

the power behind the throne

Bill Given took a group of tourists to the remote Mahale National Park in Tanzania where they were introduced to the 'King-maker', a chimp known for his skill as a political mastermind.

On arrival at Greystoke Mahale Camp, we focused our attention on our guide, who started by telling us about the group of chimps we would be visiting. He knew all their names and could recognise individuals, but his claim that he would introduce us to the politics at work in the group raised eyebrows among the humans present. Surely, this was an enthusiastic guide injecting some humour? No way could chimpanzee society be sophisticated enough for that sort of social interaction.

But meeting Kalunde was a revelation. At 45, he is the oldest male in the group and has spent the majority of his years using his political skills to manipulate the male hierarchy to his advantage. Male members of a chimpanzee group have a linear ranking, with the dominant animal known as the alpha. A high-ranking male has the advantage of access to females in oestrus and a good share of meat during hunting; the alpha gains the best access to both.

Kalunde is 14 years older than any other male in the group and, despite losing body size and strength in his later years, he has continued to thrive by controlling the group through others. Coalition building and then manipulating such partnerships is essential for displacing dominant chimps, and Kalunde has been the mastermind behind the crowning of numerous alpha males over the years. This cunning has earned him the nickname 'King-maker'.

When Kalunde reached his prime in his mid-teens, the alpha in place was an unusually successful male named Ntologe, who had held on to his top ranking for 15 years. As Kalunde worked his way up to the number-two rank, he found a ruler who was not easy to overthrow. So, while supporting Ntologe, he learned to work the group to his advantage. As Ntologe aged and began to weaken, a young male named Nsaba rose to challenge him and

the King-maker used him as muscle to overthrow the alpha male and take his position. It was a brief reign, however, as Nsaba would not submit and Kalunde was unwilling to fight to establish his dominance, choosing to simply avoid Nsaba to escape being overthrown.

Ntologe realised that this split coalition held no real power and returned to his alpha position. Perhaps it was at this point that Kalunde realised that he could gain mating benefits and feeding access by being near the top without having to face the daily challenges of holding the alpha rank. He welcomed Ntologe back and supported him in front of Nsaba, but, as soon as the alpha was absent, Kalunde would groom and bond with the challenger, as if sensing that the end of a reign was coming. Eventually, Kalunde switched his support to Nsaba as he overtook Ntologe.

Under the new alpha male, Kalunde developed his trademark strategy – forming alliances with the strongest of the young chimps, bonding with them as they matured and moved up the ranks. He mentored a large young male, Fanana, helping him to rally support for a takeover. Fanana's only challenge came from a young upstart, Alofu, and his mother, who would ambush him when they could, forcing him to submit unless Kalunde was present.

With Kalunde's support, Fanana consolidated his power, until he made the mistake of keeping a female in oestrus all to himself. Not taking care of your constituents can backfire and Kalunde joined the other frustrated males in ousting Fanana, who was forced into exile when Alofu ascended the throne. If Fanana came near the group, Kalunde would lead an attack on him, thus cementing his association with Alofu and ensuring many preferential benefits during the four-and-a-half years that he reigned.

In 2007, an aggressive young male, Pimu, formed an alliance with two



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Kalunde has realised that he can gain many benefits by being near the top of the troop hierarchy without having to face the challenge of holding the alpha rank.

other large younger males, Bonobo and Primus, to challenge Alofu, but they were unsuccessful until Kalunde switched sides and joined them. Pimu then turned on the others and has used his aggression and ruthlessness to dominate the group since October 2007. Interestingly, Kalunde welcomed back Fanana after a four-year exile, probably in an unsuccessful attempt to hold off the unpopular Pimu.

Next in line could be 17-year-old Primus, who is currently ranked number three. He is big and popular enough to mount a challenge and, with Kalunde's help, a successful coalition could form behind him to threaten Pimu in the coming years. For his part, Pimu tries to keep Primus close and when I observed a younger chimp, named Christmas, greet Primus with too much enthusiasm, he was chased down and punished with a powerful smack from Pimu.

The battle lines are drawn as Pimu works to prevent coalitions between the ranking males. Keeping them divided secures his position, but, behind the scenes, that old tactician Kalunde is probably plotting a course for change. No doubt most of the world's politicians would like to have this intelligent chimpanzee on their staff, that is, until he decided to trade them in. ■