

# Rousseau Meets Japanese Primatology - 3

## Quarks Daily

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**by Frans de Waal**

Yesterday in a restaurant in Tokyo, someone at the table next to us lit up a cigarette. I asked my Japanese host if no one ever asked smokers to go outside. His answer took me by surprise: one is not allowed to smoke on the street. Inside is fine, outside is wrong. It's the opposite of what we are used to in the West.

The point is not so much the reason for the Japanese rule (which is that a walking smoker often holds his or her cigarette at children's eye level, hence may accidentally blind a child – apparently, this has happened!), but the fact that cultural differences often baffle us. This is because we assume our own perspective to be the only one that matters or makes sense. The same applies very much to my field of primatology, which owes much to Japanese pioneers.



(<https://3quarksdaily.com/.a/6a00d8341c562c53ef01310f9d34ff970c-popup>) Today I met in Kyoto with my old friend Toshisada Nishida, who is a student of the late Jun'ichiro Itani, who in turn was the most prominent student of Kinji Imanishi (<http://tomcat.sunsite.ualberta.ca/Imanishi/>), the founder of

Japanese primatology. Imanishi was interested in the connection between primate behavior and human evolution well before Louis Leakey and others in the West, and had fewer inhibitions to speculate about it. In 1952, when European ethologists still worked on instinct theories and American behaviorists still trained rats to press levers, Imanishi wrote a little book that criticized the view of animals as mindless automatons. He inserted an imaginary debate between a wasp, a monkey, an evolutionist and a layman, in which the possibility was raised that animals other than ourselves might have culture. The proposed definition of culture was simple: if individuals learn from one another, their behavior may, over time, become different from that in other groups, thus creating a characteristic culture. Soon thereafter, his students demonstrated that the potato washing started by a juvenile female monkey on Koshima Island spread to other members of her troop. The troop had developed a potato washing culture. [Photo, taken by the author, shows Japanese macaques on Koshima Island are still washing potatoes half a century later.]

Imanishi was also the first to insist that observers give their animals names and follow them for years so that they understand their kinship relations. His concepts are now all around us: every self-respecting field worker conducts long-term studies based on individual identification, and the idea of cultural transmission in animals is one of the hottest topics of today. But that is now: at the time, all Imanishi got was ridicule.

In 1958, he and his students toured American universities to report their findings. They encountered a great deal of skepticism about the ability of mere humans to distinguish between all those monkeys, which all look alike. Weren't the Japanese grossly overestimating the social lives of their monkeys, and who said that monkeys could tell each other apart even if human observers said *they* could? Also, what about the humanizing inherent in giving names to animals: hadn't they heard that scientists need to keep their distance?

Only the greatest American primatologist of the day, Ray Carpenter ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarence\\_Ray\\_Carpenter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarence_Ray_Carpenter)), saw the point and became a staunch supporter of Japanese primatology. He visited Japan three times, and within a decade the practice of identifying primates individually had been adopted at Western primatological field sites from Gombe Stream to Cayo Santiago.

In another little-known example, Western and Eastern scientists held contrasting expectations about our closest animal relatives, the great apes. Until well into the 1960s, the Western view was positively Rousseauian: apes were autonomous “noble savages,” free of social ties and obligations. They didn’t need each other and traveled in haphazard combinations from one fruit tree to the next. The ever-changing parties of chimpanzees that researchers encountered in the forests of Africa seemed to confirm that they lacked any social coherence.

While Western scientists described female chimpanzees and their dependent offspring as the only bonded units, Nishida’s team worked under quite different assumptions. How could a species that supposedly fills the gap between ourselves and other animals have no complex social life, they wondered. Should’t they have a community life, like us? Eventually, through persistent field observations, they cracked the puzzle and showed that chimpanzees live in large communities with a stable membership. The male-bonded society of the chimpanzee is now taken for granted, but the initial discovery came out of a firm conviction that chimpanzees could not be nearly as “individualistic” as Western science had made them out to be.

To understand how this “alien invasion” of ideas could have taken place under our noses, we need to look at Eastern culture, and also appreciate how linguistic monopoly affects science.



(<https://3quarksdaily.com/.a/6a00d8341c562c53ef0120a936ac2c970b-popup>)Plato’s “great chain of being”, which places humans above all other animals, is absent from Eastern philosophy. In most Eastern belief systems, the human soul can reincarnate in many shapes and forms, so all living things are

spiritually connected. A man can become a fish and a fish can become God. The fact that primates, our closest animal relatives, are native to many Eastern countries, has only helped to strengthen this belief in the interconnectedness of life. Unlike European fables, which are populated with ravens, rabbits, foxes and the like, Eastern folk tales and poetry are laced with references to gibbons and monkeys. The three wise men, or magi, of the Bible are matched in the East by the three wise macaques of Tendai Buddhism (of “See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil” fame). [Photo shows the three wise monkeys in a carving at the Toshogu Shrine.]

Feeling humility towards animals affects the way we study them. If we believe the soul can move from monkey to human and back, there are no grounds for resisting the idea that we are historically connected. So, it’s hardly surprising that evolution was never controversial in the East: it was a logical and welcome thought. As Itani put it, “Japanese culture does not emphasize the difference between people and animals and so is relatively free from the spell of anti-anthropomorphism”.

The lack of credit for the Japanese approach (most treatments of animal culture either forget to mention Imanishi or, worse, claim that the studies of potato-washing were naive and ill-conceived) can be partly attributed to the language barrier. It is just hard for non-English speakers to make themselves heard in an English-speaking world.

Since English is not my native tongue, I am familiar with the effort involved in writing and speaking another language — even though my native Dutch is probably the closest another language can come to English. Scientists from other places have to make ten times the effort. English itself is of course not the problem: It is not better or worse than any other language. The problem is the attitude of native English speakers.

Naturally, you speak your own language faster and better than any other. This can make it impossible for those who are not native English speakers to keep up at international meetings. It is worse on those occasions when an English speaker doesn’t pull any punches while debating with a scientist whose English is poor.

I have seen it happen often. The English speaker rises from the audience, articulates a penetrating question, sometimes with a joke mixed in, and barely takes the time to listen to the clumsily phrased reply of his opponent. Since English speakers dominate every discussion, they form a class of great minds strutting around in the secure knowledge that no one will challenge them.

Good ideas formulated in bad English either die or get repackaged. It is a bit like a Hollywood remake of a French play such as *La cage aux folles*: its origins are immediately erased once it's called *The birdcage*. One reason Eastern thinking could creep into the study of animal behavior unnoticed is that it filtered into the literature through awkward formulations and translations that native English speakers found it easy to improve.

In a way, it is delightful to see how views that were clearly at odds with the traditional Western dualism could slip into our thinking. It helped us chuck out some of our cultural baggage. At the same time, however, the way it happened hints at the difficulties other cultural and linguistic groups experience when they seek a voice in science and gain proper acknowledgement.

Each culture is too wrapped up in its own relation with nature to step back and see it as it is. To gain a full picture requires all kinds of scientists, who together take on a task equivalent to comparing the images in a range of fun-house mirrors. Somewhere in that heavily distorted information resides the truth.

*\*There is now abundant experimental evidence that monkeys and apes tell each other apart and have excellent face recognition skills ([http://www.emory.edu/LIVING\\_LINKS/facial.html](http://www.emory.edu/LIVING_LINKS/facial.html)), which engage similar areas of their brains as our own face recognition.*

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3



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