



**BROTHER CHIMP
SISTER BONOBO**

Rights for Great Apes!



MAX (1974-2009)

Brother Chimpanzee, Sister Bonobo

The German performance artist Bazon Brock, in 1963, wanted to be included into the primate collection of the Frankfurt Zoo. His request was denied – despite rather modest requirements (“3 times daily food in, faeces out; keeper; typewriter, paper; ten cigarettes”). Some forty years later, in 2005, his idea came to fruition, when the London Zoo displayed volunteer specimens of *Homo sapiens* in an outdoor enclosure. With this, the management aimed to illustrate the place of humans in nature and our relationship with other species.

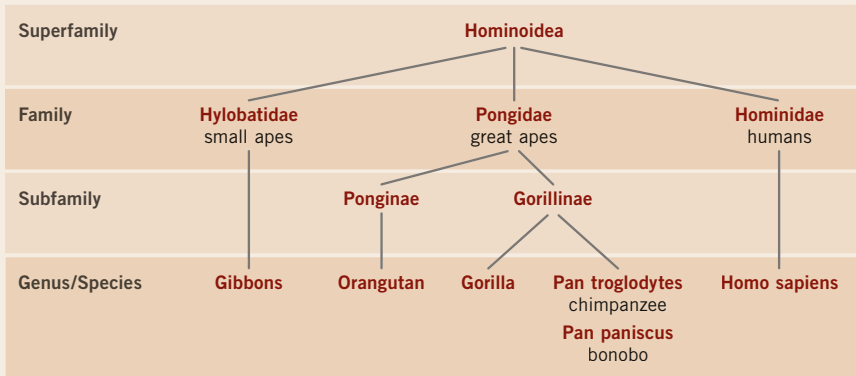
Some people might feel that such actions violate their “dignity” – instead of feeling enchanted about our connection to other life forms through billions of years of evolution. Thus, our existence is not made poorer, but richer, in that we descend from apes. More than that: not only *were* our ancestors apes, we still *are* apes. In the hierarchical terms of zoological taxonomy, humans belong to the order of primates, the superfamily of Hominoidea and the family of Hominidae, which includes great apes and humans.



KAMITI (*1987)

Nevertheless, the familiar distinction between great apes and humans is misleading, because it implies that all great apes (chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, orangutans) are more closely related to each other than to us. That notion, however, had to be discarded decades ago: the closest relatives of chimpanzees and bonobos are not gorillas, but humans. Metaphorically speaking, humans, chimpanzees and bonobos are siblings; their common cousins are the gorillas, while orangutans could be equated to cousins once removed.

We should not only acknowledge these biological facts, but it is high time to act on such findings – or else the phrase “our closest relatives” will remain a shallow platitude.



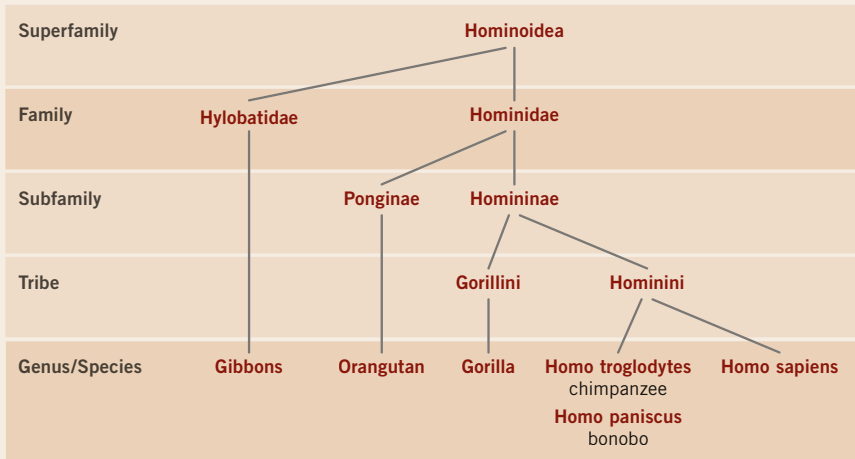
Until recently, gorillas were believed to be the closest relatives of chimpanzees and bonobos – as illustrated by the above graph of zoological classification.

Why *Pan* Should Become *Homo*

Genetic studies indicate that the lines leading to humans and orangutans split about 11 million years ago (mya), while gorillas went their own ways 6 mya. The last common ancestor of the genera *Pan* (chimpanzees, bonobos) and *Homo* (humans) lived about 5 mya. Chimpanzees and bonobos separated about 1.5 mya, while various archaic forms of humans were succeeded about 200,000 years ago by “modern humans” – *Homo*

sapiens. Still, precursors of today’s chimpanzees, bonobos and humans regularly cross-bred throughout millions of years, and probably until quite recently – a finding again backed up by molecular genetics.

The separation of *Homo* and *Pan* certainly reflects our deep-rooted desire to occupy a “special place in nature”. Because if the genomes of two beetles or two cats varied by

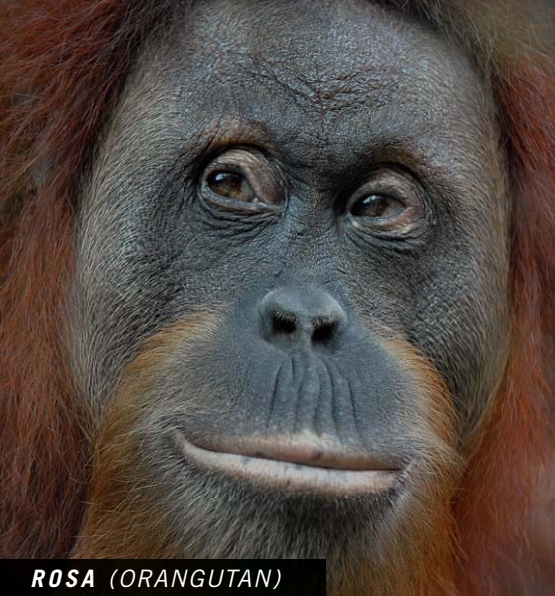


Today it is an undisputed fact that humans are the closest living relatives of chimpanzees and bonobos. The genome of these three species differs only by a fraction – between 6.4 and 0.6 percent, depending on the methods of measurement. Some scientists would therefore like to unite them in a single genus, *Homo* – a demand already implemented in this graph.

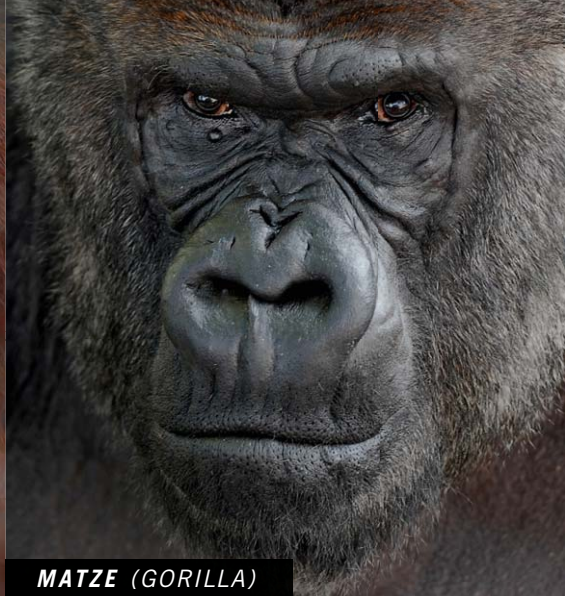
such fractions, they would certainly not be assigned to alternative genera. Thus, a demand requires appropriate consideration, which might seem strange at first glance – namely, to expand our genus. That would mean to rename chimpanzees as *Homo troglodytes* and bonobos as *Homo paniscus*.

Interestingly, this would restore the original classification of the founder

of zoological taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus, who, 250 years ago, included all ape-like creatures then known to him into the genus *Homo*. This “new-old” classification would not only be scientifically consistent, it would also have psychological knock-on effects – as it would deflate our exaggerated sense of importance and motivate us to grant our closest relatives the respect they deserve.



ROSA (ORANGUTAN)



MATZE (GORILLA)

Fundamental Rights for Great Apes!

Philosophers Peter Singer and Paola Cavalieri initiated “The Great Ape Project” in 1993. It demands to extend some of the privileges currently reserved for human beings to orangutans, gorillas, bonobos and chimpanzees: the right to life, the right to individual liberty, and the prohibition of torture. These demands are basic and they remain measured – for nobody requests a right to education for bonobos, voting rights for gorillas, data-protection rules for chimpanzees or a minimum age for sexual consent amongst orangutans. Supported by eminent primatologists, the Great Ape Project simply wants to expand the “community of equals” in certain aspects. For example, it should be unlawful to inflict pain on great apes for the alleged benefit of others – as is done in biomedical experiments. Moreover, their freedom

should not be arbitrarily deprived – although it is recognised that, for their own good, apes born in captivity might need to be kept in a zoo or in a sanctuary where they were brought to as orphans after hunters had killed their mothers. Defenders of the project would also like to see that great apes are recognized as “persons”, given that their complex mental landscape includes consciousness, emotions and sophisticated cognitive abilities such as forward planning and empathy.

Demanding basic equality for great apes is the logical extension of a historical trend. Ethical sentiments amongst humans were first restricted to one’s own relatives, then extended to clans, later to members of larger societies, and eventually to all people – with the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Why should we stop short here



MACOURI (CHIMPANZEE)



UKELA (BONOBO)

and ignore the interests of beings that experience suffering and joy in ways very similar to us – merely because they are not human beings? Humans have strived to defeat nationalism, racism and sexism. We believe the historic moment has arrived to overcome a further barrier – that of “speciesism”, which justifies discrimination based on species membership. (Of course, some would like to extend equality to many other animals as well – whereas others assert that we should presently only go as far as to include all great apes. In any case, working towards the goals of the Great Ape Project does not mean we stop considering the fair treatment of other animals.)

Interests of humans unable to speak up for themselves – such as infants or those afflicted by conditions such as Alzheimer’s – are represented by

guardians. Guardians can therefore also safeguard the legal rights of great apes. Legislation to this end has already been drafted in New Zealand and Spain. The Giordano Bruno Foundation supports these efforts, as they logically arise from its guiding principle of evolutionary humanism: as human beings, we are not the “summit of creation”, but organisms brought about by evolutionary processes. As Albert Schweitzer put it, we are “life that wants to live, in the midst of life that wants to live.” This premise should be reflected in a more responsible approach to the lives of non-human animals – and especially in our relationship with those organisms with whom we share a close evolutionary history.



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Text: Prof. Dr. Volker Sommer, Dr. Michael Schmidt-Salomon

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www.greatapeproject.de

Recommended reading:

Jutta Hof & Volker Sommer:

Apes Like Us.
Portraits of a Kinship.

Menschenaffen wie wir.
Portraits einer Verwandtschaft.

Edition Panorama 2010
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The Giordano Bruno Foundation is a think-tank for humanism and enlightenment, supported by many renowned scientists, philosophers and artists. Prizes of the foundation have as so far been bestowed upon evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and the initiators of the Great Ape Project, Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer.