

Female macaque at Italian sanctuary ate her mummified dead baby

September 29 2017, by Bob Yirka



Tonkean black macaque. Credit: Public Domain

(Phys.org)—A trio of researchers working at Italy's Parco Abatino animal sanctuary report witnessing an adult female Tonkean macaque eat the mummified remains of her dead infant. In their paper published in

the journal *Primates* describing the incident, Arianna De Marco, Roberto Cozzolino and Bernard Thierry also outline the events leading up to the odd behavior and offer possible reasons for it.

The unusual [behavior](#) was carried out by a new young mother named Evalyne, the team reports. She had given birth to a baby that lived for just four days—enough time to bond, the researchers note. When the baby died, the mother did not seem to react unusually until she came upon a reflection of herself in her enclosure—that seemed to set her off, the team reports. She became very agitated and screamed for a period of time. After that, the mother continued to carry the dead infant around with her, even as it began to deteriorate. This, the team also reports, is also not unusual behavior for primates in general. Prior research on such behavior has not been able to clarify if it is a form of grief, or an inability to grasp the concept of death.

Whatever the reason, Evalyne continued to carry the dead infant, at times trying to care for it. Eventually, as the baby decayed, its head fell off, and then its fur and skin, leaving behind a skeleton with remnants of flesh still attached. After three weeks, the researchers witnessed the mother nibbling on the remains of the child, tearing off bits of mummified flesh and swallowing it. The mother continued with the behavior, even chewing and swallowing bones, leaving just one as perhaps a reminder of what she had lost. Making the act even more bizarre, perhaps, is the fact that Tonkean macaques are vegetarian.

The researchers report also that they are at a loss to explain might have caused this extremely unusual behavior, but suggest it might have been a combination of things, such as the mother's young age and inexperience combined with an inability to process what had happened. They suggest it could simply be the mother's way of trying to maintain the bond that had formed between her and her baby.

More information: Arianna De Marco et al. Prolonged transport and cannibalism of mummified infant remains by a Tonkean macaque mother, *Primates* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s10329-017-0633-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10329-017-0633-8)

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Citation: Female macaque at Italian sanctuary ate her mummified dead baby (2017, September 29) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-09-female-macaque-italian-sanctuary-ate.html>

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