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Hulk Hogan in the Rainforest

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"Do you know Hulk Hogan?" The question came from a crowd of small boys who stood eyeing me with mild curiosity. I was returning to a longhouse in northern Sarawak, in the Malaysian part of Borneo, where I had lived in the mid-1970s, and I was finding it a bewildering experience. On the one hand, I recognized friendly faces everywhere, and the familiar pace of longhouse life. On the other, I knew none of the young people, and the new longhouse was unrecognizable. In the 1970s, the building that then housed a community of some 300 people had been made largely out of materials taken from the jungle, which stretched unbroken for miles in every direction. It had been an imposing structure, with its great ironwood pilings and massive, shingled roof. Its dark interior was always mysterious and welcoming after hours of river travel under the tropical sun. The longhouse I now stood in had sawn planks on the floors, shiny Formica panelling in various pastel shades on the walls, and everywhere there were glass louvred windows (Figure 1.1).

I was not at all surprised by the boy's abrupt conversational opener. In local languages, there are no formulae of greeting, no "hello" or "good morning." Moreover, introductions are out of place, since a certain familiarity must be established first, before you learn anyone's name. Consequently, conversations routinely begin without preliminaries. In the 1970s, the commonest question addressed to me by complete strangers had been, "How did the Americans get to the moon?" so I was ready for the direct question. But I was not ready for Hulk Hogan. Who was he, and why did these kids think I should know him? My distracted mind, still struggling to come to terms with glass and Formica, searched in vain for an answer. It took me a long time to recover the image of a man with a weight-lifter's torso, long blond hair, and Viking whiskers – a celebrity in the world of professional wrestling. By then the boys had lost interest and wandered away.

Figure 1.1 On the verandah of a modern longhouse. Note the Formica siding and glass windows. Once the scene of communal activity, it is now abandoned except for a few children.

At the simplest level, my experience in central Borneo underlines what we all know: that there is no corner of the world beyond the reach of the global economy. On coral atolls in the South Seas or in the highlands of New Guinea, teenagers press to their ears the same CD players as their peers in Tokyo or Los Angeles. Nor do political blocs impede the flow of goods as they used to; the same equipment is seen on the streets of Beijing and Hanoi. The music being played is promiscuously transnational, as Western rock stars incorporate Indonesian gamelan sounds, and Hong Kong producers imitate the resulting fusion, or confusion.

The result, however – and this is the premise with which I begin – is not a grey global uniformity, and that is because the process is not a passive one. Innovations and novelties, whether technical or cultural, epoch-making or trivial, do not simply diffuse like dye dropped in water. Instead, different cultures are receptive or resistant to them, each in its own way. Moreover, as anthropologists noted a century ago, every act of borrowing is in effect a reinvention. They were thinking of pottery and patrilineal clans, but their insight applies equally well to blue jeans and democracy when new

cultural cohesion comes into play, blurring old ethnic contrasts and creating new ones.

Commodity Fetishism

The boy's question caught me off guard, but I was ready the next time Hulk Hogan's name came up – and it did. By then I had had my memory refreshed by his image, jumping out at me everywhere. Hulk Hogan waved his fists from the backs of T-shirts, and glared out from magazine covers tacked up on longhouse walls. He was a veritable cult figure in upriver parts of Sarawak. But why him of all people, with his piercing blue eyes and startling blondness?

The first comparison that came to mind was a figure from Mexican-American folklore. Among people as universally black-haired and brown-eyed as Southeast Asians, the devil – or one version of the devil – is portrayed as blond. The obvious reference is to animosities with Anglo-American neighbours dating back to the war of 1846 and the Alamo, but the symbolism is more subtle than that. The blond devil is not so much vindictive as deeply seductive. Immaculately dressed, and with the most polished of manners, he is particularly irresistible to women. He represents the corrupting power of materialism, the desire for individual success and wealth, against what are seen as the traditional Mexican values of family solidarity and cooperation. The blond devil embodies Marx's "commodity fetishism" in that he substitutes relationships with material things for relationships between people.

Was it possible that Hulk Hogan meant something of the same kind in Borneo? He did not seem very seductive or polished to me, but his popularity did coincide with an unprecedented influx of manufactured goods. What had happened between my fieldwork in the 1970s and my return visits in the 1990s was the commercial exploitation of the forest on a massive scale. Huge earthmoving equipment had been used to cut roads deep into the interior, allowing the majestic trees of the rainforest to be hauled out on trucks of proportionate size. Even though only a tiny trickle of the enormous profits made from logging flowed back to the longhouses in the form of wages, it had been enough to transform communities that had formerly been remote and largely self-sufficient. Was it possible that the fist-waving Hulk Hogan expressed some awareness of the disruption this transformation had caused to community life, some half-articulated awareness of the dangers of materialism? Finding no word in local languages to translate "materialism," I began asking about the prices of things, hoping to move from their literal to their spiritual costs. I had hit on a rich vein of discourse; everyone wanted to talk about the price of things – everything from canned food to cellular telephones – but no one had anything to say about the communal costs. Nowhere did I detect any resistance to consumerism, only

the most cheerful appetite. I probed; did not wealth divide people and break up the community? – blank looks. As I knew perfectly well, there have always been rich and poor in the longhouse, and the latter were always looked down on. Those without prestige goods (beads, pottery) obtained by international trade, or enough rice to eat, were simply *dja'at,* "bad." I tried again: didn't the money now circulating come from the destruction of the rain forest, their ancestral home? Yes, they agreed fervently, and they had not received their proper cut of the profits.

Upriver People

For the people I met, the destruction of the rainforest was not associated with the West or with the colonial period. It occurred after independence, the conglomerates that profited from it were mostly Asian, and the politicians who lined their own pockets were from the coast. It was those circumstances that forced onto the people of the longhouses a new awareness of themselves as an ethnic group, and a disadvantaged minority at that. The name they use to describe themselves is *Orang Ulu,* literally Upriver People.

The dissatisfactions of Upriver People were often phrased in terms of an unflattering contrast between the current regime and earlier ones. When older people waxed nostalgic about the colonial era, when longhouse communities were largely left to manage their own affairs, young people did not contradict them. In their dealings with Upriver People, they said, the English had always been *terus,* "straightforward," dropping their arms in a chopping motion, while those who now controlled the government were *gayang-gayang,* "devious," and here they made a serpentine motion. Perhaps we should not make too much of such rosy-tinted memories, especially as they were produced for an Englishman, and certainly their feelings about the colonial era are more complicated than these gestures imply. To start with, it is not clear that being *terus* implies only trustworthiness. At times I noticed that it took on a colouring of stupidity, of not having enough brains or culture to be subtle about anything. Nevertheless, the frequent expression of nostalgia for a simpler time did appear to constitute an element of resistance to the current regime. I heard frustrated government officials remark that the enthusiasm of Upriver People for *merdeka* – freedom or independence – was less than whole-hearted.

Taking into account these attitudes to the West, Hulk Hogan is unconvincing as an anti-hero or villain. But can we see him as a positive hero, a sort of quasi-supernatural ally? Upriver People are explicit about their fears that, in a rapidly changing world, they will not be able to hold their own against the numerous and aggressive coastal people, particularly the business-savvy Chinese, who immigrated in large numbers at the end of the nineteenth century, and the Malays, who dominate government. They lament

their lack of success in commercial ventures, and wonder out loud whether this is a result of their own failings, or the underhand tactics of Chinese and Malays, or the fecklessness of their leaders, who have so often sold them out. In politics, they remark on how few they are, and even that few easily divided. How do Hulk Hogan's powers fit into this pattern of dread and suspicion?

Perhaps there is a similar logic to the conversion of Upriver People to Christianity in the last few decades. In some way not entirely clear to me, this conversion was related to a dawning awareness of their peripheral place in a complex world, an awareness forced upon them first by a world war, and then by the insistent intrusion of the world economy. But what is interesting here is that Upriver People avoided the most actively proselytizing religion of the coast, the religion of the Malays: Islam. Ideologically, they leapfrogged, as it were, over their most threatening neighbours. If Hulk Hogan's blondness is iconic of the West, then his cult expresses an awareness, not of the perils of materialism, but of the marginalization of Upriver People in a neocolonial order that has cheated them of the fruits of "progress."

Plus ça change?

If Hulk Hogan is to be taken seriously as hero, however, he will have to be assimilated to all the existing Upriver heroes who similarly defeated their enemies and got things done in a satisfyingly direct way. Each community has its own favourites, whose deeds are recounted in long epics. For example, Lamusak was a warrior so tough that iron could not pierce him. In one battle, as the story goes, he stabbed so many foes with his spear – which in the Upriver mode was also a blowpipe and so had a small hole along its length – that blood squirted out at the handle end.

At first I resisted the notion of Hogan's heroic assimilation because the values and behaviour of Upriver People are so completely at odds with those displayed in professional wrestling. In longhouse communities, men are admired who are *sagem,* or "vigorous," a word connoting the edgy, violent quality of the warrior, but at the same time have the ability to work steadily at heavy tasks, and for common goals. Men should be quick-witted rather than quick-tempered, and above all else, modest. Any hint of boasting, of having a "swollen nose," immediately destroys a man's standing. By contrast, the wrestling bouts that Upriver People watch are often preceded by interviews in which contestants wave their fists at their opponents and make childish threats, while the camera zooms in to get close-ups of their contorted faces. Sometimes the contestants' managers, in dinner jackets and red bow ties, fall to insulting one another, and waving *their* fists. It is all very far removed from proper longhouse behaviour.

However, on further reflection I realized that the heroes of Upriver myth also frequently fail to conform to social norms. Indeed, they invert them; they throw tantrums, abduct women, and lay curses on their own people. They also do the impossible: they climb to the heavens, and have the hubris to steal from the gods. In one sequence of stories, the hero Ureng improbably encounters the Sultan of Brunei alone in the forest, and taunts him with his superior prowess. They engage in a series of competitions of strength, seeing who can cut down the most palm trees with one blow of the sword, or punch holes in the trunks of hardwood trees – behaviour not far from the posturing of wrestlers. Hogan's posturing is in fact less extreme than that of other fighters; although he does his share of muscle flexing and pretended rages, he occasionally smiles, or makes a joke against himself. Much less incoherent than some of his supposed rivals for the title of world champion, he has lent his name to various social causes, and has been described, ironically no doubt, as the thinking man's wrestler.

Like the wrestlers' postures, the costumes seen in the ring have no counterpart in Upriver dress, which tends to be simple. But the wrestlers' face paint and hangman's masks are worn by those who play the villain's roles, not the heroes. They have their counterpart in the monsters that the Upriver heroes encounter, all well provided with horns, fangs, and scales. Meanwhile, the heroes of wrestling tend to be clean-cut youths.

Television in the Longhouse

To the extent that Hogan is seen by Upriver People as a new version of a traditional mythic hero, his blondness becomes irrelevant. Indeed, twenty years earlier, another cult figure was much in evidence, one who was not blond. In those days, the face on T-shirts belonged to Bruce Lee, and the stock interpretation of Lee's popularity was that he was a nimble Asian who defeated all comers, including great hulking Americans. What distinguishes the 1990s from the 1970s, however, is not only the substitution of a Caucasian hero for a Chinese one (Lee, like Hogan, was an American), but the way in which images of the new hero have proliferated. Hulk Hogan is everywhere in a way that Bruce Lee never was.

To see Bruce Lee in action in the 1970s, you had to go to the cinema, and there was just one in the entire district in which I lived. I remember the theatre well because it was, for two years, the only source of passive entertainment available to me. It was a great gloomy barn of a building, depressing in daylight, but at night the lights of its canopy always drew a crowd. The inside was seldom swept, and the detritus of last night's crowd – peanut shells and soda cans – was always underfoot. The usual fare fell into four well-tried genres. There were Hindi family dramas, and B-grade spy movies. More popular than either of these were Chinese costume dramas featuring elaborate sword-fights, but the most popular genre of all was a modern-

Figure 1.2 High-speed launches waiting to take passengers upriver.

dress version of the Chinese drama involving martial arts. This was, of course, the genre that Bruce Lee made his own, and during his career perhaps a hundred Upriver People could see him on any given night.

By comparison, Hulk Hogan could command a far bigger audience in his heyday. What made him unavoidable was an innovation of river travel, in the express launches that nowadays regularly ply far upriver (Figure 1.2). Outside they are sleek and impressive, but inside, there are only rows of hard seats set close together, and, for entertainment on long trips, a large video screen. Since diesel engines occupy the rear half of the launch, soundtracks are usually inaudible, and this may help to explain the preponderance of professional wrestling on VCRs in launches. No plot summary is necessary, and wherever you get on or off, the primal struggle goes on as timelessly as in the *Mahabharata*.

Wrestling tapes are also popular in the longhouse. By the late 1980s, most family apartments in longhouses had a television set. Electrical power was usually available only in the evening. Some prosperous houses were wired throughout, and had large generators to serve the entire community. Usually housed in front of the longhouse, their distant hum is inoffensive, and by common convention, a little ritual is enacted every evening at ten, when the lights are blinked off for a moment, to give warning that in ten minutes

they will go off for good. At the signal, people rush to find their flashlights, and visitors scurry off home. The contrast with twenty years ago, when socializing could neither be refused nor terminated, is striking.

Shrewdly, timber companies often provided longhouses with diesel generators, and kept them running while they were actively cutting the forest in the neighbourhood – a convenient opiate, no doubt. After the timber companies moved on, many communities could not provide the necessary maintenance, and individuals reverted to small two-stroke generators, one for each family that could afford it. The whine of small generators became the background to all longhouse gatherings, and finding fuel for them was a constant chore. As the medium of sociality, petrol has replaced liquor.

Video equipment is also common in longhouses. However, tapes are not easily available so people watch them over and over again. In one longhouse I visited in 1993, the same tape was played every night for a week, with a variable audience of adults and children. People borrow tapes from one another so tapes do circulate slowly, but there is, as yet, no organized system of distribution.

Many videotapes circulating upriver show professional wrestling bouts, so I quizzed people on why they are so popular. Perhaps not surprisingly, the results were at first disappointing, but I did manage eventually to draw an old friend, a senior member of his community, into reflecting on the popularity of wrestling. His first thought was that it was the novelty of the thing, a passing craze. I pointed out that wrestling had been just as much in evidence during my previous visit a couple of years earlier. After a pause, he tried a different tack, talking about the amazement people felt when they saw a wrestler jump directly onto the body of his opponent, so that the floor of the ring bent under the impact, or when they saw someone throw a kick, or slam with the elbow, or twist a limb, apparently with all the force that could be mustered. The recipient of this treatment showed pain all right, but almost always got up soon afterward, and probably turned the tables on his torturer. How could ordinary human beings take such punishment? Why was there no blood? Why weren't people disabled, and carried from the ring with torn muscles, or broken ribs, or worse?

I thought I knew the answer to this question, and it had to do with stagecraft. The ring bounced so much precisely because the kinetic energy of the wrestler's leap had to be absorbed by the planks if it was not to break bones. Punches and slams were pulled, and agony was faked. The truth is, however, that I do not fully understand how the performance works. Surely there are mistakes, and wrestlers must take some punishing blows. Can it always be that the winner is selected in advance? Don't contestants genuinely lose their tempers occasionally, and go after their opponents with all the destructive force they can manage? There must be some boundary line between show and contest, and I do not know where it lies, or how it is

marked. In any event, I did not register my scepticism because I had already learned that Upriver folk did not want to hear it. What is interesting about my friend's introspection is the suggestion that wrestlers are not ordinary mortals. Instead, they are like Lamusak and all the other heroes of Upriver epics, with bodies so tough they can withstand what would destroy ordinary people. In this way, he confirmed an element of continuity between new and traditional heroes.

My friend was still turning it over in his mind, however. What he wanted to talk about next was the powerlessness of experts in the "martial arts" to touch these heroes. Those clever Chinese, he said, the Bruce Lees of this world, could jump and twirl, but their chops and gouges and flying kicks would not damage Hulk Hogan. But let Hogan, slow-moving as he might be, get a grip on the martial artist, and the latter's fate would be sealed. He would be broken like firewood. Once again, I have no idea whether this is true. I would have said that a karate expert could certainly down anybody with one well-placed blow. Nevertheless, this potential confrontation between styles was often imagined, and its outcome confidently predicted. It was exploited by the local promoters of a 1993 tour, who arranged a brilliant publicity stunt in a coastal town. The wrestlers, blond and boyish, appeared where people gather at all hours to eat at food stalls. There, they were threatened by a supposedly enraged local martial arts champion, who resented being upstaged. The wrestlers responded by throwing out their chests, and inviting him to do his worst. He chopped and kicked at them without result, until, tiring, one of his fists was grabbed in the beefy paw of a wrestler, and he was slowly crushed into submission. Then the wrestlers bought him a drink. It made the front page of the local newspaper, with a picture of the heroes. Everywhere I went that day, Upriver People recalled other occasions when martial arts experts had been humbled by professional wrestlers.

It is such a confrontation, real or simulated, but in any case idealized, that convinces me that the replacement of Bruce Lee by Hulk Hogan as an Upriver cult figure is more than a media accident. There is a double opposition, not only between East and West, but also between technique and simplicity. Martial arts entail a long learning process, with submission to a master and promotion through an elaborately ranked hierarchy, marked by the variously coloured belts, and then black belts of the first dan, second dan, and so on. This social mode is associated with the coast, which has for hundreds of years absorbed the influences of the civilizations of India, China, and the Middle East, and with coastal people, whose relatively authoritarian and status-conscious society Upriver People have had ample opportunity to observe. By contrast, the wrestlers simply "are" what they seem; their bodies and their physical presence are the whole story. I often noticed how fascinated Upriver People were with sheer size. In the towns on the coast,

where foreign oilfield workers were much in evidence, Upriver People would follow particularly large Texans around, exclaiming about their height. Professional wrestlers provoke the same fascination with their towering bulk, their massive arms and thighs.

The same artlessness is apparent in, for example, cuisine. Coastal people make a joke of the monotony of Upriver food. Meals comprise a mountain of starch, rice usually, but sometimes sago if times are hard, with minimal side dishes, perhaps only a plate of salt. Boiled bitter grasses are the next step up, and then watery fish soup. On special occasions, hosts go to a lot of trouble to add a variety of game, fish, and roots, but the starch basis predominates. I once teased people in the longhouse about their dull food, and I was surprised by the warmth of their response. "We are Upriver People," they said defiantly, eyes flashing, "and we eat everything." It is not true, of course; like everyone else, they have a classification of what and is not edible. What they meant, I believe, is that they are people who do not pay much attention to elaborate cuisines. That is the province of coastal peoples, who get served up to them, along with their spicy dishes, a system that traps some people in the kitchen and everyone in some niche or other.

The claim that Upriver People make of being simple folk is a moral statement, an assertion of the superiority of the direct and unstudied. In this regard, Upriver folk perhaps see an affinity between themselves and the West. If the English character is *terus,* or straightforward, so is the Upriver lifestyle, and that includes the word's less positive connotations. Upriver folk have seen, to their own chagrin, how easily they are outdone in devious things like business and politics by other Asians. Hulk Hogan has been embraced by the people of the longhouses because of the particular style of his heroism – regardless of the fact that this "heroism" is a part of the profitable artifice of professional wrestling. The blond champion seems to reflect back to Upriver People qualities they cherish in their own tradition and perceive as increasingly threatened: personal autonomy, directness, and stoicism. Westerners might be hard put to see themselves in the same light, but in the Bornean corner of the global village it is not Hogan's cultural origins that are at issue. His victories over boastful and devious opponents offer to his admirers, in the midst of a diminished present, the echo of an heroic past.