

feature was its naked skin, which led me as a zoologist to name the creature 'the naked ape'. We have since seen that it could have been given any number of suitable names: the vertical ape, the tool-making ape, the brainy ape, the territorial ape, and so on. But these were not the first things we noticed. Regarded simply as a zoological specimen in a museum, it is the nakedness that has the immediate impact, and this is the name we will stick to, if only to bring it into line with other zoological studies and remind us that this is the special way in which we are approaching it. But what is the significance of this strange feature? Why on earth should the hunting ape have become a naked ape?

Unfortunately fossils cannot help us when it comes to differences in skin and hair, so that we have no idea as to exactly when the great denudation took place. We can be fairly certain that it did not happen before our ancestors left their forest homes. It is such an odd development that it seems much more likely to have been yet another feature of the great transformation scene on the open plains. But exactly how did it occur, and how did it help the emerging ape to survive?

This problem has puzzled experts for a long time and many imaginative theories have been put forward. 'One of the most promising ideas is that it was part and parcel of the process of neoteny. If you examine an infant chimpanzee at birth you will find that it has a good head of hair, but that its body is almost naked. If this condition was delayed into the animal's adult life by neoteny, the adult chimpanzee's hair condition would be very much like ours.

It is interesting that in our own species this neotenous suppression of hair growth has not been entirely perfected. The growing foetus starts off on the road towards typical mammalian hairiness, so that between the sixth and eighth months of its life in the womb it becomes almost completely covered in a fine hairy down. This foetal coat is referred to as the lanugo and is not shed until just before birth. Premature babies sometimes enter the world still wearing their lanugo, much to the horror of their parents, but, except in very rare cases, it soon drops away. There