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978-1-107-02537-0 - Wild Cultures: A Comparison Between Chimpanzee and Human Cultures

Christophe Boesch

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## Wild Cultures: A Comparison Between Chimpanzee and Human Cultures

How do chimpanzees say, “I want to have sex with you?” By clipping a leaf or knocking on a tree trunk? How do they eat live aggressive ants? By using a short stick with one hand or a long stick with both? Ivorian and Tanzanian chimpanzees answer these questions differently, as would humans from France and China if asked how they eat rice. Christophe Boesch takes readers into the lives of chimpanzees from different African regions, highlighting the debate about culture. His ethnography reveals how simple techniques have evolved into complex ones, how teaching styles differ, how material culture widens access to new food sources, and how youngsters learn culture. This journey reveals many parallels between humans and chimpanzees and points to striking differences. Written in a vivid and accessible style, *Wild Cultures* places the reader in social and ecological contexts that shed light on our cultures, which will help us refine human nature and its multitude of facets.

**Christophe Boesch** is Professor and Director of the Department of Primatology at the Max-Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology in Germany. He has studied the chimpanzees of Taï National Park in Côte d’Ivoire for the last 33 years and those of Loango National Park in Gabon for 6 years. The author of two published books and the founding president of the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation, he fights for a better future for the remaining wild ape populations at a grassroots level.

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# Wild Cultures

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**To all – people and chimpanzees – whose cultures are so fascinating and make  
life on Earth so rich,  
To Lukas and Léonore for accompanying us through this adventure,  
To Brutus and Fédora for coaching us through the secrets of their Culture  
To Grégoire and Moda for sharing the intimacy of their Culture**

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## Acknowledgments

*Wild Cultures* is about differences within and between species and such comparisons were only possible thanks to the generosity, tolerance, and cooperation of many others. When Jane Goodall first invited my wife Hedwige and I to visit Gombe in 1983, we were naturally very impressed by the Gombe chimpanzees, given our still very slow progress in habituating the Tai chimpanzees at that time. But we were just as impressed by how dramatically different the Gombe habitat was compared to the Tai forest. And as we progressed in our observations of the Tai chimpanzees, we rapidly felt that they did not fit perfectly into what we had read about the chimpanzees of Gombe and Mahale. That was the beginning of this book.

It was not only a great honor then when both Jane Goodall and Toshisada Nishida invited me to their study sites for longer stays and encouraged me to make comparisons between the Tai, Gombe, and Mahale chimpanzees. This was not only a wonderful opportunity, it was also an eye-opener to what population differences in this species really mean. I am not only very grateful to these two pioneers of chimpanzee research for inviting and supporting me; I am equally grateful that they made my stays in their camps and my learning experiences there such a pleasure. I want to thank my teachers in Gombe who so patiently taught me about cultural differences there: Frodo, Evered, and Prof introduced me to their hunting behavior; Fanny and Fred showed me leaf grooming; Fifi, Fax, and Gremlin introduced me to termite fishing; and Goblin and Wilkie introduced me to their complex interactions with red colobus monkeys. I would also like to thank my teachers in Mahale: Alufo and Bonobo's refined leaf folding allowed me to understand this behavior; Masudi, Caliope, Opal, and Gwekulo introduced me to skilled ant fishing; and Darwin and Carter ably demonstrated their specific way of leaf clipping. Without these teachers, I would not have been convinced about all these differences and an important aspect of chimpanzee life would have remained obscured.

After my illuminating visits to Gombe and Mahale, I became very curious about the breadth and richness of cultural differences in chimpanzees and was lucky enough to have generous colleagues who graciously invited me to visit a variety of chimpanzee groups living in a variety of ecological conditions. I am thus very grateful to John Mitani, David Watts and the Ngogo chimpanzees, to Vernon Reynolds and the Budongo chimpanzees, and to Richard Wrangham and the Kanyawara chimpanzees for accepting me at their sites, for guiding my vision into the fascinating individuals of these study communities, and for graciously answering all

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my questions as I wanted to know whether my impressions gained on their study groups corresponded to theirs. Here, I would also like to thank Crickette Sanz and David Morgan for introducing me to the Goulalougo chimpanzees, and David for memorably showing me how the chimpanzees use sequential tools to access underground termites.

The start of our project in Taï National Park would not have been possible without the trust Hans Kummer placed in us. Hans Kummer's intellectual mix of rigor and keen longing to understand the unknown have greatly influenced my own attitude towards science. My present involvement in primate research and conservation is part of the legacy he left me. In 1991, after visiting the Taï chimpanzee project, Professor Steven Stearns of the University of Basel offered me an academic position at his institute that would allow me to continue my fieldwork in Taï forest. After 12 years in the forest, this generous offer allowed me to touch base with scientific progress and intensify the Taï Chimpanzee Project as well as develop my scientific career. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor André Aeschlimann from the University of Neuchâtel, head of the Swiss National Foundation and President of the CSRS in Abidjan for many years, whose support of the Taï Chimpanzee Project throughout its early years contributed importantly to the long-term success of this project, now in its 33rd year.

My wife Hedwige Boesch-Achermann was enthusiastic, curious, and open to leave the so-called civilized world. She was by my side from the first day on and for more than 12 years of permanent life in the Taï forest. If the study of the Taï chimpanzees is successful, it is only because she was there with me all those years. This transformed our life into an adventure, a long inquiry into and discovery of some of the most intimate aspects of the lives of our cousins from the forest. Most of the ideas developed in this book matured over the years we spent together in the forest, but also after this time when she continued her work for the chimpanzees in Europe. Trying to understand this elusive species and discovering the many aspects of their life was and will always be a part of our life. Therefore, throughout the text, the use of "I" should often be read as "we" as the Taï experience was a joint experience that moulded so many aspects of my scientific and personal way of thinking.

As the Taï Chimpanzee Project developed, we began to include both students and local field assistants to increase the number of observations done with the chimpanzees as well as to habituate three other chimpanzee communities. Each of our many field assistants have our deepest gratitude. Not only were they willing to spend 12–14 hours per day following the chimpanzees on their often over 5 km-long forays in the forest, but they spent nights in the forest to protect seriously ill chimpanzees from possible leopard attacks. And they were willing to stay with the chimpanzees during some very unstable periods, including the civil wars from 2002 to 2004 and in 2011, thereby actively protecting the study site and the chimpanzees. They have been our ambassadors in the local populations and made the development and continuation of the project possible since it began in 1978. We would especially like to thank the senior field assistants Kpazahi Honora, Bolé

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In any long-term project, some difficult periods may occur that might have dramatic consequences for the chimpanzees we have habituated to human presence. Thanks to the courage and altruism of some individuals, in most cases we were able to prevent the worst – the disappearance for unknown reason and/or the killing of the chimpanzees. My warmest thanks therefore go to Claudia Steiner and Franca Donati, who were present during the emotionally wrenching *Ebola* outbreaks in the Ta   chimpanzees in 1992 and 1994, to Thomas Pfluger who stayed near the camp when, in 1991, unrest from Liberia spilled over into the Ta   region and also to Emmanuelle Normand, Yasmin Moebius, Tobias Deschner, and Cristina Gomes for having decisively contributed to keeping the project going during some of the most difficult times of civil unrest in C  te d'Ivoire during 2002–2004. Finally, my warmest thanks go to Livia Wittiger, Lydia Luncz, Nadine Eckhardt, Sonja Metzger, and Danielle P  tzer for keeping the project alive during the terrible disease outbreak of Christmas 2009 and the following periods of unrest, as well as to Serge Keagnon Soiret and Simone Ban Dagui during the war of early 2011. These individuals' contributions made it possible for the Ta   Chimpanzee Project to remain active, which will undoubtedly contribute to our understanding of chimpanzees in the years to come.

I am most grateful to Carolyn Rowney for enthusiastically and efficiently correcting the writing in this book. A special thank you to my office assistant Claudia Nebel, our IT expert Andreas Walther, and our multimedia expert Silvio T  pke for their great continuous support, which makes it possible for me to spend time writing books! And I thank Hedwige Boesch, Cleve Hicks, Claudia Borchers, Tobias Deschner, Linda Vigilant, Geraldine Fahy, Livia Wittiger, Josephine Head, Erin

**Acknowledgments**

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Our new project in Loango National Park in Gabon has profited from the unfailing support of the Gabonese authorities, l’Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux (ANPN), and of the Centre National de Recherches Scientifique et Techniques (CENAREST). This project is a collaboration among and financially supported by Société pour la Conservation et le Développement (SCD), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and the Max Planck Society. We are very grateful to Rombout Swanborn for his financial and logistical support of the Loango project, and Tomo Nishihara, Lee White, and Edward Truter for their constant logistical support. I am especially grateful to the students who helped right from the start and contributed to the development of the project under sometimes quite strenuous conditions: Josephine Head was with us from the very first day and she was later joined by Luisa Rabanal, Nikki Tagg, Beke Graw, Emilie Fairet, Edward Wright, Lyndsay Rankin, Melanie Gregoire, Christopher Orbell, and Carolyn Sanguinetti. We are indebted to Loïc Mackaga, Erick Reteno Guizard, Kharl Remanda, Aimé Relonga, Herve Ngoundou, Ulrich Moussouami, Yannick Nkoma, Jhon Essongue, Martial Pambo, and Pierre Boukoussou for their invaluable tracking assistance in the forest and contributing to the long-term data collection.

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How dull would our life have been in the forest without our encounters with the wonderful, friendly, helpful, curious, and tolerant African people near and in our forest camp, who joyfully shared their knowledge with us? What would our life have been like over the years without our friends and family from abroad who visited, sent presents, letters, food, and books, and stayed in contact while we were in Africa and back in Europe? Thank you to all of you.

Last but not least, we would like to thank all the chimpanzees who have tolerated our presence for so many years, allowed us to share so much of their lives with us, and made us wonder on a daily basis about our own species. During the process of habituating and following them, we also inadvertently contributed to their confrontation with threats such as diseases and made them more vulnerable to poaching. This has been a constant worry for us from the beginning and I hope that by increasing the status of chimpanzees in the scientific community and the public at large, this book will allow us to pay back some of our debts to them.

It is also in the spirit of “paying back” a debt to the chimpanzees that my wife and I have created the “Wild Chimpanzee Foundation” ([www.wildchimps.org](http://www.wildchimps.org)). We are most grateful for the wonderful support, motivation, and involvement, be it financial or technical, we have experienced in this undertaking from so many of the team at the Max Planck Institute. We could not do it without them.