

Orangutans and the boundaries of humankind: from the 17th century to the 21st

A Public Lecture presented by Professor Robert Cribb,
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Early accounts of orangutans (*Pongo pygmaeus*) tended to emphasise their human qualities. Not only the choice of name (from *orang hutan*, Malay for 'person of the forest') but a host of anecdotes told by travellers and retold by scientists, philosophers and entertainers attributed to orangutans what were otherwise seen as human characteristics including the capacity to cook, to build dwellings, to hunt other animals and to bury their dead. They could speak, it was sometimes said, but refused to do so because they were afraid of being enslaved. This culturalist interpretation of human-ness was challenged, however, by anatomists who asserted, as soon as the bodies of orangutans became available for investigation, that they were too different from humans to be included in the same category. In Holland in 1777, the dispute between the two camps broke out into the celebrated 'orangutan war' between the keeper Vosmaer and the anatomist Camper. The dispute ended largely in a victory for the anatomists. The orangutan lost all vestiges of human status and for most of the 19th century was treated primarily as one animal amongst many. Paradoxically, the last supporters of human standing for the orangutan were proponents of slavery, who used the great ape as evidence for the existence of a hierarchy of humans which would justify slavery and perhaps open the possibility of substituting orangutans for Africans in the plantations. Darwin's evolutionary theories encouraged humans to believe that they were descended from apes, but created no special sense of the humanness of living apes. Only in the late 19th century did the discovery of psychology and of physiological and genetic similarities between humans and orangutans begin to encourage a renewed sense of special kinship between humans and great apes leading, amongst other things, to a struggle over just which great ape is closest to humankind.

Monday 7th March 2011

4:00 pm

Senate Room, Murdoch University

All Welcome, Free Admission

Wine (and orange juice) will be available

Robert Cribb is professor at the Australian National University. His research focuses on Indonesian history and covers national identity, mass violence and historical geography. He has a long interest in natural history and is currently (with two colleagues) completing a cultural history of the orangutan.