

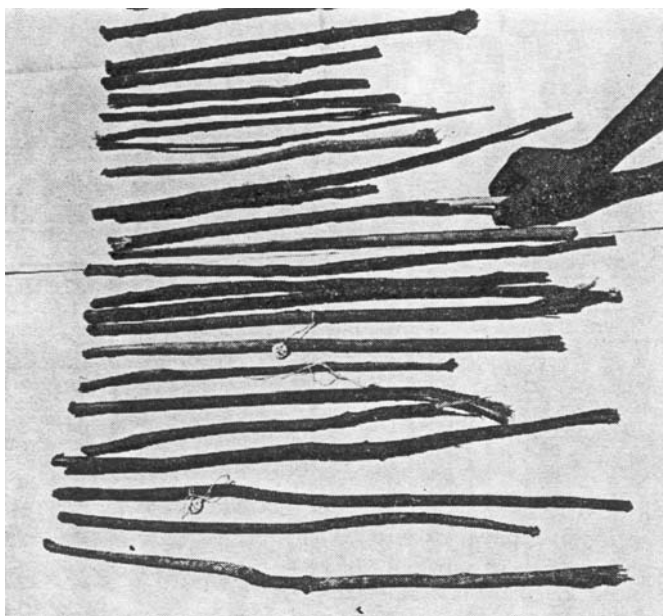
## Supposed tool use by a chimp: Mafuka's stick does not fit<sup>1</sup>

Sir –Whiten and McGrew stated in Correspondence<sup>2</sup> that the identification of the original drawing does not solve the mystery of the Liberian postage stamp of 1906, which they suggested to be probably the first depiction of tool use by a chimpanzee<sup>3</sup>. Accepting that the original drawing shows Mafuka, a female chimp who lived in the zoo of Dresden<sup>4</sup>, Whiten and McGrew are asking whether the stamp-illustrator may have known more about chimpanzees' behaviour than the original drawer. Still adhering to their hypotheses, the interpretation of the stamp by Whiten and McGrew becomes an interesting case of scientific argumentation.

Originally Whiten and McGrew were fascinated by the accurate image of the ape's stature and locomotion. Considering this and presuming that the illustration of the stamp was based on authentic observations it was suggestive to assume that the stamp's illustrator may have been an experienced naturalist, who watched or at least had knowledge of the behaviour of Liberian chimpanzees. But realising that the image of the ape is copied slavishly from a drawing of Gustav Mützel, which was originally published in a popular German book on animals<sup>5</sup>, it is reasonable to assume that the stamp-illustrator neither saw any living ape in her or his life nor did she or he know anything about chimpanzee behaviour.

Whiten and McGrew point out some of the differences between the original drawing and the illustration of the stamp, which concern the surroundings of the ape and the stick. But the argued "close match" between the stamp and our knowledge of termite digging is far from being evident.

None of the changes clearly relate to digging termites. All elements changed – even the marks on what is supposed to be a termite mound – correspond to those in the original drawing. Roman Ginner from the University of Vienna, an expert on reproducing techniques, states that the changes are due to the aim of the illustrator to get a keen and clear image. Therefore the ape is exposed from the surroundings which otherwise would have disturbed the perception of mini-sized figure on the stamp. This especially applies to the stick no longer touching an object.



Set of sticks used by chimps digging termites (from Jones & Sabater-Pi, 1969)

<sup>1</sup> Letter submitted to *Nature* 30.05.01, but not accepted

<sup>2</sup> Whiten, A. & McGrew, W. C. *Nature* **411**, 413 (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Whiten, A. & McGrew, W. C. *Nature* **409**, 12 (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Kattmann, U. *Nature* **411**, 413 (2001).

<sup>5</sup> Brehm, A. E. *Brehms Thierleben: Erster Band* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn), (Bibliographisches Institut, Leipzig, 1876).

In their first letter to *Nature* Whiten and McGrew stated that the stick of the ape is of “the dimensions” which are documented as associated with digging termites. This proposition does not bear up against the review of the sources cited by the authors. From the sticks used by chimpanzees to get access to termites it is reported that they are unbowed without any branches (picture).<sup>6</sup>

Contrarily the stick is bowed and branched in both images, in the original as well in the slightly shortened one of the stamp. Mafuka’s stick apparently is not fit for digging termites.

Thus the story again tells us little about chimpanzees and much more about human cognition and even scientific preoccupation. We mainly see what we already know. Thus, looking on the Liberian stamp, particularly a primatologist might be persuaded to see a West African chimp ready for digging termites. But the ape, although transposed to a Liberian stamp, still is Mafuka in the zoo of Dresden. In a world of global flow of information the size of a 5 cents postage stamp is probably too small a basis for far reaching scientific assumptions.

**Ulrich Kattmann**

*Department of Biology, Geo- and Environmental Sciences, Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg, D-26111 Oldenburg, Germany*

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<sup>6</sup> Jones, C. & Sabater-Pi, J. *Nature* **223**, 100-1001 (1969).