

Chimpanzee Culture Wars: Rethinking Human Nature alongside Japanese, European, and American Cultural Primatologists

By Nicolas Langlitz

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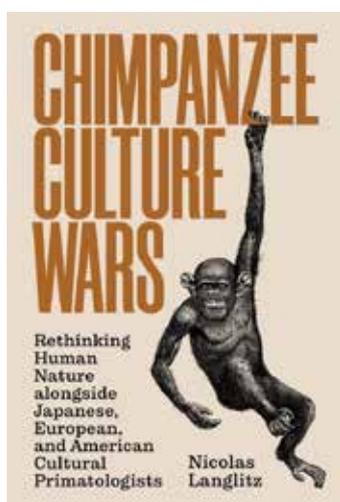
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When the editor-in-chief of *PAN* contacted me to review this book, I was somewhat hesitant. This was not because I was uninterested, but because it takes me a significant amount of time to read through a 352-page academic book in English. The reading process actually took three weeks, not simply because of my modest English ability, but also because the book contained rather

intricate philosophical discussions referring to Rousseau, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, etc. Nonetheless, I felt compelled to finish because the book's theme is quite relevant to my own research and many of the people mentioned in the text are familiar to me.

In brief, this book is an ethnography of “cultural primatologists” studying chimpanzees. Two famous primatologists, one from Europe and another from Japan, are the main figures of the book, although many other supporting individuals appear at relevant points. These two eminent scholars differ in various ways, which readers will learn in detail from the book, but I would like to highlight their commonalities. First, both study western subspecies of chimpanzees, field studies of which started later than those of eastern subspecies. Second, both belong to academic institutions where they were able to delve entirely into research, avoiding the need to devote time to undergraduate teaching. Third, the two were heads of their respective institutions while also conducting their own research projects (so, they have long been “alpha males!”). Fourth, their research teams are highly international in terms of membership. I draw attention to these points as I think they can affect the behaviors of researchers in the same way as the leaders' regional or cultural origins.

The descriptions of these two stalwarts by Langlitz were quite interesting and useful. Being Japanese myself, I was more familiar with the situation in Japan, but discovered a great deal from accounts of the Max Planck team. For example, it was interesting to learn of the very refined hygiene measures taken at the field site, the important role of a specialized statistician at the institute, the overhabituation problem of chimpanzees, and the tendency for students to rely exclusively on electronic devices to take data and even to read e-books in the forest (though this last point may be more of a generational difference than a cultural one), etc. Perhaps Western readers can learn likewise from descriptions of the Japanese side.

The aim of this book is not just to describe the behaviors of two human alpha males, of course. By going into the field sites and laboratories of these primatologists, Langlitz's ultimate aim is to understand the reflections of “cultural primatologists” from the viewpoint of cultural anthropology. While Langlitz is well aware that his observations are “very much skewed toward the researchers who allowed me” (p. 12), he looks more broadly at the controversy over whether or not chimpanzees have cultures by comparing the backgrounds of “field studies vs. laboratory studies” and “Euro–American studies vs. Japanese studies.”

I felt slightly awkward to find myself mentioned on p. 12 alongside big names of cultural primatology. While I felt honored to be grouped among such eminent scholars, honestly speaking this accolade should rather belong to Toshisada Nishida. Nishida also deserves to be mentioned more often elsewhere in the text, at least in my view. For example, Langlitz did not refer to Nishida even as a representative of Mahale. Instead, he repeatedly arranged “Goodall's Gombe” and “Itani's Mahale” consecutively (e.g., pp. 20–21, p. 59, p. 106). I do not deny the significance of Itani's role in the initial stage of Mahale research. Calling Mahale “Itani's,” however, seems almost like calling Gombe “Leakey's,” as it disregards those who actually worked on site. It was Nishida who stayed at Mahale for a long time, accomplishing the habituation of K and M group chimpanzees, and subsequently writing many influential papers about the site, and maintaining it over

the long-term. I understand that Langlitz could not study Nishida (in the form of participant observation or interview) because, by the time of his research on this topic, Nishida was already deceased. Nonetheless, it might have been better if more credit had been given to this important player, at least in the context of comparing Euro-American and Japanese cultural primatologists.

Perhaps in conjunction with the paucity of references to Nishida, very few papers or books written in the Japanese language are cited in the book. In my understanding, anthropological studies are usually performed in the languages of the target audience (at least my anthropologist colleagues use local languages to undertake interviews and participant observations). If texts exist in the language of the targets of an anthropological study, this local literature should also be a very important source for investigation, especially in the specific context of research on diversity between cultures.

While reading books of this kind on science studies (or anthropology of science), I sometimes become confused about whose voices are really represented in the text. For example, even when the words of a scientist are placed in quotation marks, it is not really easy to tell whose message this is. Of course, the words were originally those of the scientist, but it is the anthropologist (the author) who selected them from among many other things that the scientist may have said in the interview or during more casual conversations with the anthropologist. Thus, the final decision over which words to use in the book seems to belong to the anthropologist. To further confuse matters, such words are not usually presented independently, but may be connected to other words or writings by different actors, which are then woven into a story. Perhaps some important actors were inevitably excluded from the story. What may superficially seem to represent the voice of a scientist is actually the result of careful selection by the anthropologist to fit his/her story.

Conversely, human informants do not always tell “truths.” As Langlitz cites the words of William McGrew, “Large-brained, intelligent creatures practice deception, and one of the easiest ways of doing so is by telling lies” (p. 129). I do not want to claim that the primatologists

in this book are telling “lies” to deceive the author, but I can easily imagine that prominent scientists may be quite good at presenting themselves well at least to the public and to the media. Perhaps such great figures’ loud and clear messages are more easily adopted in this kind of anthropology of science, precisely because they are loud and clear. However, might there not be minorities who would not even dare to speak their “truth” for fear that they may be regarded as defying the alpha? Would there be a completely different story if the author compiled such different voices? It might be interesting for a study to be undertaken on the academic conduct of anthropologists (how they choose target scientists or how they select words of the scientists, etc.) just as anthropologists study the academic conduct of primatologists.

Although I have raised several concerns (some of which I understand are overly demanding), I can assure that this book is both an important ethnography as well as a philosophical essay that raises some significant questions regarding cultural primatology. I found it especially interesting to read the discussion of certain similarities between Kinji Imanishi’s epistemology and recent trends in science studies. If I understand correctly, both pose doubts over the presuppositions of the Modern, such as the *a priori* division of nature and culture, which may be perpetuating the deep gap between the academic domains of humanities and natural sciences.

“It is such deviations from the habitual that get us to think” (p. 307), Langlitz says in the concluding chapter. I completely agree. Whether anthropologists or primatologists, this is the main reason that we do fieldwork.

SOME MINOR NOTES:

- “Kazutaka Sugawara” (p. 31) should read “Kazuyoshi Sugawara” (even many Japanese mistakenly read Sugawara’s first name in *kanji* as Kazutaka).
- The patterns of grooming hand-clasp in Mahale K and M groups (p. 131) are reversed.

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