

Chimpanzee culture wars

Nicolas Langlitz

Princeton University Press, 2020. 352 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-20428-4. \$26.95 (paper/hardcover/ebook).

The idea that nonhuman primates are cultural beings has a long history. Its roots can be found in the work of Kinji Imanishi, the founding father of Japanese primatology. Many readers of this journal will find some of Imanishi's nonevolutionary views unorthodox. Nevertheless, Imanishi's suggestion that primates possess culture was apparently confirmed by his student, Masao Kawai, who reported that Japanese macaques provisioned with sweet potatoes started to wash them in the sea. The behavior appeared to be invented by a single monkey and then spread via social learning. The story of the potato-washing Japanese macaques is now widely known and planted the seed for future research on primate culture.

In 1975, Bill McGrew and Caroline Tutin visited the Mahale Mountains in Tanzania where Toshisada Nishida had been conducting research on chimpanzees for many years. They had just completed several months studying chimpanzees nearby in Gombe National Park. At Mahale, they witnessed chimpanzees groom each other simultaneously, with each individual using one hand while raising their free hands above their heads and clasping them together. This innocuous observation surprised McGrew and Tutin as they had never seen the Gombe chimpanzees groom this way. In a subsequent paper, they considered alternative explanations for the difference in grooming behavior displayed by the Mahale and Gombe chimpanzees. They tentatively concluded that the "grooming hand-clasp" reflected a social custom and potentially represented a case of cultural behavior. Over 40 years have elapsed since McGrew and Tutin made their provocative proposal that chimpanzees possess culture. In *Chimpanzee Culture Wars* Nicolas Langlitz, a sociocultural anthropologist, recounts the ensuing debate over this thorny issue.

The book provides an ethnographic account of three key players in the debate, Christophe Boesch, Mike Tomasello, and Tetsuro Matsuzawa. Langlitz was given unprecedented access to research conducted by Boesch at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (MPI-EVA). He accompanied Boesch to his field sites in the Ivory Coast and Gabon to furnish a first-hand description of what it is like to observe wild chimpanzees. These observations have convinced Boesch that chimpanzees are cognitively complex creatures, whose cultural exploits rival our own. In contrast, Tomasello, Boesch's colleague at the MPI-EVA, rejects these claims. Tomasello's experiments with captive chimpanzees suggest that there are major differences between the cognitive and

learning capabilities of chimpanzees and humans. This precludes the possibility that chimpanzees possess culture as we conceive of it in humans. Langlitz concludes his ethnographic account by traveling to Japan and Guinea, where Matsuzawa welcomed him to his lab and field site. Matsuzawa's blend of lab and field experiments with captive and wild chimpanzees has led him to adopt a middle ground on the issue of chimpanzee culture that lies somewhere between the polarized views of Boesch and Tomasello.

Chimpanzee Culture Wars covers considerable material and will appeal to multiple audiences. As a historian of science, Langlitz has written a readily accessible historical account. Science studies scholars will learn that those who study chimpanzees do not do so in the same way, as the different disciplinary backgrounds of chimpanzee researchers influence their work. Langlitz also has plenty to say to his fellow sociocultural anthropologists, who rejected culture as a concept around the same time McGrew and Tutin hypothesized that culture is not restricted to humans. He makes a plea for renewed dialog between sociocultural and biological anthropologists, who have largely gone their separate ways, urging them to come together to consider our place in nature and why we have come to dominate the planet. Primatologists will find that Langlitz has left few stones unturned. I was pleased to see, for example, a description of Jeff Galef's analysis of the sweet potato washing story, which casts doubt on it as an example of animal culture. Alternatively, Boesch's criticisms regarding the ecological validity of experiments conducted with captive chimpanzees make one pause and reconsider the results of these studies.

Despite its impressive coverage, *Chimpanzee Culture Wars* may disappoint a few readers for different reasons, some of which Langlitz acknowledges. First, the work of two researchers featured in the book, Boesch and Matsuzawa, is given in depth treatment. Both, to their credit, gave Langlitz unfettered access. Tomasello, by contrast, failed to open his lab, and Langlitz was only able to interview him. As a consequence, the description of Tomasello's research is thin in comparison. Second, the ethnographic approach adopted by Langlitz involves a few case studies. This is fine as far as it goes, but it ignores the bigger picture created by others who have contributed to our understanding of these animals and have furnished different insights into the question of chimpanzee culture. Third, while the scope of chimpanzee research remains hidden, Langlitz fails to place his narrative within the broader framework of animal behavior. Many issues covered in this book

recapitulate the war that took place between field and lab workers in the study animal behavior during its early days. Like those discussed in this book, the ethologists and comparative psychologists who waged those battles had different theoretical backgrounds, worked in different conditions, employed different methods, and yet were able to mend fences.

Chimpanzee Culture Wars will end unsatisfyingly for some and provide hope to others. With the key figures portrayed in this book now retired, it is unclear whether the chimpanzee culture wars will be resolved or relegated to the dustbin of other unsettled intellectual debates fought in the past. Having only seen chimpanzees at two sites where their numbers are plummeting, Langlitz concludes that conserving chimpanzees in the wild is doomed. I prefer to remain optimistic and hope that the lives of our closest living relatives as revealed in this book will catalyze efforts to save them. And if anthropologists of varying stripes heed Langlitz's call for a rapprochement after their own culture and science wars, then *Chimpanzee Culture Wars* will have a salutary effect that extends far beyond what is covered in its pages.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

John Mitani: Writing-original draft.

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