In the Beginning Were Two Chameleons

By Bob Golding


A true short story, with photographs, that first outlines the background to the Zoological Garden at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and how the writer was appointed Curator there in 1963, just three years after Nigeria gained its independence. It goes on to describe how a collection of reptiles was built up gradually at the Zoo and later, in 1975, a Reptile House constructed where zoo visitors could observe these animals easily and in a safe environment. (It should be pointed out that the civil unrest in Nigeria that is reported in the international news from time to time occurs in an area far from Ibadan and the Zoological Garden).

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 the British Cameroons, the country immediately to the east of Nigeria. I had accompanied Gerald Durrell, the animal collector and writer, on an animal collecting trip there, a trip later described by Durrell in his book 'A Zoo in my Luggage'. I had found the - often little known - 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 in Nigeria as well as some of their London-based colleagues. The following week I was delighted to receive a telegram offering me the post.

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

I flew to Nigeria in September 1963, aged 25 years. Little did I know I was to spend the next 16 years there developing the University's Zoological Garden, initially as Zoo Curator and later as Director; or that I was to experience a steady cascade of sometimes extraordinary events that made life challenging at times but which also brought me great pleasure 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 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 Nigeria - from Calabar to Enugu, from Benin City to Ibadan itself as well as a smaller number from further north. Thus several different indigenous languages were spoken among the Nigerian staff. The indigenous language of Ibadan and the south west area of Nigeria was Yoruba but standard English - Nigeria's official language - was spoken by educated Nigerians, including the University's academic and senior staff and students. However, Nigeria's *de facto* lingua franca was Pidgin English, a hybrid language that had developed to enable people from different areas of Nigeria to communicate with each other. Different sources give the number of indigenous languages in Nigeria as between one and two hundred!

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

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 on an ad hoc basis as a research and teaching collection and had been housed on adjacent land. Before my appointment, the University had decided to make these animals accessible to 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 people had responded to this and had come to view the animals, the animal collection remained something of a menagerie, with most of the animals kept in outdated, unimaginative and poorly maintained cages and enclosures, with little information of interest available to zoo visitors. Within the University, and the Faculty of Science in particular, it was then agreed that the time had come to try to tap into the Zoo's potential in a more structured way, hence the creation in 1963 of the new post of Zoo Curator. At that time the Zoo's potential had become clear and more widely recognised; this was the provision of a facility where members of the Nigerian public could view, for the first time in most cases, a range of indigenous animal species in complete safety and where educational information about those animals would be provided.

The Zoo staff included many animal keepers as well as a driver, night-watchmen, gatekeepers, an office clerk, an accountant, a secretary and others. As Zoo Curator I had direct access to the University's excellent Chief Engineer and his Maintenance Department for work such as the construction and maintenance of buildings.

The Head Zoo Keeper, Daniel Osula, was from 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 in 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.

One of the incidental advantages of the Zoo being located on the campus of the University of Ibadan was that it was easily 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 noted by some of the most educated and potentially influential young people in the country.

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 animals, from gorillas to pangolins and from hornbills to cobras. I have already written a number of short stories about my experiences with some of these creatures. This just to remind the reader that this story - 'At the Beginning Were Two Chameleons' - focuses on reptiles and how I was eventually able to construct a multi-species reptile house that became one of the most popular attractions in the Zoo.

Male agama lizard (Agama agama).

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. I knew from my previous experience in West Africa that, in the tropics, one is aware of the comparative abundance and diversity of life around one. Certain species of small lizard, for example, are creatures that, if one sits still for a while, whether in one's garden or further afield, can appear suddenly and silently, from nowhere. Indeed, on the University campus the most frequently seen small reptile was the agama lizard (*Agama agama - see photos above and page 4)*. These lizards could often be observed, either singly or in small groups, as one went about one's daily business. They might be on the wall of a building or on a tree trunk or some other vantage point where they could bask in the sun. As they basked, these creatures made small, intermittent movements, darting one way then another in little bursts of energy they seemed quite unable to suppress. They kept constant watch for any moving or suspect object nearby and could run for cover and disappear in seconds They held their heads high as they gazed around, often bobbing up and down as though performing miniature press-ups. Agamas always seemed such energetic, positive, cheerful little creatures. 'Be happy' they seemed to say. 'Just be happy'.

Adult male agamas can reach 30cm (24") in length; they 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 where they can often be seen darting around and occasionally grabbing and munching some small invertebrate.

Young agama lizard.

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 also shiny, smooth-scaled skinks that seemed to pour them themselves effortlessly along the ground, and 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 indigenous to south western Nigeria and some of these were well established on the University campus. The campus was over 1,000 hectares in size with buildings equipped 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.

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

I soon became known by residents on the University campus as the man who actually kept snakes in his house and could sort out most kinds of snake problem! For example, I was sometimes asked to go to the residence of a member of staff in order to 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. On one occasion I received a report of a large, black snake having being seen in a tree in a staff member's garden (or compound) on the campus; I was asked to go and advise or somehow 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 partly digested bird eggs - almost certainly domestic chickens' eggs - that it had consumed recently (*see photo right*).

Bird (probably hens') eggs regurgitated by a black cobra (see photo page 4), apparently having been swallowed at different times and thus now at different stages of digestion.

Another incident occurred one day when Ann, the wife of a lecturer from the UK, was working in the small garden attached to her ground floor apartment. Ann was alone that day and was kneeling down, trowelling happily way and thinking about the gorgeous bunches of flowers she would eventually gather from the seedlings she was planting Suddenly she glimpsed the head of a small snake that had just emerged from a pile of dead leaves just where she was working. The snake struck immediately and grabbed Ann's thumb in its mouth! It then withdrew and quickly disappeared again among the plants and garden debris. Ann said later it was all over in a matter of seconds. She was absolutely shocked, especially as she had been left with a few small perforations on her thumb where the snake's teeth had penetrated her skin! What if this snake was venomous? Although she had had a clear, albeit brief, view of the snake as it bit 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 Ann immediately to the University doctor's surgery on the University campus. The Doctor was very concerned but was unclear about what he should do. He kept some snake antivenoms in the surgery's fridge but, without knowing the identity of the snake in question, he was reluctant to inject Ann with this. In any case, Ann hadn't yet shown any obvious symptoms of a venomous snake bite so he was prepared to wait before taking any further action. Ann 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 Ann'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. I pointed out that it was important to know the identity of the snake so that, if it was venomous, we could advise the Doctor appropriately and ensure that the correct antivenom was used for treatment. I felt it would be sensible to return, even briefly, to the garden where the bite had occurred as it was just possible that the snake might still be there somewhere. We rushed out to John's car and he drove through the campus so fast I thought we might never make it. On arrival at the apartment I walked quickly over to the small garden. I could see few obvious 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 recognised it as a young Blanding's tree snake (*Toxicodryas blandingii*). This species is venomous but its bite is not regarded a dangerously toxic to man. It is a back-fanged species, so called because its fangs are grooved rather than hollow and are at the back, rather than the front, of the upper jaw. Thus a back-fanged venomous snake normally has to bite a victim with its back teeth before any venom is injected.

Young Blanding's tree snake (Toxicodryas blandingii).

I said we should take the snake with us to the Doctor's surgery to show Ann in case she could confirm it was the snake that had bitten her. 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 where Ann took a long look at the snake but couldn't be sure it was the one that had bitten her. She showed me her thumb and the site of the snake bite. I looked at the 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 the normal, solid teeth right at the front of the snake's upper jaw. There was no swelling around the site of the bite and Ann was showing none of the symptoms of a venomous snake bite of any kind. My cautious view was that Ann had not been injected with venom by this or any other snake. There was tremendous relief from Ann and everßyone present; Ann was later asked 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 a 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 something happened that effectively kick-started the development of the first small reptile exhibit in the Zoo since my arrival. One morning, in 1964, a young man appeared at the Zoo's entrance gate and told the gatekeeper he had an animal for sale; he was directed to my office which was just inside the zoo entrance, 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 dried, hard-walled fruit that has had its contents removed so that it can be used as a container. Calabashes can be of different sizes and shapes and are produced by more than one species of plant; they 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 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 owner's head by changes of 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 grassland beside 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?

These two calabashes were growing on a farm in Oyo, south western Nigeria. They are almost at the stage when they are cut from the parent plant prior to being prepared as containers.

The calabash held by my young visitor was 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 farm land 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.

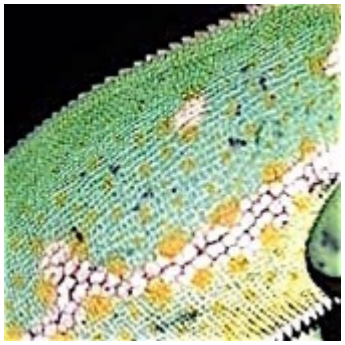
I began to pull out the plug of leaves to expose the contents. I did this slowly and with a degree of caution as I was aware that inside might be anything from a large spider or a bat to a baby crocodile or a green mamba. Holding the calabash at arm's length I stared hard into its dim interior; at first it was impossible to see anything at all but, after holding it at different angles and getting some light down

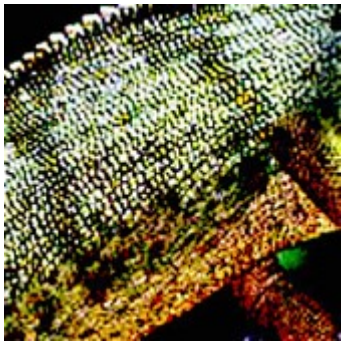
This bowl is the lower half of a calabash or gourd and is being used to carry milk. This Fulani woman was carrying not only the bowl of milk but also the small baby on her back. But she still made it look easy…

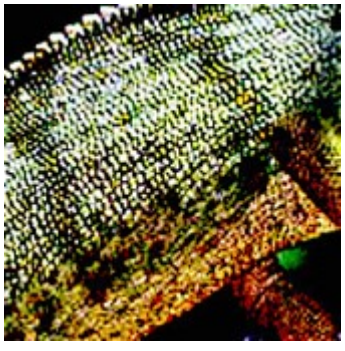
The first graceful chameleon (Chamaeleo gracilis) brought to the Zoo after my arrival.

inside, I could just make out a chameleon 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 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 of its dark little world.

The young man who had brought the chameleon continued to be very wary of it and kept well away from it at all times. With the help of one of my zoo keepers as interpreter, we agreed a price, I gave him the cash and he promptly disappeared.







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

One of the zoo keepers found a large, disused wooden box on site and quickly adapted it as a temporary vivarium. 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 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 set up a small, trial reptile exhibit in the Zoo. I issued instructions to our carpenters to construct a simple, robust, glass-sided display cage - or vivarium - that would enable us to exhibit this, and perhaps other, chameleons.

Chameleons are popularly known for their ability to change their skin colour, skin markings or colour 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 a particular location or environment (ie., camouflage it), or it can affect heat absorption and thermoregulation, or it can be a response to a stress; it can even be used to send signals to other chameleons. The range and variety of the skin colours and markings is impressive (*see photos page 8*).

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

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

Most chameleon species have prehensile tails with which they hold on to twigs and branches as they move around (*see photo above)*. 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 frequently encountered in the wild, even by farmers or other workers who spent time in the 'bush' or countryside. This is likely to be because, in addition to their ability to colour camouflage, graceful chameleons are small, live singly and can be difficult to see - to pick out - among the branches and foliage of shrubs and trees.

It so happened that a second graceful chameleon was brought to the Zoo a few days later. Happily, the carpenters had just completed constructing the new chameleon vivarium and had fixed it onto an existing concrete pedestal in the Zoo. Around its base, at ground level, the pedestal had a channel that could be filled with water and thus prevent driver ants from climbing up to the vivarium at night, entering through much needed ventilation points and attacking, and almost certainly overwhelming, both chameleons. We furnished the vivarium with one or two small plants as well as small branches which the chameleons could climb and move around on. This small, trial chameleon exhibit was located near the bottom of the steps that led up to my office.

I put two zoo keepers, Michael Iyoha and Nicholas Eze, who were particularly interested in reptiles and good at handling them, in charge of the chameleons. The bulk of the food for these small newcomers would be grasshoppers and other small invertebrates which we were already capturing on a regular basis as food for some of the other zoo animals. This involved a zoo keeper walking to a field just outside the Zoo and sweeping a fine net from side to side as he walked through the long grass. The chameleons were thus assured of natural, nutritious food in the form of some of the plumpest, juciest grasshoppers on the University campus.

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.

When the newly exhibited chameleons were fed for the first time, there was a quite unexpectedly enthusiastic response from zoo visitors. Through my office window that morning I was intrigued to see a large group of people gathered around the chameleon cage. I walked down my office steps for a closer look and it was soon clear that the visitors were watching the chameleons feeding. They seemed completely absorbed by what was happening and I stood there for several minutes watching the visitors watching the chameleons firing their long tongues at their prey.

Zoo visitors watching chameleons feeding in the first trial chameleon exhibit; they were fascinated by the long tongues that could snatch a grasshopper in the blink of an eye!

I should explain that, when a chameleon sees a suitable insect or other invertebrate prey, it first attempts to move within tongue-shot range. The tongue is an extraordinary structure; when at rest it is located below and behind the mouth and can be up to 1.5 times the length of the reptile's body. When the chameleon 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 can be judged accurately. At the same time the chameleon opens its mouth and, sometimes slowly at first, protrudes its tongue. The chameleon, with both eyes still directed at 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! 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,

This zoo visitor thought a small royal python around her neck would be just the right finishing touch to her colourful costume. So we let her try it…

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 quite fascinating little dramas.

To return to the two chameleons in the Zoo, the response of visitors that day, and subsequently, to our modest chameleon exhibit, was a useful indication that zoo visitors could be interested in the less obvious aspects of the animal world provided that the exhibit was interesting or presented in an interesting way; it strengthened my view that a much larger, multi-species, display of Nigerian reptiles in the Zoo would be a success.

As the popularity and reputation 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. 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 anxious about the prospect of being shoved in front of a TV camera and somebody whispering 'OK - you're on' or whatever it is they say. So I practised (if that was what it was) at home, jabbering away to 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.

It was agreed that, on the day of each broadcast, WNTV would 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.

Reptile keeper Nicholas talking to a school party of young visitors at the Zoo.

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 seemed to have a great time and, amazingly, even the disappearing wood owl - which 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 late1960s - 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, a particularly time-consuming project. However, soon after the trial chameleon exhibit had been set up, modest funds did suddenly become available for what I considered would be an appropriate next step in developing our reptile exhibits - an open snake enclosure. This enclosure would be five or six metres across and bounded by a circular, rendered wall with an inner overhang (*see photo below*). Although of basic, inexpensive design, It would be an entirely new type of exhibit for the Zoo and provide another useful tool with which to communicate with visitors. After discussions with one of the Chief Engineer's staff, he produced builders' drawings, appointed a local building contractor and the new snake enclosure was constructed very quickly (*see photo below*).

As soon as the decision was taken to proceed with this modest project, we started to 'collect' suitable species of snake and place them in temporary accommodation pending their display in the new enclosure. I selected species I thought would remain unhidden and thus be on view for at least some of the time. They also needed to be species that

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 allowed to touch and to hold the specimens in the enclosure. Such gatherings became hugely popular. Occasions like this were supervised at all times. NB: regular zoo visitors were not allowed to sit on the wall.

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*), emerald snakes (*Hapsidophrys smaragdina*), green tree snakes (*Philothamnus irregularis*), Smyth's water snakes (*Grayia smithii*) and black tree snakes (*Thrasops occidentalis*). The royal pythons, because of their temperament and size, were particularly suited to being handled by visitors.

I can say that the snake enclosure was a success from the day it was opened. When the two reptile keepers had enough time, they entered the enclosure, singly or together, and talked to visitors about the snakes, some of which they allowed visitors to handle under their 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 parties of school children. Thus while the snake pit - as some called it - remained our only significant reptile exhibit for some time, it turned out to be a really valuable resource. On a point of information, we always took care to emphasise, and demonstrate, to visitors that some snakes are venomous and can kill, and that no snake should be handled until they were sure it was safe to do so.

In the new snake enclosure. Royal pythons (on upper part of tree stump) were among the easier snakes for visitors to handle. They also remained exposed and on view for much of the time. 1965.

It wasn't until 1973 that funds became available for a new Reptile House and a decision made to go ahead with this. I worked closely with the Chief Engineer and the University's Maintenance Department during the design and build process that finally delivered the completed building in 1975. We agreed that we could kill two birds with one stone by partly demolishing an existing but outdated zoo building and incorporating it as part of the new Reptile House. The new building would include certain features of a modern reptile house. The floors of the live animal units would be raised so that visitors could view the exhibits at waist level from a darkened visitor viewing area and from behind glass panels. Some exhibits would include live plants, rockwork, etc., and be exposed to natural light, day length, 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, with visitor viewing from a shaded walkway. The new building would enable us to display many species of reptile - and amphibian - in attractive and naturalistic settings. It would provide facilities for keeping and treating any sick specimens and for the incubation of eggs of species such as the hinged tortoise and monitor lizard and also for taking care of any newly hatched or born young.

Work on the demolition of the old building and construction of the new Reptile House commenced in 1974 and took around a year to complete. I watched the new building

The outside crocodile enclosure and pool, part of the new Reptile House. Zoo visitors were protected from sun or rain while viewing from the walkway. To observe these reptiles so closely and in safety was a new experience for most visitors to the Zoo.

gradually emerge and was able to provide guidance or clarification when this or that option or uncertainty arose during construction. It was a relief as well as a challenge to take over the building on completion and to begin the job of equipping and developing it as a working Reptile House, complete with designated reptile staff, exellent animal accommodation and the animals that were to live there. The new Reptile House was a big step forward and, with its darkened viewing corridor providing excellent and secure sight of the creatures on display, offered visitors a new and very different experience. It contributed significantly to many more visitors coming into the Zoo and the University campus; during public holidays a queue of people now formed outside the Zoo entrance gate and extended along the road outside.

A closer look inside the crocodile enclosure. Three species can be seen here.

In 1977, a year or so after completion of the building, the University's Vice-Chancellor suggested there should be an official opening of the Reptile House. Thus an opening ceremony was organised for the 30th of January,1978, and duly took place in an area just in front of the new crocodile enclosure. The Vice-Chancellor led the ceremony and made a charming and encouraging speech in which he said how much the University valued the new Reptile House and indeed the Zoological Garden. Among others

The Reptile House opening ceremony January 1978. On my right, in centre of picture, is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan making the main speech.

With my friend the Orangun of Ila, Oba William Adetona Ayeni, on a different occasion in 1972. He cut the tape at the opening ceremony of the new Reptile House in 1978. This Orangun died in 1999.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERINARY MEDICINE

Cables and Telegrams: University Ibadan
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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 - from Professor Hill, Head of the Department of Veterinary Medicine at the University, who provided an invaluable veterinary service to the Zoological Garden.

attending were the Dean of the Faculty of Science and many other members of the University's academic and administrative staff as well as the British Deputy High Commissoner and his wife. A particularly notable and welcome guest was my friend the Orangun of Ila (now deceased), a paramount Yoruba ruler or king, who was accompanied by a Police guard (*see photo above)*. After the speeches and the cutting of the tape by the Orangun to pronounce the reptile house officially open, we all headed to the refreshment tables for a beer and a chat. It was a wonderful ceremony and a wonderful day.

During the period of planning for the new Reptile House there was a development of great importance for tne Zoological Garden. In response to the expanded public role and popularity of the Zoo, the University administrators separated it from the Department of Zoology and formally redesignated it a Public Service Unit. As such the Zoo became responsible, under a newly appointed Director (yours truly), to a newly-formed Zoo Management Board headed by the Dean of the University's Faculty of Science. Visitor numbers continued to increase each year. From the 30,000 or 40,000 visitors in 1963 when I arrived in Nigeria, the number rose to 158,000 in 1970 and would approach just under a quarter of a million in 1979,

making the Zoo the most visited public amenity of any kind in Nigeria. The Zoo had become a centre where Nigerians of every age and background could observe wild creatures at their leisure and in complete safety, in most cases for the first time.

Looking back now, in 2020, I can say 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 saw the job ad in the newspaper, a curtain was drawn aside to reveal a new and challenging panorama of opportunities, requiring new ways of thinking and of doing things, often involving new and different human relationships. Among other things, I am pleased to have had the opportunity to live and work creatively across cultures and nationalities. I am informed that, in Nigeria, the University of Ibadan Zoological Garden continues to contribute to the public awareness of wildlife and the natural world; I am certainly content that I was able to play a part in developing this facility.

The End.

Bob Golding.

The two chameleons that started it all

Story completed April 2018 *Updated November 2020 nws*

Postscript: It has been a pleasure to keep in touch with the Zoological Garden in Ibadan. In 2013 the Director of the Zoo at that time, Dr Olajumoke Morenikeji, came to visit me in Bristol and I was able to help her work with Bristol Zoo Gardens whose Director kindly agreed to let one of the Ibadan zoo keepers spend a month in Bristol gaining further zoo experience. This was followed a year later by her Zoo Curator also spending a month at Bristol Zoo.

Immature African giant toad
(Sclerophrys superciliaris?)

Especially since setting up a website a few years ago about my work in Nigeria, Nigerians and others have contacted me to renew past relationships or remind me of this or that occasion. Particularly surprising, sometimes moving, messages have been from Nigerians who were young school children when I was in Ibadan but of whom I have no recollection, simply because, in most cases, I had no direct contact with them. They had been taken to the Zoo by their parents, or had perhaps visited in a school party. Some of the emails came from countries outside Nigeria where the writers were then living and working. In their different ways they described how and why they had become frequent visitors to the Zoo and how much they had enjoyed their visits. One letter described how his zoo visits as a boy had stimulated his great interest in animals to the extent that he now had a PhD in animal science, was working in Canada and was just writing to say thank you.

I thank him and all those who have written to me and wish them every success.

Clockwise from top right:-
Banana gecko (Lygodactylus conraui).
Bosc's monitor (Varanus exanthematicus).
Hinged tortoise (Kinixys belliana).
Forest hinged tortoise (Kinixys homeana) just hatched, with sibling egg.
Fernand's or fire skink (Lepidothyris (Riopa) fernandi).
Egg-eating snake (Dasypeltis bazi) .
Emerald snake (Gastropyxis smaragdina) eating an agama lizard.