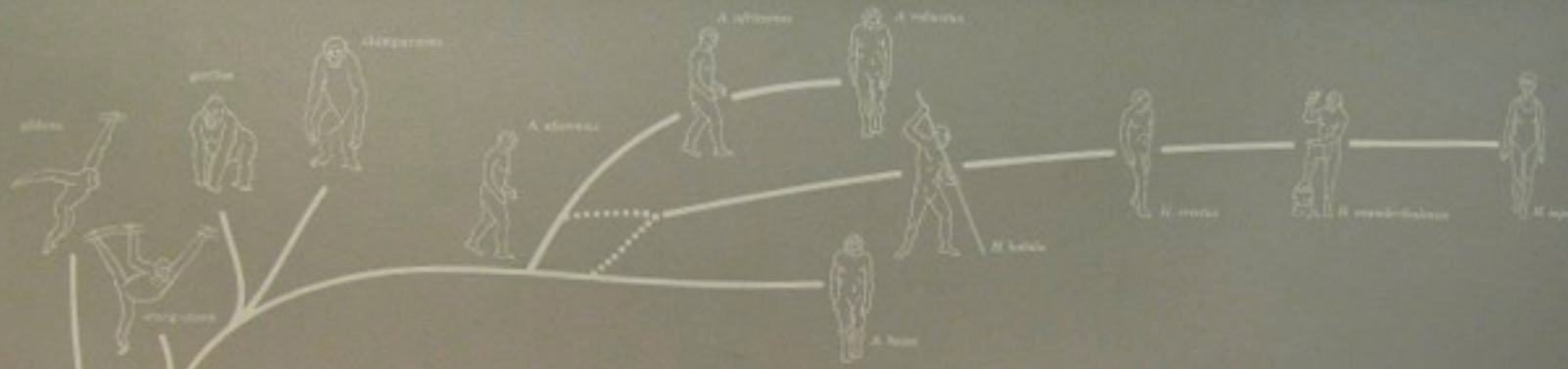

The Apes

The living apes, listed in order from our most distant to our closest relatives, are the gibbons of Southeast Asia, the orang-utans of Indonesia, and the gorillas and chimpanzees of central Africa. In fact, the time of the split between lineages leading to modern gorillas, chimpanzees, and humans are so close that we cannot currently tell which of the three lineages split off first.

Australopithecus

The earliest human group is represented by the genus *Australopithecus*. It consists of four species, *A. afarensis*, *A. africanus*, *A. boisei* and *A. robustus*. The earliest species, *A. afarensis*, lived in east Africa. Sometime before 3 million years ago, it gave rise to its southern African descendants, *A. africanus*, and subsequently around 2.5 million years ago to *A. boisei* in East Africa. *A. africanus* also gave rise to a later species, *A. robustus*, in southern Africa.

Homo

The subsequent human genus, of which we are members, is the genus *Homo*. There is ongoing debate about the origins of the genus *Homo*, but most anthropologists agree that its earliest species, *H. habilis*, evolved out of *A. afarensis* in eastern Africa around 2.5 million years ago. Alternatively, it may have emerged from *A. africanus* farther to the south.

Subsequently, a direct lineal descent existed from *H. habilis* to *H. erectus* to *H. neanderthalensis* to *H. sapiens*. Not all regional populations of *H. erectus* or *H. neanderthalensis* necessarily gave rise to subsequent populations of *H. neanderthalensis* or *H. sapiens*, however. In fact, it is likely that some of the more remote regional populations of all of these prehistoric human species died out without offspring.