis. As the Zoo became increasingly well known throughout south western Nigeria and beyond, orphaned, injured or captured mammals, birds, reptiles and occasionally amphibians were brought to us, sometimes from great distances. The vendors were often relatively poor, small-scale farmers or people working on the land in some capacity. Although there were large and rapidly growing conurbations around cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, Kano, Kaduna and other centres, much of the country was rural and agricultural. In most cases we did not pay high prices for animals brought to us, and in some cases we declined to purchase the animal being offered; it was important not to do anything that might result in the establishment of a live animal market. As far as reptiles were concerned, the Zoo had little acceptable reptile accommodation of any kind at that time, and for some time most reptiles brought to us for sale, or became available in other ways, were turned away.

Then one day something happened that effectively kick-started the development of the first small reptile exhibit in the Zoo since my arrival. A young man appeared at the Zoo's main entrance one morning and told the gatekeeper he had an animal for sale; he was directed to my office which was just inside the zoo entrance and at the top of a flight of steps. The young man looked around 17 or 18 years of age and was dressed in a rather old, well-worn shirt and shorts. He stood, rather nervously, in the open doorway of my office, not quite knowing what to say. His hands were clasped around a calabash which he held out in front of him.

I should explain that an African calabash is a large, dried, hard fruit that has had its contents, including seeds, removed so that it can be used as a container. A calabash, or gourd, can be of variable size and shape and it seems that gourds are produced by more than one plant species. Calabashes are used throughout much of Africa for transporting liquids such as water, milk or palm wine; they may be cut into two parts, the bottom section thus providing a bowl-shaped container (*see photos page 8*). A large calabash and its contents can, of course, be quite heavy; the owner usually places it - if necessary with some assistance - on his or her head, perhaps using a soft pad of some sort to make the task a little easier. The calabash is then supported and kept in an upright position on the head by changes in posture and small movements of the neck and upper body, a balancing act that is almost magical to watch. I remember observing a group of Fulani women in northern Nigeria walking, apparently effortlessly, through rough, remote



**These two calabashes were growing on a farm in Oyo, south western Nigeria. They are almost at the stage where the farmer will cut them from the parent plant prior to preparing them as containers.**

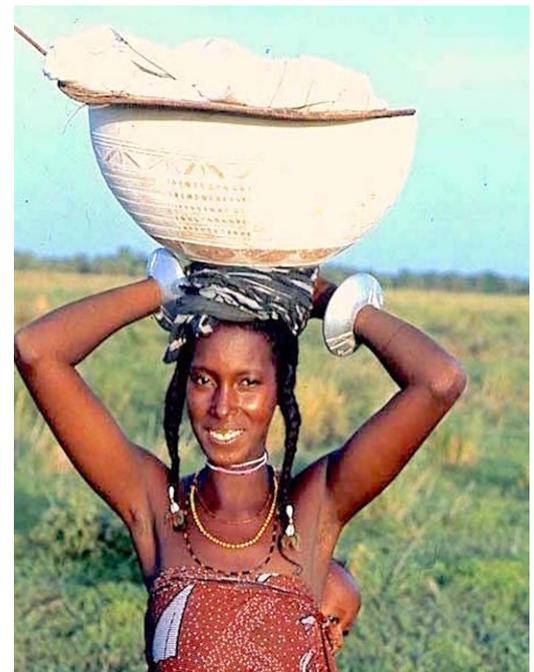
grassland alongside the River Niger, each with a large calabash on her head and a baby strapped to her back, the calabash swaying gently as she walked. Just how did those calabashes, full of milk, remain so securely in place?

The calabash held by my young visitor was a little larger than a football. It had a narrow neck, rather like the neck of a bottle, where it had been attached to the living plant, and this was plugged with a bunch of green leaves. The young man was nervous and could speak only limited English - and I could speak little Yoruba - and at the end of our brief discussion I was still not clear what the animal inside

might be. I reckoned it was probably a small rodent of some kind that had been captured on farmland somewhere near the vendor's home. He handed the unopened calabash to me and then stepped well back, as though wanting to keep clear of whatever creature was inside.

I began to pull out the plug of leaves to expose the contents. However, I did this slowly and with a degree of caution as I was aware that inside might be anything from a large spider or a bat to a baby crocodile or a green mamba. Holding the calabash at arms length I stared hard into its dim interior. At first it was impossible to see anything at all but, after holding the calabash at different angles and getting some light down inside, I could just make out a chameleon resting there at the bottom. How wonderful! The first chameleon I had seen in Nigeria. As I was unable to squeeze my hand through the narrow neck of the calabash, I pushed a long, slender stick inside and down to where the chameleon was and very gently pushed the little reptile's head on one side and then on the other. Then, just as I had hoped, it suddenly grabbed the stick in one, then both, front feet and I was able to pull it carefully up and out into its strange new world.

The young man who had brought the chameleon continued to display a degree of caution and kept well away from it at all times. With the help of one of my zoo keepers as interpreter, we agreed a modest price and I gave him the cash - upon which he promptly



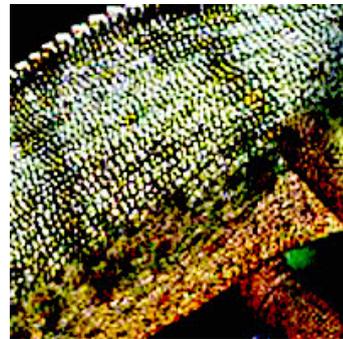
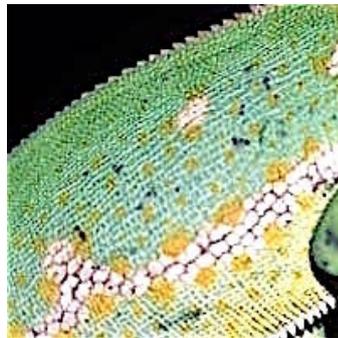
**This bowl is the lower half of a calabash or gourd and is being used to carry milk. This Fulani woman was carrying not only the bowl of milk but also the small baby on her back. But she still made it look easy...**



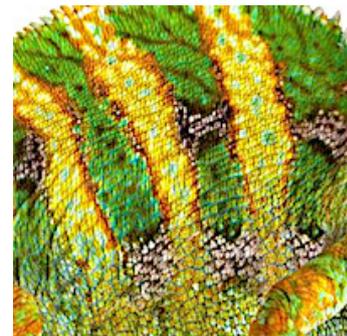
The first graceful chameleon (*Chamaeleo gracilis*) brought to the Zoo after my arrival.

disappeared. A keeper found a large, disused wooden box on site and quickly adapted it as a temporary vivarium for the small newcomer. We placed the chameleon inside it, together with water to drink and leafy branches to climb on, and placed it in my office where I could keep an eye on it. I soon identified the new arrival as a graceful chameleon, the scientific name of which is *Chamaeleo gracilis*. It measured around 31cm (12in) in length, including the tail.

The arrival of my 'first' chameleon provided the perfect opportunity to start experimenting with some modest reptile exhibits in the Zoo. I issued instructions to our carpenters to



**These photographs, of different individual graceful chameleons (*Chamaeleo gracilis*), give some idea of the range of skin colours and patterns that can be displayed by this species.**



make a simple, robust, glass-sided display cage - or vivarium - that would enable us to exhibit this, and perhaps other, chameleons in the Zoo.

Chameleons are, of course, well-known for the ability of many species to change their skin colour, including the various skin markings or patterns. The colour changes are brought about by complex changes in the outer layers of the skin. A colour change may make the chameleon more difficult to see in its particular location or environment; or the change may affect heat absorption and thermoregulation; or it can be a response to a stress; and it can be used to send signals to other chameleons. The range and variety of the skin colours and markings is impressive (see *photos page 9*).

A chameleon's eyes are another feature many people find fascinating. Each eye is enclosed entirely in a mobile, slightly cone-shaped structure and can be moved independently of the other. One of the few occasions when both eyes look, albeit briefly, in the same direction is when they focus on a prey animal in order to assess distance just before projecting the tongue.

Many chameleon species have prehensile tails with which they hold on to twigs and branches as they move around (see *photo below*). When not being used in this way, the tail is often held in a neat coil.

I learned that chameleons were not brought to the Zoo very often and over time my impression was that they were not encountered in the wild particularly frequently, even by farmers or those who spent much time in the 'bush' or tending their farms. This was possibly because many species of chameleon live relatively solitary lives, are territorial and are very good at camouflaging themselves and hiding away among the branches and foliage of shrubs and trees.



**Chameleon using its prehensile tail to grasp a twig for greater stability and as it moves around among the branches.**

It so happened that a second graceful chameleon was brought to the Zoo a few days later. Happily, the carpenters had just completed the construction of the new vivarium which I instructed them to fix on a concrete pedestal in the Zoo that had once supported some other exhibit. Around its base, at ground level, the pedestal still had a concrete channel that could be filled with water and thus prevent driver ants from climbing up to the chameleons at night and attacking - and almost certainly overwhelming - them both. We furnished the vivarium with one or two small potted plants as well as branches which the two chameleons could climb and move around on. The pedestal, with its new chameleon exhibit, was located near the bottom of the steps that led up to my office.

I put two of the zoo keepers, Michael Iyoha and Nicholas Eze, who were particularly interested in reptiles and good at handling them, in charge of the chameleons and instructed them to feed the small newcomers with grasshoppers. We already captured grasshoppers on a regular basis as food for other zoo inmates. This involved one or two zoo keepers, armed with sweep nets, walking to a grassy field just outside the Zoo. By

walking among the grasses while sweeping the net from side to side, the keepers were able to capture not only large, plump grasshoppers but other invertebrates too.

The first time the newly exhibited chameleons were fed they attracted a remarkable response from zoo visitors. Through my office window that morning I noticed a small, animated crowd gathering around the chameleon cage, with others hurrying to join them. I walked down the steps and it was soon clear the visitors were watching the two chameleons feeding. They seemed completely absorbed by what they could see.

I should explain that when a chameleon sees a suitable insect or other invertebrate prey, it will first attempt to move within tongue-shot range if it can. When it is correctly positioned, and at exactly the right moment, both its eyes - having been moving independently and looking around in different directions - are suddenly directed at the prey so that the distance



**Chameleon feeding. The tongue is fully extended here, although the food item is not clear in this photo. The club-shaped end of the tongue is sticky and also partly wraps around the prey.**

can be judged accurately. At the same time the chameleon opens its mouth and, sometimes quite slowly at first, protrudes its tongue. The tongue is an extraordinary structure; it normally rests in the base of the mouth and can be up to 1.5 times the length of the reptile's body. The chameleon, with both eyes focused briefly on its prey, takes careful aim. Suddenly, and dramatically, the tongue is projected at very high speed toward the prey. One source states that the tongue reaches a speed of 60 miles per hour from zero in one hundredth of a second; and another that the

chameleon's tongue hits its prey in less than a blink of a human eye from the start of projection of the tongue! Whatever the speed actually is, the tongue is extremely effective at securing food! The prey animal is hit by the club-shaped end of the tongue which is sticky and which partially wraps around, and holds, the prey. The tongue, together with prey, is then pulled back into the mouth, although at a slower speed, and the prey is quickly crushed and munched in the chameleon's jaws before being swallowed. To watch a chameleon feeding is to watch one of nature's secret but fascinating little dramas.

To return to the two chameleons in the Zoo, the enthusiastic response of visitors that day, and subsequently, to our small and very modest chameleon exhibit was, in its own way, reassuring and strengthened my view that a representative, multi-species display of Nigerian reptiles in the Zoo would be a success.

As the public popularity of the Zoo expanded, I was asked by the regional television company, Western Nigeria Television (WNTV), to present a series of children's television programmes about animals, the first such series on Nigerian TV. I saw this as a very positive step forward; it also suggested that the concept of educating the general public



**Zoo visitors watching chameleons feeding in the first trial chameleon exhibit in the Zoo. Although this soon became a routine event, visitors never lost their fascination for the chameleons' feeding time.**

about the natural world was being taken seriously in some important quarters. All programmes were to be broadcast live from a television studio. Although I welcomed this new and unexpected opportunity, I had no clear idea about how I, a complete novice as a TV presenter, would be able to fill that role. So while I felt that this TV series was a wonderful opportunity to talk to a large audience about some of Nigeria's wildlife, I was also aware that being a key figure in a TV series possibly demanded skills and experience that I just didn't

have. In the days before the first broadcast I became distinctly worried about the prospect of being shoved in front of a TV camera with somebody whispering 'Go Bob go - you're on' - or whatever it is they say. So I practised (if that was what it was) at home, jabbering away at myself in front of a mirror with a tame wood owl from the Zoo on my arm. On the third trial run the owl lost interest completely. It suddenly produced a loud, strangled scream, took off, found an open window and disappeared from sight.

On the day of each broadcast, WNTV was to organise a party of school children to attend the TV studio while I and some of the zoo keepers were to pack a few suitable zoo animals carefully into improvised travelling cages so that they could be transported to the TV studio by road. Fortunately, the studio was only two or three miles from the University campus. For the programme series I was to be addressed as Uncle Bob and was to play the role of a sort of animal father figure.

In the event, the mixture of very lively, articulate children and live animals created its own impetus and spontaneity which drove the proceedings during most broadcasts. My nervousness evaporated, the children had a great time and, amazingly, even the disappearing wood owl - which



**This zoo visitor thought a small royal python around her neck would be just the right finishing touch to her colourful costume.**



**The new snake enclosure, 1965. One of the reptile keepers, Michael Iyoha, is addressing a party of children from a school in Ibadan. The children were encouraged to ask questions about snakes and to touch and hold the specimens in the enclosure. Such gatherings became hugely popular. Occasions like this were supervised at all times. Non-party (regular) zoo visitors were not allowed to sit on the wall.**

had been recaptured the following day - was brought to the TV studio on one occasion and behaved perfectly!

Much change and reorganisation was going on in the Zoo at that time - the mid to late 1960s - and most available funds were allocated to the most urgently needed improvements, for example a completely new ape house with water-filled moat barriers for our gorillas and chimpanzees. However, modest funds did suddenly become available for what I considered would be an appropriate next step in developing our reptile collection - an open snake enclosure. This enclosure would be five or six metres across, bounded by a circular, rendered block wall with an inner overhang. It would be furnished with plants and natural materials and would contain a number of snake species. It would be an entirely new type of exhibit for the Zoo and provide a useful tool with which to communicate with visitors.

One of the Chief Engineer's staff produced a couple of basic drawings and appointed a small building contractor. The new enclosure was constructed very quickly. It was painted in green and natural earth colours, the ground inside was dug over, a small pool constructed, areas of gravel laid down, cut branches fixed in the centre of the enclosure to enable certain species to climb, and suitable plants added.

As soon as the decision was taken to proceed with this modest project, we started to 'collect' suitable snake species and place them in temporary accommodation. I selected species I



**Reptile keeper Nicholas talking to a party of very young visitors to the Zoo.**

thought would remain visible to visitors for at least some of the time. They also needed to be species that would live in close proximity to each other without significant problems. Included were royal pythons (*Python regius*), a small African python (*Python sebae*), a young boa constrictor (*Boa constrictor*), the one exotic species, emerald snakes (*Hapsidophrys smaragdina*), green tree snakes (*Philothamnus irregularis*), Smyth's

water snakes (*Grayia smithii*) and black tree snakes (*Thrasops occidentalis*). Because of their temperament and size, the royal pythons were particularly suited to being handled by zoo visitors.

I am delighted to say that the snake enclosure was a big success from the day it was opened. When the two designated reptile keepers had time, they entered the enclosure, singly or together, and talked to visitors about the snakes, some of which they allowed visitors to handle under strict supervision. This always drew an enthusiastic response and, indeed, a whole new attitude to snakes evolved among our many regular zoo visitors, particularly among the younger Nigerians and the increasing number of school children who visited the Zoo in school parties from the Ibadan area and beyond.

My ultimate ambition for a much larger, comprehensive reptile exhibit in the Zoo involved the partial demolition of an old building that was falling into disrepair and its reconstruction as a purpose-designed, multi-species reptile house. The building would incorporate certain features of a modern zoo reptile house. I wanted the floors of most of the exhibition units to be raised so that visitors could view the various reptiles at waist level and from



**The royal pythons were among the easier snakes for visitors to handle. These snakes also remained on view in the snake enclosure for much of the time if provided with the appropriate resting facilities.**



**The outside crocodile enclosure and pool that was part of the new reptile house that I designed and construction of which began in 1974. Three species of African crocodile were exhibited here. Zoo visitors were protected from sun and rain while viewing from the walkway. It was a new experience for most visitors to observe these reptiles so closely and in safety.**

behind glass panels; also for zoo visitors to be within a darkened viewing area. Exhibits would be furnished with live plants, rockwork, etc., and as many as possible exposed to natural daylight, rainfall and temperature, with necessary protection from the sun. I also planned to incorporate a large, outside crocodile enclosure and pool with a basking area for our three species of crocodile and with areas of shade for zoo visitors.

This new reptile house would enable us to display many species of reptile in attractive and naturalistic settings. It would also provide facilities for keeping and treating sick reptiles and for the incubation of eggs of species such as the hinged tortoise and monitor lizards, as well as those of a number of snake species.

The reptile house was officially opened by the University's Vice Chancellor during a wonderful ceremony in January 1978 at the Zoo. Many of the senior academic and administrative staff of the University attended as well as the British Deputy High Commissioner in Nigeria and, especially meaningful for me, my friend Oba William Adetona Ayeni, the Orangun of Ila, a paramount chief



**The outside crocodile enclosure attached to the new reptile house. Can you identify the three crocodile species here?**



Newly hatched hinged tortoise (*Kinixys homeana*).



Emerald snake (*Hapsidophrys smaragdina*) hatching. Before emerging, the young snake cut a slit in the soft eggshell with a special egg tooth at the front of the mouth.

(now deceased). Unusually for a hot country like Nigeria, everyone wore a suit or impressive native dress. All those attending were seated in the area immediately adjacent to the new crocodile enclosure and listened to the Vice Chancellor telling us how much the University valued the new reptile house and indeed the Zoological Garden. And he said this with such flowing sincerity that I am sure he meant every word. It was a great occasion. I was delighted to be there.

The reptile house and a number of other new exhibits and developments in the Zoo during the 1970s attracted increasing numbers of zoo visitors. Two years after the completion of the reptile house in 1977, the annual zoo visitor attendance figure rose to an all time high of just under a quarter of a million.

### Voices from the past

This story is nearly at an end. In it I have tried to convey how, over a period of 16 years, the University of Ibadan Zoo attempted (among many other things!) to narrow an ancient stand-off between human beings and the group of animals known as reptiles, especially snakes.

However, there is one aspect of this story that I have not yet touched on. In 2010 I set up a website called Animals, Africa and Other Secrets - [www.bobgolding.co.uk](http://www.bobgolding.co.uk) - which is about my zoo work in Nigeria, with notes and comments on my experiences there. Soon after the website went live I began to receive emails, some very personal, from Nigerians who had been young school children in Ibadan when I was there but with whom I had had little or no direct contact; they had been taken to the Zoo by their parents, or had perhaps visited in a school party. Many of the emails came from countries outside Nigeria where the writers were then living and working. I have to say that some of the messages moved me deeply; and they surprised me because, while I was working in Nigeria, I was largely unaware of the deep interests being aroused in some of the very young zoo visitors, interests that would influence their lives and, in some cases, their future careers.

I reproduce just three of those emails here; they have been edited to minimise length and to remove names:-



1) From: Dr Jovi - - - - (in Canada)

To: bob.golding@natural-habitats.co.uk Date: 7 March 2014

Dear Uncle Bob Golden, I'm sure you don't remember me. I grew up on (address on the University of Ibadan campus). The house with the pigeons. I've always wondered where you are. You really inspired lots of us back in the days. I

remember you also coming to our house when a thief showed up. All the neighbours switched off their lights and pretended to sleep but you showed up. You also had snakes. I was in Nigeria a few months back and Mr Iyoha (one of your workers) talked a lot about you as well. Do you still have snakes? I love snakes. I once had a pet snake and intend getting more animals with time. I got interested in animals because of you and now I have a Phd in Animal Science. I don't want to bore you with a long email. I just want to say thank you.

Regards Jovi - - - - .

P.S. I just realized your name ends in ing and not en. I'm sorry for the error. I guess it's the way I used to pronounce your name as a kid. Sorry once again for the error Sir.

**Subsequent email from Jovi:-** It's funny, after 40 years the zoo has not had anyone like you. You got some parts about yourself right (the man who actually kept snakes) but I see you knew little of what was said behind your back. It was believed you had charms to lure snakes and no snake could bite you. However, working with animals I know you had God given talents. Very few like you out there. Many didn't go to the zoo just for the animals. You were also one of the attractions at the zoo. It's funny you never noticed kids were always trying to get a glimpse of you and also learn as much as they could from you. I remember the Late Professor Ladokun, an animal scientist at University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, telling my how you also influenced his love for animals.

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2) From: Dr Femi - - - - (in the UK)

To: bob.golding@natural-habitats.co.uk

Subject: Ibadan Zoo

Date: Thu, 15 Dec 2011 19:02.38 +0000

Dear Mr Golding, Thank you very much for your website, which I viewed for the first time this morning. Thank you for the awesome work that you did at the University of Ibadan Zoo. I remember you on many occasions putting a long non-poisonous snake around my neck. These were my first close encounters with snakes. The very first time, I was surprised to find that its body was dry (somehow, I had always imagined that it would be cold and slimy). My father (Augustus - - - -) and you often loved to have a chat when you met at the zoo. It was on those occasions you decorated my neck with one of your many snakes. From 1979 to 1982 I studied Zoology at University of Ibadan. The glory of the zoo was already on the decline. Again, thank you for the tremendous contribution that you made to Nigeria by developing the UI Zoo. The impact was extremely far reaching. God bless. Femi - - - - , Kent, England.

**Subsequent email from Femi:-** Dear Bob, I have shared with friends on Facebook the joyous news that you are doing well and setting up a splendid website. They were all so excited. Many of my friends grew up in Ibadan and were regular visitors at the zoo you built. God Bless you. Wishing you the best of the season, Femi.

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3) From: Elizabeth Oritsejolomi Dudley (in the UK)

To: "Bob Golding" <bob.golding@natural-habitats.co.uk>

Date: 2014

Dear Bob, You won't remember this but you once asked me to assist you holding a rock python during a talk you gave at the Zoo. I felt so important and fantastically happy that you had asked me to help. You must hear from so many people saying exactly this but we loved your zoo so much and talk still when we meet about being able to be involved in – hopefully - helping the wonderful Mike and Anthony (zoo keepers) on

Saturdays. Wendy - - - - -, Peter - - - - -, Charles - - - - -, Akwe - - - - - and I lived for those Saturdays. Do you know how Mike and Anthony are now? Is Aruna (male gorilla) still there? Best wishes, Elizabeth Oritsejolomi Dudley

**Subsequent email from Elizabeth:-** Mon, 21 Apr 2014..... What you gave to us with your University of Ibadan Zoological garden gave us all a magical, memorable past. We knew it was special then but, years on, we appreciate this all the more so as we realise just how unique it was. Thank you.

### In conclusion

Looking back now, in 2018, I have no doubt that my experiences in Nigeria added a new and lasting dimension to my view of the world. It is as though, on that spring day in Bristol in 1963 when I was looking at the job ad in the newspaper, fate threw aside a curtain to reveal a new and challenging panorama of opportunities, requiring new ways of thinking and of doing things, often within a framework of new and different human relationships. Among other things, I believe the above email messages demonstrate that it is perfectly possible to live and work happily and productively across cultures and nationalities, with and for people from distant lands. I am delighted that the University of Ibadan Zoological Garden contributed to the public awareness of wildlife and the natural world, in Nigeria and beyond, and that I was able to play a part in this.

Bob Golding.

*The End*

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DEPARTMENT OF VETERINARY MEDICINE

Cables and Telegrams: University Ibadan  
Telephone: 62550-62579 (30 lines)  
Ext. 1507

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN  
IBADAN, NIGERIA

31st January, 1978.

The Secretary,  
Zoological Garden,  
University of Ibadan,  
Ibadan.

Professor & Mrs. D.H. Hill sincerely regret they were unable to accept the kind invitation of the Director and Staff of the Zoological Garden to the opening of the Reptile House on 30th January 1978 but regret they did not manage to reach Ibadan from the Lagos International Polo Tournament until 12 noon on the same day. May they take this opportunity, however, to congratulate the Director and the Staff on the excellent display of reptiles and the beautiful setting in which they have been housed. This display should be of continued and immense pleasure and interest to the visiting public, as well as biologists and other interested scientists from abroad.

**ABOVE: Professor Desmond Hill, Head of the Department of Veterinary Medicine and his wife, Dr Heather Hill, were great supporters of the University Zoo. They were unable to attend the opening of the reptile house, as Desmond explains above. This note from Desmond in January 1978 should be self-explanatory. Both Desmond and Heather are now dead but I remember them, and thank them, for their friendship and for their contributions to the development of the Zoological Garden. Bob Golding 2018.**



Left: me with my friend the Orangun of Ila, Oba William Adetona Ayeni, at his palace in 1972. He attended the opening ceremony of the new reptile house in Ibadan in 1978. This Orangun died in 1999, aged 87, and another Oba was crowned and became the new Orangun in May 2003.

Right: a wooden carving given to me by the Orangun which I still have in my house in Bristol, UK (2018).



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V 29/9/2018

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