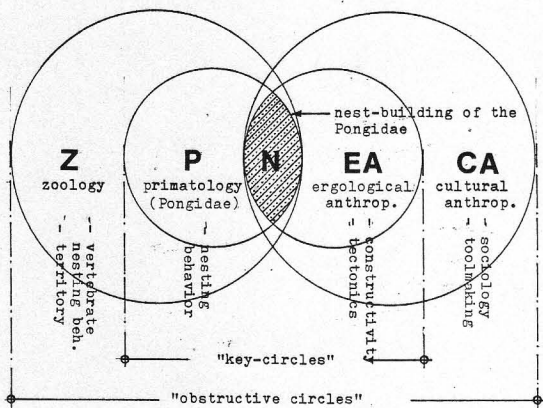


Nold Egenter

NEST-BUILDING OF THE PONGIDAE – A FORM OF SUBHUMAN CONSTRUCTIVITY?



- fig. 1 -

December 1982

DOCUMENTATION OFFICE FOR
FUNDAMENTAL STUDIES IN BUILDING THEORY

P. O. Box 414

CH-2540 Grenchen, Switzerland

NESTS OF HIGHER APES: SUBHUMAN HANDICRAFT?

All three sub-human primates, the so-called Pongidae, are regular, even daily nestbuilders. This fact is supported by a remarkably extensive literature and a history of observation which is at least 200 years old. However, only few people seem to know that Chimpanzees, Gorillas and Orang Utans daily build nests essentially their whole life long. The nest-building of the Pongidae suggests a striking question: are the nests of higher apes prototypes of human handi-craft in the strict sense of the word? This suggestion was initially made in Primatology about fifty years ago by J.M. YERKES. Today this anthropologically interesting idea seems to be forgotten. There are mainly three reasons for this:

- zoology traditionally describes the Pongid nest in the general frame of the vertebrate nest and thus as a product of instinctive artefact behavior. The "technical" difference is consequently treated as of secondary importance. Zoology classifies the hand nest of the apes with the beak-nest of birds.
- those primatologists who are interested in prototypes of material culture are looking for tool-behavior among the higher apes, but their casual observations are not convincing.
- subhuman primate sociology describes nest building in the wider frame of social behavior. Observations put emphasis on the social function of the nest for sleep, birth and care of the young. How the nest is made and the physical implications of the process remains of very unsystematic interest for the observer.

Rejecting the zoological classification, N. EGENER, a Swiss anthropologist, maintains that I.S. BERNSTEIN's experiments conducted between 1960 and 1970 prove that the Pongid nest is not merely a result of instinctive activity but also essentially of learned behavior. Only those animals that have sufficient contact with nest builders are able to construct a solid nest. Nestbuilding can thus be considered as a sub-human tradition. The technical difference becomes important: anthropologically, the hand is of great importance. It stands in close relation to stereoscopic vision and brain-development. The nest could be

interpreted as a model for learning processes.

Thus EGENTER sees reasons for rediscovering YERKES, who in 1929 described the Pongid nest as a subhuman construction made solely with the hand and stressed its evolutionary potential in the frame of a "phylogenetic development of constructivity". In contrast to YERKES, who in the field of culture was looking for representative elements like "dwelling" or "bed", EGENTER advocates more systematic research into human craft-behavior. This could avoid the hidden paradigmata in our historically conditioned disciplines and subdisciplines with regard to material culture. Important are recent developments of archaeology in borderzones with ethnology (America, Africa, S.E. Asia, Australia) where the classic claim to "pre-history" has become questionable. Comparison of archaeological sources with the material culture of comprehensible non-writing traditions shows that the archaeological method is inadequate for the illustration of object culture; much that might be relevant for the reconstruction of technological evolution is inaccessible to archaeology for a rather simple reason: the material is not durable.

An interdisciplinary comparative ergological anthropology* as suggested by EGENTER could also show that, in addition to the "hand-tool-work" concept established among prehistorians (because earliest archaeological finds of artefacts support it), there is another formula which could have been at least as important in technological evolution: the hand as a "tool". Though the direct relation "hand-work" by its nature implies low durability, leading prehistorians assume: non-durable craft traditions might be older than those enshrined in stone.

On the basis of such considerations EGENTER concludes that the nesting behavior of the higher apes is a technological source which should not be neglected.

* from Greek érgon, work