



Chimps line up to watch as Dorothy, who died of heart failure, is wheeled away.
Picture: Monica Szczupider, in the [National Geographic Magazine](#) (Nov. 2009)

The National Geographic Magazine [reports](#): "On September 23, 2008, Dorothy, a female chimpanzee in her late 40s, died of congestive heart failure. A maternal and beloved figure, Dorothy had spent eight years at Cameroon's Sanaga-Yong Chimpanzee Rescue Center, which houses and rehabilitates chimps victimized by habitat loss and the illegal African bushmeat trade.... Szczupider, who had been a volunteer at the center, told me: 'Her presence, and loss, was palpable, and resonated throughout the group. The management at Sanaga-Yong opted to let Dorothy's chimpanzee family witness her burial, so that perhaps they would understand, in their own capacity, that Dorothy would not return. Some chimps displayed aggression while others barked in frustration. But perhaps the most stunning reaction was a recurring, almost tangible silence. If one knows chimpanzees, then one knows that [they] are not [usually] silent creatures.' "

There are other examples of what looks like animal grieving behaviour, the case of elephants being the best known ([here](#) is a relevant video). [Marc Bekoff](#), in an [article](#) forthcoming in [Emotion, Space and Society](#), reports observing grieving magpies (magpies are Corvids, a very intelligent family of birds): "One magpie had obviously been hit by a car and was lying dead on the side of the road. The four other magpies were standing around him. One approached the corpse, gently pecked at it, just as an elephant would nose the carcass of another elephant, and stepped back. Another magpie did the same thing. Next, one of the magpies flew off, brought back some grass, and laid it by the corpse. Another magpie did the same. Then, all four magpies stood vigil for a few seconds and one by one flew off."

These behaviours beg for an explanation. It is not implausible that it may involve some awareness of death, some emotional reaction to it, and some relatively fixed behavioural response (if you have other plausible explanations, please, do share them with us). Assuming that it is so, it raises the following question: To what extent are they culturally transmitted? Is there, for instance, evidence of inter-group variation? This is speculation, but if grieving behaviour is, to any extent, culturally transmitted among chimpanzees (and other animals), this would be an item of animal culture quite different from the mostly technological or communicational items that have been reported so far. In particular, it would have no obvious function (even if I can sense both social anthropologists and group selectionists immediately thinking of group cohesion, but this, to me, is hand waving).

(I am unhappy that relatively few social and cultural anthropologists contribute to this blog - although I know that some are secret followers. I am sadly aware that such a post is unlikely to make them come around, but c'mon folks, this is an intriguing and relevant question!)