

[image]

Subscribe to DeepL Pro to edit this document. Visit www.DeepL.com/pro for more information.

STORYTELLING MAKES US HUMAN

When, between six and four million years ago, the roots of the human evolutionary tree began to plant themselves in the Horn of Africa, between Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya, our earliest ancestors were not too different from the nonhuman primates from which they had just separated, the chimpanzees. And if we look at our DNA (the biological information that determines the development of organisms) and that of chimpanzees and bonobos, our closest ape-like "cousins," what we will see is an incredible similarity, reaching about 98.8 percent.

Chimpanzees, however, live in communities of about 15 to 150 individuals, move in small groups, have a very strict hierarchy, rarely live more than 15 years, and their habitat is limited to west-central Africa, among rainforests, savanna and montane forests. We humans, on the other hand, have colonized the entire planet, live in cities of millions, move in vehicles carrying hundreds or thousands of people, trade over long distances, and live to be over 100 years old.

How is it possible that all these obvious differences come from a mere 1.2% different DNA? After all, it is now known to everyone that our genetics contain all biological information, from the most relevant ones such as diseases and malformations to the more minor ones such as eye color or nail shape.

There is, however, one crucial point about which we often fall into error: as the most attentive reader will have noticed, in the previous paragraph I spoke of *biological* information. We humans, however, are more than our biology: we are also culture, although this is not an exclusively human prerogative. Culture, understood as a body of knowledge that is transmitted and modified from generation to generation, is something that many animals have: from birds, which learn and teach their own "songs" made of chirps, to killer whales, which over thousands of years have divided into different groups based on different hunting techniques.

I can already imagine the objection the reader is making to these statements, "But human culture is different, it is more complex!" And that is true, but not for the reasons we can imagine: our culture has been more successful than those of other animals not because *Homo sapiens sapiens* are good at developing new technologies or because they have superior intelligence, but because they have been able to find the best techniques for transmitting *cultural* information. Let's think about it: as long as a finch has to teach its offspring courtship songs or battle songs, it can only do so directly, through demonstrations-if the parent finch were to die, the offspring would never learn this information. If a human being wants to convey information about himself, history or past ideas, he can do so with a book, video or audio recording, reaching not only his children but, potentially, millions or billions of people. The ability to convey information effectively has been fundamental in the journey of humanity and it becomes increasingly evident what is stated in the title of this article: storytelling made us human. Without the priests who painted rocks to propitiate the hunt, the poets who roamed from town to town, recounting the exploits of Homeric heroes, the Middle Eastern tribes who transmitted biblical myths orally, or those early humans who invented writing in Mesopotamia, humanity would never have emerged from its ape-like state. Narrating, which etymologically means "to make known," has allowed us to unite into

large groups that share a history: religions, states, business sectors, political parties... Underlying it all is the narrative of an identity, a shared set of ideas: be it the life story of Muhammad, the Italian Risorgimento or communism.

In the end, then, that superiority we believe we have over other animals is nothing more than another story, the older one, which saw us fall asleep as apes and wake up as humans.