

31. A Meeting of Relatives

Famous anthropologist unravels the primitive mind

Dr. Lewis Berger was an anthropologist who became famous in the 1950s for his daring expeditions into the depths of dark continents and other far-away places. He was the first, and sometimes only, white man that many of the lost tribes of his discovery ever knew. Dr. Berger's fame also arose from his great humanism. He was always concerned that, by bringing these Primitive Peoples into contact with Western Civilization, their cultures would be destroyed, their "souls ripped from their bodies." Therefore, when he judged that a particular tribe was, on balance, living as happily or more happily than the people of his own culture (Oxford, England), he thereby left them alone and refused to give up any information as to where they might be found. Naturally, this led to lots of criticism from his fellow anthropologists, because it required him to conduct many of his expeditions in deep secrecy. There was no way of establishing the "validity of his findings," as they say in social science. Matters were made even more difficult for Dr. Berger when it came to convincing funding agencies to finance his expeditions since they were simply not courageous enough to risk their money on "some wild safari," as one evaluator so coarsely put it. And Dr. Berger wrote so colorfully, many suspected that he sat underneath one of those shady date palms, the exciting sounds of the jungle around him, and dreamed it all up. None of these things concerned Dr. Berger one scrap. In fact, they played into his hands since all he wanted was to "lead" lone expeditions, which cost, comparatively speaking, very little money -- just sweat and exertion on his part.

Dr. Berger's last expedition was into the jungles of central Indonesia, where he had heard of a fierce tribe of head hunters that had resisted, indeed repelled, all attempts by explorers and even the soldiers of the Indonesian government, to penetrate the seclusion of their villages. There is little doubt that Doctor Berger, somehow, slipped into this tribe and lived among them for some time.

The full story of his disappearance will never be known because it was three years before anyone became alarmed that

something may have happened to him: people had become used to his many secret and solitary withdrawals from civilization. In reconstructing the events that led to the doctor's disappearance, I have had to rely on the rare jabberings of his friend, Ockabunga, who was one of the tribe's young leaders. Snippets of the Doctor's field notes were found sewn into Ockabunga's delicately feathered head-dress, and these have been of inestimable value. For the rest, I have had to imagine it:

Friday, June 14, 1959

After five days tracking around the colorful ghettos of Djakarta, I at last found a capable native of the Ung Fungo tribe who agreed to be my guide for six pence a day, meals provided. This tribe is thought to have contact with the Folijot warriors. The sun is baking me, the sky seems white hot. But this is the dry season, so at least I'm thankful that the steam of the tropics isn't yet closing in.

Thursday, July 30, 1959

A quick note. Have walked for days and days, chopping our way through grass, 8 to 10 feet high. Snakes, reptiles, all those animals that slink about. The stench from black mud under foot. It's like Hell, the sun's heat penetrates even the thickest cover. My guide Tojo doesn't even sweat. Sings a monotonous tune over and over. I'm getting old. May turn back. Exhausted—

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No field notes describe Doctor Berger's first encounter with the Folijot warriors, although we are relatively sure that his guide abandoned him in fear, and that he remained alone in the jungle for several days, resting and gathering his strength. In what follows, I have reconstructed what I think may have occurred.

When he was searching for a snake that he could kill for food, Dr. Berger pushed back a large succulent leaf, and there standing before him was Ockabunga, short and stocky, with fatty breasts, a huge smile on his face; a forehead that reminded Doctor Berger of the pictures he had seen of prehistoric man.

“How do you do, I'm Doctor Lewis Berger.”

“!” replied Ockabunga, laying his spear aside, and extending the other hand out in a friendly gesture.

Ockabunga was a man of few words, his most common one being a deep grunting sound that came from somewhere in his

chest. No English phonics reproduce the sound accurately, so I will use the notation “!” when it is necessary to represent it.

From Doctor Berger's notes, and from what we now know about the Folijot warriors, it remains a mystery as to why the natives received Doctor Berger when they had so violently rejected all others. And Doctor Berger a white man, too! My own theory is that Ockabunga fell in love with Doctor Berger, in the sense that he was fascinated by the Doctor's toothless smile, reddish sunburnt skin, and twinkling eyes. It seems that Doctor Berger moved in with Ockabunga and that they developed, what one might call, an intimate relationship:

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Tuesday, October 22, 1959

I have been unable to communicate with Ockabunga except on a physical level. He has said, perhaps, no more than 3 different words to me. Physically, however, he is most forthright. Each night after a large meal of juicy meat and vegetables, we sit in front of his grass hut, sipping coconut juice. I talk and talk and talk, telling him of the wonders of our civilization. He nods his head, smiles, grunts. Then, after some hours, he leans toward me, grips my arm firmly and grins widely. We go into his hut and lay on his straw mat together—

December 1959

We talked about medicine last night. Ockabunga seems very interested. I drew diagrams for him, he got excited, pulled me into bed. The Folijot sex and kinship patterns are still a complete mystery. I have so far seen no women or children. This small village of 12 huts, arranged in a circle, houses 24 young men of Ockabunga's age. One of them goes off into the jungle and returns with cooked food each day. I have asked to see the women and children, but Ockabunga pretends he doesn't understand me. Yet I know he does. His eyes are frightening, they are so lucid and penetrating. During our evening talks, he sometimes looks at me as if he knew it all and much more. Very unnerving—

March 1960

— I'm losing track of time. Dates no longer matter. The lethargy induced by tropical heat, and my liaison with Ockabunga, is destroying my soul. He's no longer an exotic native. I hate him. He's kept me, prisoner, all this time, and I've only now understood this. I have resolved that tomorrow, I won't

go to bed with him.

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The remainder of Doctor Berger's notes is scribbled furiously, often both horizontally and vertically across the same page. Most of it is illegible, none of it is dated. I have tried to piece together the remains of his field notes along with my own interviews with Ockabunga to construct the rest of the story.

It seems that the next evening, when Ockabunga beckoned Doctor Berger into his hut, the doctor said, "No!" Ockabunga replied, "!!" and sat down again. He pointed to the doctor's mouth, to his throat, to his own head, then traced a shape on the ground. The doctor quickly recognized that Ockabunga was, at last, communicating positively, he wanted to be educated. The doctor was elated, immediately began to teach Ockabunga to speak English, and in only a few months, Ockabunga was speaking it, "like a native," as they say.

Then it was Doctor Berger's turn to be educated. He was taken head hunting, taught how to stalk another native, how to chop off the head leaving enough skin on the neck, so that when the head was boiled in special herbs, the skin had room to shrink, and settled smoothly over the hardened flesh of the cheeks.

"When will I see the women and children?" Berger asked.

"When you have cut off your first head," replied Ockabunga.

Many months went by. The good doctor could not, of course, bring himself to kill someone and cut off his head. He wanted to leave this tribe and get back to civilization. The more he learned about their language and lifestyle, the more he began to hate them, Ockabunga especially. This upset him because he had never felt this way about the many tribes he had previously discovered. He had always felt a special kind of love for them. He never judged them, he always accepted them for what they were. His role was not that of judge, but of scientist and humanist.

One day, Ockabunga touched his arm gently — the first time he had touched him since the doctor's loud rejection — and smiled:

"Today you will see your first child," he said. "And as well you may have your own hut and may take in your own companion. We will have a feast to celebrate."

The doctor was both pleased and worried. He had waited so

long to see this child. But he was being moved out from under Ockabunga's protective wing.

The feast began. Two natives emerged from the jungle carrying a large wooden dish, garnished with big banana leaves, and in the middle, the still sizzling, dark brown child, the legs trussed up under the chin, roast yams spaced around the dish, a paw-paw slice wedged into the mouth. Cheers of approval went up from the tribe.

The doctor feigned illness, which was not so difficult under the circumstances. He emerged from his hut several days later, weak and emaciated from lack of food. Ockabunga approached him.

“Come back to my hut,” he said. “I don't think you are ready yet.”

And the Doctor gathered up his things and moved back in with his host. The days passed, the doctor regained his strength, and with it, his resourcefulness. He had realized that many bodies were going to waste. He looked around Ockabunga's hut and counted 63 heads of all shapes and sizes, as well as 37 skulls. The bodies could be made use of. He would teach Ockabunga some anatomy.

That evening, they sat in front of Ockabunga's hut, as they had done now every night for over two years. It was hot, steamy, and the insects buzzed around the little camp fire. The soft smell of the straw mats on which they sat oozed upward, mixing with the odor of their bodies. Ockabunga had one of those all-knowing looks in his eyes.

“!” he said.

“Have you ever taken the time to look inside these corpses that you throw away?” asked Doctor Berger.

“We want only the heads. They have the spirit.”

“That may be true.” Doctor Berger paused, realizing that perhaps he should begin his anatomy lesson with the part of the body in which the Folijot were most interested. “Now take the human brain,” he continued, pointing to his own head, “it's the most amazing part of our bodies. “Yes, it is the spirit,” nodded Ockabunga, looking wise.

“It's more than that, Ockabunga. Do you know that it's made up of millions of tiny little cells that turn on and off, and talk to each other in electricity? You remember what I told you about

electricity, don't you?"

"Yes."

"The brain controls all the rest of the body, you know. It receives electrical impulses, processes them, then sends messages back. You see? When I raise my hand, my brain has told it to do so." The doctor tapped his head with his finger to emphasize the point.

"Different parts of the brain control different parts of the body. The front part here, for example, controls speech, and the amazing thing is that the right side controls the left side of the body, and the left the right, isn't that amazing?"

Then Doctor Berger broke his rule never to make an advance to a native. He reached across and stroked Ockabunga's cheek with his open palm. "Tomorrow, or the next time when you bring in a head, we must cut it up, and I'll teach you what is inside. What do you think of that?"

"!" said Ockabunga, and he rose up, stretched his hand down and softly felt all over the Doctor's head. Then he walked over to his long spear which was leaning against the hut. Their eyes met, and the Doctor was frightened by the all-seeing clarity of Ockabunga's gaze. There was no silly grin. "No simple savage this," thought Doctor Berger, as Ockabunga raised the spear carefully, then thrust it deep into the Doctor's heart. He died with his eyes open, according to Ockabunga who explained, "he had seen the truth."

The next day, the women and children of the tribe were invited to the feast of the white man. Ockabunga severed the head, then very excitedly explained to the rest of his tribe what was inside. They carefully opened a cavity in the back of the skull and scooped out the brains. They found no electricity, just a thick pulp which, when lightly fried in the fat of a wild pig, and sprinkled with jungle herbs, has an exquisite taste.

