Experiment and Excavation in the Ethnographic Museum: Care, Cruelty, and Barbara Harrisson

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When does care become cruel? I answer this question by considering the career of Dr. Barbara Harrisson who for a decade directed the Keramiekmuseum Princessehof in the late twentieth century, from 1977 to 1987. Before she became renowned as an expert of Asian ceramics, she was known for primatology, having invented the idea of orangutan rehabilitation.

What follows is not quite a cautionary tale. A cautionary tale is used as a warning against the perils of moral or social transgression. Rather, the point of this story is to remind us that we should not have the hubris to act as if we know all the answers in advance. When paving new pathways and executing new plans, we must seriously consider the effects of our actions. The intention to care or do good is never enough.

This brief essay has two parts: Experimentation (orangutan) and Excavation (ceramic jars). The first part is about the problem that good intentions can result in harmful consequences, which was the dilemma Barbara Harrisson faced. The second part takes the question in a different direction by considering something that is increasingly understood as harmful or perhaps even cruel to instead think of it as beneficial, careful, and maybe even rehabilitative.

Part 1: Experimentation

The year was 1956 and Barbara Harrisson experimented with the idea of rehabilitating orangutans. Orphaned infant orangutans were being sent to the Sarawak Museum, only to die in cages shortly after. She was loath to send these apes to cold concrete and iron-barred zoos in the UK. She was equally loath to send them to what she considered 'third-rate zoos' in cities like Manila or Johor Baharu. Unable to fend for themselves, orphaned orangutans couldn't be sent back to different forests which by then were being actively exploited by newly introduced motorized chainsaws. It was entirely out of the question for her that orangutans become domesticated pets, because she was certain they would succumb to diseases and malnutrition from hu-

man contact. She instead sought a hitherto untested way of finding a form of eventual independence for these orphaned orangutans.

The problem of how to instil independence was as much a political dilemma for Sarawak's colonial society as it was a programmatic one in the Harrisson household where the experiment of rehabilitating orangutans began. The kernel of Barbara Harrisson's idea began just a year after the Asian-African Conference in neighbouring Indonesia. There, leaders from Africa and Asia articulated the Third World stance against 'colonialism in all of its manifestations'.[1] It was fifteen years after the last White Rajah, a British subject whose family personally owned Sarawak for a century, had promised Sarawak's eventual self-governance in 1941. He later reneged that promise and transferred Sarawak to Britain in 1946. Three years later, the first British appointed governor of Sarawak was assassinated. As a form of punishment, the colonial state forbade political participation for Malays, who made up about a third of Sarawak's population.[2] Ongoing British colonialism had to end. Everyone knew it. The problem was how.

Barbara Harrisson's husband Tom had been the curator of the Sarawak Museum since the end of World War II and Barbara was a German-born university-educated volunteer who gained British citizenship through her second husband. When I met her in 2006 in the Netherlands, she spoke of herself as a 'British colonial'. Her persistent German accent and serious tone uttering those words did not betray any irony. Remembering her actions and her sincere work to instil freedom for orangutans serves as a reminder that even colonials have a vision of decolonization.

The story of Eve, the infant orangutan might best illustrate what could be described as a specifically colonial desire to control the outcomes of Harrisson's experiment with independence. Eve was the second orangutan infant who came into her care. Eve's predecessor wasn't Adam, as readers might imagine, but Bob. Bob was named for a visiting director from an American museum. This story may be familiar either from Barbara Harrisson's memoir *Orang Utan* in 1962[3] or from my 2018 book *Decolonizing Extinction*[4], yet I think it's worth further consideration on the question of when care becomes cruel.

Barbara Harrisson tells the story of how her matronly Malay domestic worker Dayang, in want of a baby to finally care for in the Harrisson household, immediately took under her care. Yet Eve refused to eat and Dayang understood this as Eve's refusal to live. Barbara rejected Dayang's interpretation and in, Barbara Harrisson's own words, she 'violently' force fed Eve with a glass pipette.

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1 Asian-African Conference 1955.

2 Leigh 1974.

3 Harrisson 1962a, 224.

4 Parreñas 2018.

Caring for Eve in Barbara Harrisson's sense of care included cruelty, foreshadowing the work of care at today's orangutan rehabilitation centres where workers hit orangutans in order to prevent them from getting too acclimatized and accustomed to human contact. They call this kind of cruelty 'tough love', which they contrast to a mother's love. Ironically, Barbara Harrisson called the tough love that she came to embody after observing wild orangutan behaviour 'ape motherhood'. Her knowledge of apes was hard-gained through hours of observation during which she climbed up to the tree canopies where orangutans dwelled, tying herself to the trunk of a Dipterocarpus tree equipped with a camera and notepad. From this vantage point, she was able to record behaviour of juvenile apes – what biologists would later call behavioural sampling.

By 1962, the Harrissons scrambled to solidify material orangutan protections before Sarawak would cease its status as a British Crown Colony the next year, and while they still had an audience with the British-appointed Chief Secretary and Conservator of Forests. The Harrissons fretted about the fate of orangutans, especially those whose habitats included the new nation of Indonesia, which was the first nation-state after World War II to succeed in gaining independence through violence. Tom Harrisson's letter to the conservator explains that the Harrisson's 'experiments of letting young orphaned Maias grow up half-wild has now proved that it is possible to educate them back to wild living'.[5] That official granted them permission to continue their experiment at Bako National Park. The first, only, and last orangutans at Bako were Arthur and Cynthia.

The national park ultimately proved to be too small and too busy with beach-going visitors, as evidenced by a document held in Sarawak Museum records with a question that seems too specific to be hypothetical. The question posed is about a *maias*, the word for orangutan commonly used in Sarawak from the nineteenth until mid-twentieth century: a cognate of the word *mawas* used in Sumatra, Indonesia. The question goes, 'If a maias introduced into the Bako Nat'l Park injures a visitor or if a visitor, say a child, injures itself running away from the maias in terror, would Government be legally liable for damages?' The next file in the folder offers an answer: 'In short, yes…'[6] Arthur and Cynthia had been transferred earlier to the custody of the Sarawak Museum, which in practice at the time meant Barbara and Tom Harrisson's home. They originally came from Sabah, then in a period of transition from a British Crown Colony of North Borneo which had been administered until World War II by a corporation intended to exploit the territory's resources into the newly formed federal state of Malaysia, whose post-colonial leaders were also keen on exploiting Sabah's resources. Sabah's Conservator wanted these orangutans to undergo the experiment of rehabilitation instead of sending them to an overseas

5 Harrisson 1962 b, 27 Feb 1962.

6 Harrisson 1962 b, 25 Sept 1962.

zoo. Barbara Harrisson personally returned the two orangutans to Sabah for what she had planned to be four to six weeks, before the experiment of orangutan rehabilitation was to continue at Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Center.

In a mere matter of days upon arrival in Sabah, one of Sepilok's two workers shot and killed Arthur while Barbara Harrisson was away. Both workers reported to Stanley De Silva and said that Arthur had 'ran amok', a curious phrase rooted in a Malay idiom for what is understood by medical anthropologists as a form of psychosis.[7] Supposedly having pushed down a water tank, the ape cornered the workers. The men felt their lives were endangered, so they killed the ape. De Silva did not believe them because the ground was dry. Yet he felt that he could not punish them: he needed them to keep working at a time when they could have easily gotten jobs as loggers, for this was a time in which deforestation in Sabah accelerated.

Barbara Harrisson, when speaking about it with me in Friesland (Leeuwarden) decades later, was convinced that 'De Silva could not punish the civil servant. He was Ceylonese, just like de Silva. De Silva could not punish his own countryman on the command of a British colonial.'[8] De Silva figured that it had been his Malay worker, not the Ceylonese. Years later, De Silva was forced to retire and a Malay officer took his place. This to me begs the question to what extent postcolonial racial politics might inform De Silva's memory as they apparently did Barbara Harrisson's? We cannot really know.

Cynthia died in a different set of circumstances than Arthur. Her death is illustrative of what can happen through liberation following decolonization. She was seen examining a clay mound with a hole in it. Subsequently, her hand became swollen and blue, then her entire arm. She soon died, most likely because a cobra had inhabited the hole in the clay mound.

If we think the cause of her death was a lack of planning, of having too much freedom when she was insufficiently trained for the responsibility such freedom would entail, then Cynthia was a victim of neglect. But if we recognize Cynthia's pursuit of curiosity as her own experimentation, we see her as a subject experiencing liberation and freedom of movement before her death.

I am inclined to see Cynthia's actions as experimentation. At the very least, she pursued her curiosity. Experimentation, whether with orangutans or with decolonization, entails trying things out and building ad hoc plans. It is not about resolutions. Nor can it end future inquiries into what other plans might arise. Indeed, experiments open other possibilities: some hopeful, some fatal, and oftentimes combinations of both.

7 Quoted in Parreñas 2018. For more on running amok, see Good and Good 2001.

8 Quoted on page 173 of Parreñas 2018.

Part 2: Excavation (Ceramics)

In the aftermath of official decolonization, Barbara Harrisson was at a crossroads. Staying on Borneo in either Sabah or Sarawak was not a possibility. Conversations with the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the chance of a primatology position at a Max Planck Institute in West Germany led to nowhere. Instead, she took the opportunity to pursue a PhD with Stanley O'Connor, Professor of Southeast Asian Art History at Cornell University, whom she had met in Sarawak when he was conducting archaeological field research. In a *festschrift* written in celebration of her advisor's retirement and published in the year 2000, her words offer inspiration for how to think of the work of museums as something other than extractive exploitation.

Fig. 1: Barbara Harrisson for her PhD dissertation studied the craft of pottery on Borneo, similar to what is depicted here in 1948 in West-Kalimantan. Pottery was a multicultural cottage industry comprising of Chinese potting families and Dayak consumers. Collection Nationaal Museum Van Wereldculturen, Coll.nr. TM-10014150.

In this section, I want us to think about the potential of excavation as something that is not about the cruel taking, looting, or coercive deprivation of meaningful cultural effects, but something akin to its root sense of hollowing out, which comes from the Latin *cavo* for hollow which – for the philologically inclined –is rooted in *keue,* a proto-Indo-European word for vault/hole. Instead of thinking of a hollow as something lacking, of it being an absence that is sharply felt as theft, I instead want to think of hollowing or excavation in a capacity to hold things for safekeeping, like a vault or hole.

Here it helps to know Barbara Harrisson's academic specialization. Her PhD thesis was not about the Hindu-Buddhist relics of empires past that had been fetishized by colonial-era Southeast Asian art collectors. She was instead interested in something more modest, but nevertheless significant. Her dissertation *Pusaka: Heirloom Jars of Borneo*[9] was about large ceramic jars that were first manufactured in continental Asia (mostly present-day China) and traded for harvests and jungle produce on Borneo starting from around the eighth century in the common era. Bornean travellers from the interior would strap these jars to their bodies for the long treks from coastal entrepots and used them to store drinking water, grain, and sometimes as vessels for ancestral bones. They were passed on as heirlooms and many of them would eventually be replaced by reproductions made in the nineteenth century and later by a Chinese diaspora of potters who migrated to Borneo. Her research included considerations of shards (broken pots), intact pots purchased by and donated to museums like the Princessehof and Borneo's museums, field work with multigenerational Chinese potter families in Sabah, and Dayaks whose families had once owned heirloom pots but who often had sold them to buy newly available goods like motorized rice threshers. Barbara Harrisson, like her PhD advisor Stan O'Connor, saw Southeast Asia as 'a cosmopolitan world threaded together by the great web of regional and international sea-born Asian trade'.[10] Barbara Harrisson described herself as a PhD student as having been 'overexposed to field research' and banished by her advisor to 'the dungeons of Olin Library' so as to have 'reading references to technical processes'.[11] Her recounting of how she first met her advisor attends to his technical processes of doing archaeology as an art historian on Borneo. As we look at this passage of two paragraphs, we should pay attention to her word choice. Excavating for her seems to be synonymous with gleaning, a word that anthropologists Amiel Bize[12] and Xenia Charkaev[13] use to describe the practice of marginalized people in claiming leftover or waste.

9 Harrisson 1984.
10 O'Connor 1986, 2.
11 Harrisson 2000, 87.
12 Bize 2020, 462–86.
13 Charkaev 2023.

Harrisson writes the following:

> 'Tropical rains and floods continually disturbed the contours of Borneo's landscape. Erosion, deposits of sand and silt, and lush vegetation had fragmented the sparse remains of human industry. One **sifted and gleaned** through them in the heat of the day. Small details were difficult to recover.
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> Reconstructions of Southeast Asian prehistory are usually founded on archaeological data. But evidence **gleaned** from beliefs captured in the folklore, costumes, and traditions of the various peoples inhabiting the land are equally important. This is especially true in Borneo where human culture is so rich and varied. Any person can identify him or herself in any number of ways. Whether originally Malay, Chinese, or a member of a Dayak group, he or she can consider him or herself a Sarawakian, an Indonesian, a Malaysian, a Christian, a Muslim, or the follower of a local cult. Human culture in Borneo is complexly plural. **To gain access to it, to accept and understand it, meant feeling one's way through this variety**. For Stan [O'Connor], the art of this region included boulders carved with symbols and figures, the relics of graves temples or shrines, and overwhelmingly the remnants of an iron industry as well as imported ceramics. Stoneware, porcelain, and beads of glass or stone, all shipped from across the South China Sea, were the most commonly **excavated** artifacts. In the past, these objects indicated wealth to the local people. Explaining this to the contemporary workmen while they recovered mounds of dirt brought forth much hilarity.'[14]

The subject of interests here to both Stan O'Connor and Barbara Harrisson are not just material objects divorced from folklore, costumes, and traditions or a list that could also include aesthetics, taste, artistic flairs, creative quirks, histories, dreams, or any other of the myriad social or cultural forms that compose what we call culture. There is also no claim to present items holistically as if they can stand as totalizing representations of a culture or people. The modesty and recognition of the limitations of what is ever knowable is expressed through the idea of 'feeling one's way'. Likewise, there is recognition that people hold myriad identities and senses of self, that there is not a locking in or capturing of complex selves under a singular label. And perhaps more importantly, as suggested by the workmen who laughed at the idea that their buckets of discard were once signs of wealth, that the things that an art historian or ceramics expert or an archaeologist may value is not intrinsically valuable, that discard or waste can have meaning and value.

14 Harrisson 2000, 86.

Conclusion

How can the question of when care becomes cruel help reconsider kinship in the ethnographic museum? I am wary of offering any prescription or remedy, precisely because a prescription or to-do list assumes a triumphant plan for success. Like Myanthi Fernando in this volume, I do not think that we can ever really know anything with certainty. Instead, what I think we can have is experimentation, when we try things out without knowing if they will succeed, and excavation, when we create a hollow space to hold things or ideas that may be valuable or may just be laughable waste. Whether you see the ethnographic museum like Miriam Ticktin in this volume, who sees the museum as holding the debris of ongoing racist violence, or whether you, like the artist Yuki Kihara in her installation *Going Native,* see the museum as a way of engaging ideas of the Pacific from iconic locations of Dutch colonial heritage: the ethnographic museum fosters careful sifting, recovering, gleaning, and safe-keeping of objects which in turn creates value. Whether such objects had been treasured or discarded or perhaps even both, the museum in its ideal form works as a vessel that can hold them.

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