

The ultimate culture clash ...

by Donal MacIntyre



We were entertaining our new house guests over tea and biscuits. Their conversational **gambits** were proving to be somewhat unusual. ‘How much did you pay for your wife?’ Samuel coolly asked me. ‘I, er ... I ... well ...’, I spluttered. ‘Do you mind if your husband have baby with another woman?’ Samuel’s spouse Christina asked my pregnant wife Ameera, who almost choked on her tea. ‘Who is the boss?’ asked Samuel, casting a knowing glance towards Ameera.

I think it’s fair to say that crocodile-hunting polygamists from Papua New Guinea would add a certain **frisson** to any polite London soirée. Samuel and Christina, who is one of his two wives, are members of the 250-strong Insect tribe – hunter-gatherers. They hunt crocodiles with spears and **stalk** wild boar with bows and arrows. They speak their own language, Ngala, and practise polygamy, paying for wives’ dowries with seashells. One tribesman has 12 wives, another is said to have 112 children.



Part 1

I first met them last year as I travelled the world to observe how ancient cultures and tribes were engaging with the **ever-encroaching** modern world. I lived in their remote village, Swagup, ate their food, shared their shelters, and mined their intimate family secrets.

The tribe had everything they wanted. The village's witch doctor serviced all medical and spiritual requirements. Everything else – fish, boar, fruit, building, and hunting materials – was gathered from the jungle. The tribespeople thought of their home as a land of plenty – a paradise that has provided their livelihood for thousands of years. They had **robustly** defended their culture against all-comers. Their one **concession** was allowing missionaries to school them in basic English. The village school still teaches them the language today.

The tribespeople revealed themselves to be as curious about my world as I was about theirs. They **bombarded** me with questions about Britain and our 'chief' – or the Queen, as we call her. The tribe's own chief, a rather colourful character called Joseph, is elected by majority every five years and carries supreme authority.

Sitting in his wooden, three-storey palace, the chief and I got to talking and, to return the overwhelming hospitality that they had shown me, I invited him and his **kin** to undertake the 12,000-mile journey to my home in Wimbledon, south-west London. The tribespeople have never before travelled beyond their local **stamping ground**. Making the journey were Joseph, Samuel, Christina, Steven and one of his three wives, Delma, and James. Together they made up the Swagup Six, a party of Stone Age travellers coming to a microchip world. 'I don't know what magic they have in Britain, but I'm about to find out,' the chief declared.



Part 2

At Heathrow airport, every escalator was met with terror and every lift with suspicion until one of them, usually Steven, an expert crocodile hunter, **ventured forth**, followed by the rest of the tribe. From Terminal 4, with spears on their backs and bows over their shoulders, the Swagup Six bravely ventured into our world.

My guests were fascinated by everyday scenes and situations. They believed the barren winter trees were dead. The battery-powered cries of my daughter's doll drew shrieks from the women. Samuel and Christina were interested in how Ameera and I related to each other. They seemed to suspect it was Ameera who wore the trousers – unthinkable in their world. But whatever Samuel and Christina secretly thought, they maintained a public front of broad-mindedness. The chief's guiding principle was: 'When in London ... '

Nonetheless, some of the capital's tourist spots proved a challenge. At the London Eye, the tribe held congress in the shadow of the huge wheel. 'It not meant for humans,' was the consensus. Eventually the chief decided that they should try to enjoy the bird's-eye view of London. When their capsule reached the summit, the chief asked for our 'spirit house' to be pointed out. He found the great dome of St Paul's Cathedral remarkable – not for its grandeur but for its **diminutive stature**. 'In our village, no building can be bigger than the spirit house,' he said.

However, the London Underground inspired awe. Astounded by the enormity of the network, James was convinced the Underground was built first, with the rest of London built on top later.

Spirits were also raised by the prospect of a visit to Buckingham Palace. As a tribal leader in a Commonwealth country, Joseph regards himself as the Queen's representative. We dutifully put in a request for a meeting, but unfortunately it was declined. In his part of the world, he is a king. Here, sadly, he is just another tourist.



After our trip to London, we spent some time in Wales, where the group encountered snow for the first time. ‘This is strange sand that falls from the sky,’ the chief said. ‘When will it stop?’ However, they were soon throwing snowballs with **pinpoint accuracy**.

Their attitude and enthusiasm highlighted for me how **jaded** we have become, and how indifferent we are to wonderful sights on our own doorstep. The Swagup Six embraced our culture but without **renouncing** an ounce of their own. The goodbyes at Heathrow were emotional. ‘We come from the same pot,’ Samuel said, standing beside Christina. ‘What do you most miss from home?’ I asked. ‘My second wife,’ he said without a blink.



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