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A CONVERSATION WITH SALLY COXE: A PRIMATE PARTNERSHIP CULTURE

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD(hon)

Abstract:

IJPS Editor-in-Chief Riane Eisler talks with Sally Coxe, founding director of the [Bonobo Conservation Initiative \(BCI\)](#), dedicated to protecting these uniquely peaceful primates who share more than 98 percent of our human species' genes and are on the brink of extinction, as well as protecting their rainforest home.

Keywords: primates, bonobos, equality, nonviolence, partnership, peace, feminism, culture

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Riane Eisler: Sally, you have been a pioneer and passionate champion for our primate cousins, the bonobo apes, whose dwindling population is increasingly threatened by poaching, logging, and agricultural encroachment, as is their African rainforest home. What in your life led you to this work?

Sally Coxe: I believe my whole life prepared me for this work, and when I discovered bonobos, I knew I'd found my calling. I first learned about bonobos while working as a copywriter at the National Geographic Society, writing the promotion for a book about the great apes. I had heard of the other great apes—chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans—but I had never heard of a bonobo. When I discovered that there was an amazing great ape so closely related to us, sharing almost 99% of our DNA, and more humanlike than the others in the most compelling ways, I was hooked!

What fascinated me most was the contrast between bonobos (*Pan paniscus*) and our other closest relatives, the chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*). Whereas chimpanzee society is patriarchal, male-dominated, and competitive, bonobo society is matriarchal, peaceful, cooperative, and more egalitarian. It orients more to what you have called a partnership rather than domination social system.

Chimps are the only primates other than humans that wage premeditated “wars” or conflicts with others of their own kind, usually over territory and natural resources—the same things most human wars are fought over. Bonobos, on the other hand, are the only primates other than humans that have sex not just for procreation, and do so with members of the same or opposite sex. Bonobos really do exemplify the 1960s credo, “Make Love, Not War!” So, in this way, bonobos and chimps represent the “yin and yang” of human nature, or the female and male paradigms.

Being a student of psychology and a hippie at heart myself, I found something I could believe in with bonobos. How could our own perception of what is “normal” change with knowledge of our bonobo heritage? Would bisexuality be considered natural, for example? What would our own culture look like if we emulated the bonobo side of ourselves, and learned to live in peace?

Beyond the lessons bonobos can teach us about ourselves and our own nature as a species, protecting them and their rainforest home presented a host of issues about which I am equally passionate. Growing up in the mountains of Asheville, North Carolina and spending summers on the coast of Maine, I loved nothing more than exploring in the woods and being close to nature. These experiences prepared me in a number of ways for life in the wilds of the Congo, and I relish the adventure! Since the 1970s, as pollution began to impact our natural ecosystems, masking beautiful views of the mountains, making lakes and rivers unsafe to swim in, I became an ardent advocate for

conservation. So, when I learned of the endangered plight of bonobos, I was compelled to do something to help them.

I love adventure and exploring other cultures and have truly found my second home in the Congo. In a way, I'm carrying on a family tradition. My great-great-grandfather was the U.S. Ambassador to China during the turn of the last century and his wife, my great-great-grandmother, Sarah Conger, wrote a few books about her experiences. She forged an uncommon friendship with Cixi, the last Empress Dowager, now the subject of a book by Grant Hayter-Menzies [*Imperial Masquerade: The Legend of Empress Der Ling*]. I grew up hearing stories about Sarah and reading her diaries. One of the things that impressed me most was how she made an effort to understand and respect the Chinese people and their culture, and to relate to them on their own terms. I have practiced the same approach in my life in the Congo.

Eisler: Please tell us about the more peaceful and egalitarian social organization of bonobos. What lessons can humans learn from these primates and perhaps apply to our own species?

Coxe: Bonobo social structure is utterly fascinating, and unique among the great apes. Unlike the male-dominant, strictly hierarchical society observed in chimps and other species, bonobos enjoy a more female-centered and egalitarian way of life. Bonobos are matriarchal, meaning that the females are in charge. Females form close social bonds and alliances among themselves, which is one way they maintain their power over males, who are physically larger and stronger. The status of males derives from their mothers. While females rule the roost, males are by no means excluded. Everyone gets to share in the bounty of the group; they are more of a partnership-oriented species. Studies have shown that bonobos display high levels of empathy, and researchers report that bonobos engage in many cooperative and collaborative

activities. Their “hippie chimp” moniker is well earned. Of course, they are not relaxed and peaceful 100% of the time; conflict and stress are inevitable parts of life and some fighting does occur, generally among males. The key difference is that, rather than resorting to violence, bonobos resolve conflict through positive physical contact such as grooming and sex. If people have heard about bonobos, it’s usually because of bonobos’ abundant and creative sexual behaviors. Whereas other nonhuman primates have sex purely for procreation, bonobos engage in lots of recreational sexual activity. Sex is used for bonding, pleasure, and relationship. Pairs and groups of all compositions are found, regardless of whether participants are male or female, or reproductively available.

Humans have so much to learn from bonobos. For so long, we assumed that our ancestors must have been like the chimpanzee, and that “human nature” is by definition competitive, hierarchical, and violent. How interesting, then, to discover that we are equally related to a species that is quite the opposite. Human nature is just as likely to be egalitarian, empathic, and loving. The choice is ours. One theory posits that the behavioral differences between bonobos and chimpanzees emerged because chimpanzees evolved in an area with fewer resources and more competitors, while bonobos evolved in a resource-rich environment. This distinction could have implications for human outcomes, too. How can we make choices, both personal and political, that are more likely to lead to a world where our bonobo-like instincts can thrive? And while no one is suggesting that world leaders get together for an orgy, it is worthwhile figuring out how we can reach toward each other in kindness rather than resorting to violence.

Eisler: Bonobo sexuality is more like human sexuality than that of any other primate. Why then do you think sexual coercion and rape have become part of the human story?

Coxe: It is ironic that bonobos live only in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, now known as the “rape capital” of the world. Tens of thousands of women have been brutally raped in the Eastern Congo as a weapon of war, as conflict over mineral wealth has ravaged this once beautiful and bucolic land. Of course, this problem is not unique to the DRC. Rape and sexual violence are global issues. There are patterns of human behavior that are distinct from bonobos, one of which is widespread patriarchal or domination systems—and I think that rape is a by-product of this cultural system and its inherent values. Rape is about dominance. Rape is about violence. It is not about loving sexual expression. It is hard to fathom from whence this sick and aberrant behavior emerged, the linking of one of the most pleasurable and sacred acts with brutality. But just as bonobo females form alliances to keep their power over the males who are stronger physically, more and more women are banding together, speaking their truth, and standing up to this kind of dominance.

Eisler: Why do you think the bonobos, who are just as genetically close to humans as the chimpanzees, receive so much less scholarly and popular attention than chimps?

Coxe: There are several reasons for this. For one thing, bonobos were discovered by westerners much later than the other great apes. It was not until 1933 that they were identified as a separate species from chimpanzees, and then only by means of a skull in the Tervuren Museum in Belgium. From that point until the 1990s, they were known as “pygmy chimpanzees,” so people erroneously inferred that they were just a diminutive form of chimp. Bonobos weren’t studied in the wild until a full decade or so after Jane Goodall began studying chimpanzees, with the support of Louis Leakey and a great deal of publicity from the National Geographic Society. Most research on bonobos was done by Japanese scientists in those early years, and wasn’t widely publicized.

The fact that bonobos inhabit some of the most remote and inaccessible territory in central Africa, and that they are found only in the DRC, formerly Zaire, a country ruled by a dictator for three decades and then wracked by war, made bonobo research an endeavor only the most intrepid scientists would dare to take on. This situation is much better now, but there has still been vastly less research on bonobos than the other apes.

It is a shame that even today, most people have never heard of bonobos, and do not know that this species—humankind’s closest relative—exists. As we stand at this crossroads in human history, when our whole planet is threatened by environmental degradation and climate change, we must learn to cooperate with one another to ensure our own survival as a species. Perhaps this is the best time to learn from our bonobo cousins.

Eisler: One of your major initiatives is the Bonobo Peace Forest, so named in honor of the peaceful and cooperative society of bonobos. Can you tell us about that initiative?

Coxe: The Bonobo Peace Forest is a constellation of community-based reserves supported by sustainable development. Bonobos have an incredible ability to live in cooperation and harmony with each other and with their environment. With the Peace Forest, we wanted to emulate bonobos by finding a model that simultaneously benefits bonobos, benefits the planet, and benefits indigenous people. One of BCI’s essential missions is to empower Congolese communities to take the lead in conservation; when we began our work in the field, we wanted to avoid the old style of conservation in which Westerners walk in and impose something on local people.

The vision for the Peace Forest was created together with our Congolese partners almost two decades ago. To achieve enduring progress in conservation, we must address the underlying humanitarian needs that drive habitat destruction, and to harness the

energy and enthusiasm that local communities have for preserving and retaining ownership of their own lands.

In the Peace Forest, reserve residents protect the forest in a variety of ways, from site management to bonobo tracking. They benefit from having increased sources of income, and working together, we have initiated livelihood programs, such as access to medical care, microenterprise, and education. The information the trackers gather is vital in the effort to protect bonobos, and the linking of critical habitat corridors gives bonobos and other wildlife a much greater chance of survival. The Peace Forest truly is a win-win-win.

To date, BCI and partners have secured official protection for almost nine million acres of rainforest within two large reserves: the Sankuru Nature Reserve and the Kokolopori Bonobo Reserve. Additional sites, totaling more than two million acres of land, are awaiting protection. The most amazing aspect of the Peace Forest is that it's self-replicating. The leaders of the sites-in-progress were inspired by what they saw happening at Kokolopori. They took it upon themselves to form their own reserves, following Kokolopori's example. Their efforts are the most ringing endorsement of the Peace Forest model, and we are so excited to support them in the next steps to official protection.

While the practical benefits of the Peace Forest are enormous, the symbolic nature is equally significant. Bonobos are widely seen as icon of peace. By promoting awareness of bonobos and a bonobo-inspired conservation model, the Bonobo Peace Forest gives people the opportunity to witness a peaceful, prosperous path forward. The DRC has been ravaged by a war over natural resources; the most effective way to ensure lasting peace is through wise and equitable management of those resources. Of course, we

hope that the message extends far beyond the borders of the DRC. If the bonobos can live in harmony, then we can believe—and demonstrate—that humans can, too.

Eisler: Besides protecting bonobos and their habitat, studying this relatively unknown species is another top priority of the Bonobo Conservation Initiative (BCI). You recently formed a partnership with scientists from the Max Planck Institute to advance this work. What have been some of the findings from this research?

Coxe: To protect a species we need to understand a species. Lack of knowledge is one of the greatest threats facing bonobos, and we are fortunate to be partnering with the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology in the effort to learn more about bonobo behavior. Led by Dr. Martin Surbeck, the research team has made some remarkable discoveries over the last year.

In addition to studying basic behaviors like feeding and ranging patterns, the researchers have had the opportunity to observe fascinating interactions between bonobo groups. They were thrilled to find out that two of the habituated bonobo groups, the Nkokoalongo and Ekalakala, regularly meet and interact. Even more exciting, they are now being joined by a third group, the Bekako. Three-group interactions have rarely been observed or described in scientific literature, so this occurrence provides a glimpse into a little-known aspect of bonobo life. The meetings are largely, though not uniformly, peaceful. The nuance of the behaviors, such as why some individuals are more welcoming or more aggressive and how the groups as a whole manage these meetings, provide valuable insight into bonobo society. The researchers are looking into what variables drive proximity (e.g. food availability) and what behavioral variables lead individuals to different interactional styles. In short, they're studying what makes bonobos come together and what happens when they do. This research has huge implications for best strategies to protect the bonobo habitat; it reinforces the

importance of having uninterrupted habitat corridors so that bonobos can range and interact freely. For the more philosophically-minded among us, our discoveries about what drives peaceful bonobo interactions could also provide insight into how humans might learn from their example.

Eisler: As you know, I write about the bonobos at some length in my book *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body*. In my research on the bonobos, I learned that there is a legend in the Congo that humans and bonobos were once related. That is of course true, in the evolutionary sense that we and bonobos stem from a common primate ancestor. How old do you think this Congolese story is, and is it of help in your work?

Coxe: One of the first things I did, beginning in the mid-1990s, was to research indigenous legends about bonobos with the aim of making a book. These legends of the “bankoko” or ancestors, have been passed down generation to generation, through the oral tradition. Because the stories have no historical referents that one could pinpoint, it is difficult to know how old they are, and most likely, the stories have continued to evolve and change over time.

Interestingly, some of the legends describe how bonobos helped people in the distant past, for example, by teaching people what food to eat in the forest. At one village meeting, a Mongandu elder said, “See, our ancestors were right; bonobos helped us in the past and they are helping us again now.” He was referring to BCI and the work we were doing to benefit the community.

We have used the legends in radio shows and educational efforts in the Congo, and they have helped immensely to reinforce and revive traditional taboos against hunting bonobos, which had been breaking down in the wake of the Congo War. Building upon

local knowledge and traditions intrinsic to the Congolese culture has been the foundation of our work.

Eisler: BCI works very closely with Congolese government leaders as well as villagers and grassroots groups, and one of the distinctive things about BCI is its focus on empowering the local people and promoting sustainable livelihoods and services that benefit wildlife and rainforest protection. Please tell us more about that.

Coxe: This approach was part of our original philosophy for two simple reasons: it's the right thing to do, and it works. No one has a greater stake in the Congo rainforest than the Congolese; it's their land and their livelihood. Engaging and empowering local people in this cause is the only way it can be successful. Humans are the greatest threat to bonobos due to activities such as hunting and habitat destruction. Conservation cannot be addressed unless the underlying human needs that drive the destruction of the rainforest are adequately met. A recent study by the Rainforest Foundation UK (RFUK) found that the conventional approach to conservation—the “guns and guards” method that creates parks by forcing people off their ancestral lands—is not effective in the Congo Basin. It fails to adequately protect wildlife and often actively harms indigenous people, who are separated from their homes and their traditional sources of livelihood. RFUK advocates an integrated conservation strategy that actively involves rainforest communities in partnership, the kind of approach that BCI has been taking for the last 15 years.

Eisler: What have been the main obstacles or challenges in your work?

Coxe: BCI's greatest challenge has been securing long-term, sustainable sources of funding for our work. Despite our successes on the ground and the cost-effectiveness of our model, as a small NGO, we have lacked the resources to compete for larger-scale

institutional funding. We have whole communities committed to protecting their bonobos and their forest, but lack the resources to adequately support them and to implement protection at the speed and scale that is needed. This problem has been compounded, sadly, by competition or hegemony among conservation non-profits. While there are many opportunities for partnership and sharing resources to achieve common goals, this has been the exception rather than the rule.

Working in the Congo also poses a great many logistical challenges, exacerbated by lack of infrastructure, transport options, and basic services. Just getting people, funds, and supplies to our field sites is quite an undertaking in itself. On one recent expedition, we traveled 10 days upriver in dugout canoes outfitted with outboard motors, then rented the only serviceable 4-wheel drive vehicle in the entire territory and a convoy of motorcycles and bicycles to transport our crew and supplies 80 km over dirt “roads” to the site. Fuel can be hard to come by and is about four times as expensive as it is in the United States, so things we take for granted here are paramount in the Congo.

While we have been successful protecting bonobos in many areas, the bushmeat trade continues to pose a terrible threat, not only to bonobos, but to many other species and the overall biodiversity of the forest. Successfully tackling this problem requires coordinated efforts for conservation and sustainable development to ensure alternative sources of income and sustenance, coupled with effective law enforcement, governance, and education. If there is one place where all parties need to come together in partnership to solve a problem, this would be it.

Eisler: What do you think are the most effective steps to bring attention to the more peaceful and egalitarian bonobo culture in which sharing resources and pleasure are prominent? What are some things that our readers can do to support your important work?

Coxe: We need to continue to speak out wherever and whenever we can. By “we” I’m not just referring to BCI. My hope is that our work will inspire others to spread the word about bonobos to their friends and family, to raise awareness about bonobos on social media, and to start conversations about bonobos at the dinner table. We need bonobos to be as much a part of our lives as any of the other great apes. A great way for readers to support our work is to follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and share our updates and campaigns with their networks. We are currently urgently seeking funding to protect two million additional acres of rainforest in the bonobo range. With the DRC about to lift the 15-year moratorium on logging concessions, we are in a race against time to protect more habitat. To support this project, please visit our website at bonobo.org and donate today. Every dollar directly benefits our lifesaving programs in the Congo rainforest.

Eisler: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Coxe: Simply to thank you, Riane, for all of your brilliant, life-changing work. I read *The Chalice and the Blade* early in my bonobo odyssey, and it spoke so profoundly to the issues that I find so important about bonobos and our understanding of ourselves. Then, when you came out with *Sacred Pleasure*, in which you wrote about bonobos, I was doubly inspired! It is such an honor to know you and to have an opportunity to collaborate.

Sally Jewell Coxe is the President and CEO of the Bonobo Conservation Initiative (BCI), which she co-founded in 1998. An international non-profit organization incorporated in the United States and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), BCI is the only organization in the world devoted solely to conservation of bonobos in the wild. BCI and

partners have achieved official protection for over 13,000 square miles of Congo's vital rainforests. BCI has been featured in a number of publications, including *The New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *National Geographic*, and the Nautilus Award-winning book *Of Bonobos and Men*. Sally is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate in psychology from Williams College. She worked as a writer for the National Geographic Society before dedicating her life to bonobo conservation.

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