

Study Suggests Orangutans Are Cultured

WASHINGTON, D.C. (AP) — Some orangutan parents teach their offspring to use leaves as napkins. Others say goodnight with a sputtering, juicy raspberry. And still others get water from a hole by dipping a branch and then licking the leaves.

These examples, researchers say, prove the orangutan is a cultured ape, able to learn new living habits and to pass them along to the next generation.

The discovery suggests that early primates may have developed the ability to invent new behaviors, such as tool use, as early as 14 million years ago.

“If the orangutans have culture, then it tells us that the capacity to develop culture is very ancient,” says Birute Galdikas, a co-author of the study. In the march of evolution, “orangutans separated from our ancestors and from the African apes many millions of years ago,” she said. The study suggests they may have had culture before they separated.

And though it is crude by human standards, orangutan culture is practiced independently by different groups and succeeding generations in the same way that human societies develop and perpetuate unique forms of music, architecture, language, clothing and art.

Galdikas and eight other scientists analyzed years of observations of the

Southeastern Asian orangutan. They concluded that the ape has the ability to adopt and pass along learned behaviors.

For instance, members of bands in Borneo and Sumatra make a kiss-squeak noise by compressing the lips and drawing in air. Both groups used leaves to amplify the noise, but only members of the Borneo groups had discovered they could change the sound by cupping the hands over the mouth. The sounds are apparently used for communicating socially.

The opposite of the kiss-squeak is the raspberry—breath is blown out through compressed lips to make a splattering sound. Only one of the six groups does this habitually, and it seems to be related to a bedtime ritual, Galdikas said.

A group in Sumatra has learned to use leaves as gloves when handling spiny fruits. A second Sumatran band has learned to drink by dipping a leafy branch into a water-filled tree hole and then licking the moisture from the leaves.

Galdikas said a group in Borneo routinely will force a small tree to the ground, riding it as it falls, and then grab nearby forest limbs before crashing to the ground.

Altogether, the researchers found 24 examples of behaviors that are routinely practiced by at least one group and passed to new generations.