

Bonobos and Chimpanzees, Foragers and Farmers

by John M Repp

Why would I want to write an essay about our closest animal relatives and their dominance systems in a newsletter of a group, WWFOR, that writes on its masthead that they want “to replace violence, war, racism and economic injustice with nonviolence, equality, peace and justice?” Good question! Let us see if I can make the relation between the goals of WWFOR and the life-styles of our closest animal relatives.

The scientific names of these relatives are *Pan troglodytes* and *Pan paniscus*. We commonly call them common chimpanzee and pigmy chimpanzee or bonobo. Although each has a Latin name indicating that each is a separate species, they have been able to interbreed in captivity.

Bonobos live in a part of the African rainforest where there are no gorillas. Now that area is in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and is separated by the Congo River from rest of the African rainforest where both chimpanzee and gorilla groups live. It is thought that because there are no gorillas in the area where bonobos live, the bonobos have better access to their favorite foods and are able to live in larger groups.

Bonobos are one of the few mammal species where females are dominant. Bonobo females are smaller than bonobo males, so size is not the factor that makes them dominant. What makes them dominant is that they will cooperate with each other more easily than the males are able to cooperate with each other. In other words, **solidarity is their key to power**. Females decide when and with whom to have sex with. If a bonobo male tries something that a bonobo female does not approve, a second female will intervene to protect that female. Bonobo females will share with each other favored foods as they sit on the ground, while the males wait up in the trees for their turn to eat.

Bonobos make the nests in which they sleep at night close to each other. Occasionally a pair will share a nest, something very rare in the world of great apes. Bonobos are the “make love not war” species. They are constantly engaged in all kinds of sexual activity, female-female, male-male and female-male. Male with male sex is less common than female with female.

Scientists have never seen one bonobo group threatening another, whereas chimpanzee groups have been known to fight each other. Sometime after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Dick Cheney was quoted as saying that war is a natural part of the world and cited the fights of chimpanzee groups. He either did not know about or didn't dare to mention bonobo group behavior.

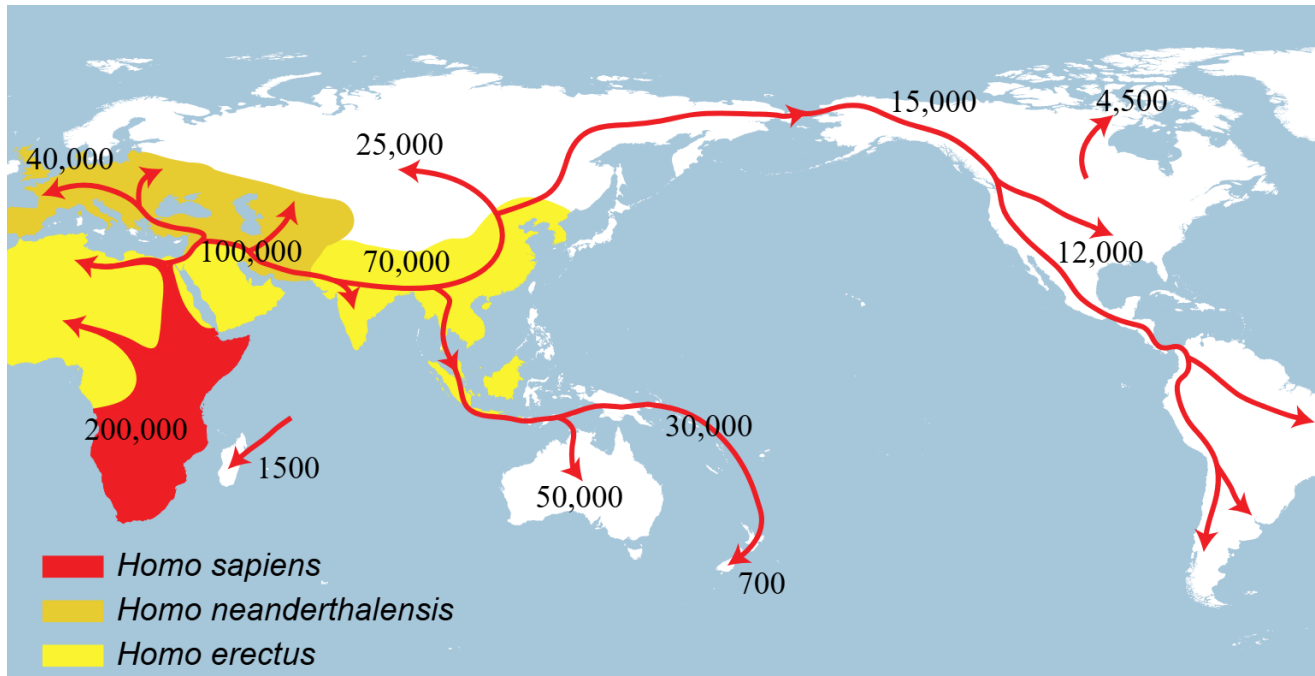
[The Seattle Times](#) had a short article on a recently published scientific study of bonobo female dominance. Here is a [Science Daily writeup](#) of that story.



This image provided by Martin Surbeck shows a female bonobo being groomed by another in the Congo in 2020.

With our species, foragers and farmers show us something similar to what we see with bonobos and chimpanzees. Foragers are also called hunter-gathers. They lived in groups of about 150 people called bands. They were matriarchal and egalitarian. When a group of males went hunting and got prey, they very carefully divided up the catch so every person in the band would get a fair share. They did not have police forces or jails but they did have ways of disciplining males who tried to dominate.(Chrispher Boehm. Hierarchy in the Forest: Harvard University Press,1999, p. 84) They would gossip about the errant males. They would joke about them. They would talk directly to a would-be alpha. Then they would greet them coldly. If those behaviors did not change the behavior of the errant male, they would shun them. If that did not work, they would banish them. If they refused banishment, the males would collectively assassinate the offender.

Homo sapiens lived several hundred thousand years as foragers and eventually settled all over the earth after their start in Africa. The map below shows the migration of several species of *Homo* and the dates of arrival.



After the melting of the ice between 14,000 and 6,500 years ago, which was the coming end of the last ice age, things began to change. The oceans gradually rose over 410 feet and some of the best places for human habitation were lost. This pushed forager groups together, although a few went further north or south as new land opened up as glaciers melted.

This is when human warfare started. The first archeological evidence of war has been dated to a site in Kenya about 10,000 years ago. With warfare, hierarchies started to form as a way of organizing human warfare and then society became hierarchical. Hierarchies allowed groups larger than 150 to be coordinated which made it possible for societies who adopted hierarchy to be more successful in war.

Foragers had often done some planting and selecting their favorite plants for food. This practice led eventually to farming. With farming and hierarchy, larger societies could form and we enter the era of history, when we have printed language, and eventually kings and monumental building. Human civilization is generally male-dominant, and most exceptions to that were early. Human civilization is considered to have started about 5,000 to 6,000 years ago. Chinese civilization has lasted the longest, stretching back over 3500 years.

The technology of war fighting changed from spears and shields to guns, then airplanes and bombs, and now drones, a massive qualitative change. Nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945, probably because of deterrence.

Our challenge now is to stop human-induced climate change. If we don't the world will become ever more insecure and dangerous. Millions will be forced to migrate. Trump, trying to stop immigration without dealing with the root cause is doing a fools' errand.