

# Holy Baboon! A 'Mystical' Moment In Africa

by Robert Krulwich

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[Morning Edition](#)

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I'm not saying something magical happened. I can't. Because I'm not a baboon.

And neither is Barbara Smuts, though she spent years in the field in East Africa studying baboons.



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**"Hallowed Be Thy Name"?**

### **What The Professor Saw**

What Smuts saw one day in Africa while watching a troop of some 30 baboons is one of the more mysterious baboon tales ever. Her account was published in the [Journal of Consciousness Studies](#) a few years ago, and when I told the story to my co-host Jad Abumrad, on NPR and WNYC's Radiolab, he was leery. He couldn't explain what the baboons did, but when I proposed an explanation, he found it ridiculous.

Here's what happened:

Smuts was following a small group of Gombe baboons on the eastern edge of Kenya. She'd been with them seven days a week for weeks and weeks, joining them before dawn, spending 10 hours a day just following, watching and taking notes. One day, she says, the whole noisy group was ambling back to its "sleeping trees" (baboons sleep off the ground, up on the limbs of trees or cliffs to keep away from predators) along the shore of a stream. "I followed them walking along this stream many, many times before and many times after," she says, "but this time was different."

### **The Quiet Was Total**

All of a sudden, Smuts says, "without any signal perceptible to me," every one of the baboons, the adults, the little ones, all of them, stopped walking and sat down on the edge of a pool of water. They not only stopped walking; they stopped talking. "Even the little kids, and you know kids are always making noises, but even they got quiet."

The quiet was total. "I really wondered what was going on," says Smuts. The baboons didn't focus on any one thing. They all, or most of them, gazed down into the little pool right below them and hardly moved. There was no fidgeting, no touching or grooming, no discernible activity, just a communal "almost sacramental" contemplation. Smuts calls it a "sacred" quiet.

### **A Baboon Secret?**

Then, after a short period of time, "again with no perceptible signal," the troop came alive and resumed its noisy walk down the stream.

Barbara Smuts is the only scientist ever to have described behavior like this among baboons. "Although I've spent years with baboons, I witnessed this only twice, both times at Gombe," she writes, "I have never heard another primatologist recount such an experience. I sometimes wonder if, on those two occasions, I was granted a glimpse of a dimension of baboon life they do not normally expose to people. These moments reminded me how little we know about the more-than-human world."

The big dangling question here is the oddball possibility that a troop of monkeys (baboons are not apes, they are more distant from us) might have the capacity for a kind of group expression of wonder or rapture or thanks. Only baboons know what they were doing during those moments Barbara Smuts saw, and though my broadcast partner Jad is right to be skeptical, I can't give up the idea that maybe groups of highly social, communicative animals might, on occasion, address the mysteries of their (and our) world.

*The radio story was produced by Robert Krulwich, Jad Abumrad and Soren Wheeler for Radiolab and NPR.*