

Comments & Response

Forth, G. (2012) Are legendary hominoids worth looking for? Views from ethnobiology and paleoanthropology. *Anthropology Today* 38(2):13-16.

Comments



Gregory Forth has made an interesting case for the possible present or recent existence of an unknown hominin on Flores, Indonesia, based on over 25 years of research on that island. It is clear from Forth's research that Flores people regard these hominins as part of their natural landscape and not as elements of their spiritual world.

Of further interest is the similarity between the characteristics of locally described hominins and *H. floresiensis*, for example, short stature, prognathic faces, no chin, relatively long arms. Certainly as a paleoanthropologist I was intrigued when I read the accounts of sightings and the descriptions of these purported hominins in Forth's 2008 monograph. Nevertheless, such comparisons must be considered as inferential at best. It is impossible to test whether these forms are *H. floresiensis* or something similar solely by comparing known characters (*H. floresiensis*) with purported characters (unknown Flores hominins). But are other tests available to us? As Forth states, a possible grave site of hominin creatures called 'ngiung' was noted by Erb (1987) in her doctoral thesis. In this case, a group of 'ngiung' in the East Manggarai region of Flores (similar to the 'ebu gogo' described by

the Nage of central Flores) are alleged to have been killed in a violent clash with local people and buried in a single grave at an unknown time in the past (Erb 1987). The existence of a putative grave provides an extraordinary opportunity to test two hypotheses: firstly, that the hominins reported by the people of Flores are based upon a once-living form, as opposed to the more conventional anthropological view that all such reports reflect beliefs in imaginary or non-empirical beings; and secondly, that these hominins represent *H. floresiensis* or something similar. While it is disappointing that work at this site must be postponed, there are other sites associated with these hominins that could be the focus of archaeological investigation, including reported graves elsewhere in Indonesia that may provide further opportunities to test these hypotheses. It is hoped that investigations will proceed in forthcoming field seasons.

Debbie Argue
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Gregory Forth's recent article, *Are Legendary Hominoids Worth Looking For?* (*Anthropology Today* 28(2): April 2012) is a must-read for sociocultural anthropologists interested in documenting human adaptations to the biological environment. It reminded me of work with the Mayangna people of Nicaragua when I was trying to elicit the local names for fauna. They identified a deer that was nocturnal, elusive and hunted so seldom that they had no physical evidence of its

presence. Nevertheless, the description and alleged behaviors dovetailed with the description and behavior of a South American deer. Ultimately, even without a kill, I felt obligated to report the probable presence of the South American deer. On the other hand, they reported certain areas of their territory that were off-limits to hunting because of the presence of huge serpents with one red eye and terrifying fangs, Waulas. No plausible identification emerged from any other data source. In the end, I hold the Waula to be mythical, emergent from a social process that protected ecological "source" areas of hunted species by surrounding them with danger. Forth's article represents an honest attempt to account for the reported hominoid on Flores island by using all available information and teasing out the implications. If his struggles to link archaeology to folklore have a lesson, it is that we should be cautious about making up our minds too soon.

Anthony Stocks
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Throughout the Sunda region, people tell stories about hairy, short people, known as *orang pendek* (short people). Usually, the stories are vague. The creatures are encountered in the forest or on the *ladang* (forest swidden), but never captured or photographed. Extensive camera-trapping and even special expeditions over the past decade have failed to produce any evidence. It is therefore tempting to dismiss the persistent local stories as fiction based on encounters with orangutans or bears.

Recent finds on Flores, however, suggest a more plausible hypothesis. Some ethnic groups on Flores have very detailed stories about a creature called *ebu gogo*, which show a remarkable fit to the small hominin species unearthed from a cave about 10 years ago. These stories are much more detailed than anything I ever heard on Sumatra. This

suggests that the *orang pendek* stories are a local version of the *ebu gogo* stories, which must have spread over the entire Sunda region, providing such an attractive narrative. The alternative, that there is or was until recently, a similar small hominin living on the greater Sunda islands I find less plausible, because (i) the stories are far less detailed, and (ii) island dwarfing is unlikely to have taken place on these larger islands.

So, for now, I would focus work on the deep-sea islands of eastern Indonesia, where island dwarfing of hominins and elephant-like forms has been documented. It would, for instance, be interesting to collect as detailed as possible information on the content of the hominin stories across the region, since this might provide information about the sociocology of *Homo floresiensis*. Although oral traditions are notoriously unstable and given to drift, the shared elements of stories on different islands may reveal the original story elements, rather than the subsequent embellishments.

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Response

All three commentators offer apposite and useful remarks on the article.

Debbie Argue is correct to suggest that morphological similarities between local Indonesian images of extinct or extant hominoids and palaeontologically attested non-sapiens hominins do not prove that the former reflect the latter, and that what is required to establish such a connection is an investigation of physical remains of hominins prospectively retrievable from sites, identified by local people (in this case specifically on the island of Flores), which are reputed to contain such remains. As I indicate, however, excavating these sites may prove problematic,

due partly to ubiquitous disputes over land and traditional positions of authority that have long been endemic on Flores and can make access to the sites difficult. Another prospective problem concerns gaining institutional support for research projects that may be deemed to lack sufficient theoretical grounding. One aim of my article, therefore, was to argue that a theoretical framework for such research is in fact already available both from the geologically extremely recent date of the *Homo floresiensis* discovery site (the only sites where skeletal materials have so far been encountered) and from circumstantial facts such as the lack of competing explanations from indigenous images of what appear to be small hominoids that survived into the last millennium or at least far more recently than the most recent dates from the discovery site.

While there is a tendency to think of ‘discoveries’ as single events, it is also worth noting that scientific discovery can involve a long process informed by a variety of factors, not all of which derive directly from the hypothetico-deductive model of classical scientific methodology. Dubois’s discovery of *Homo erectus* on Java exemplifies such a process. So too would the efforts of the Liang Bua team had they unearthed specimens of *Homo erectus* on Flores, which is what they were looking for in the light of previous palaeontological evidence for *Stegodon* hunting by hominins going back hundreds of thousands of years. What they found of course was something very different – and very much more recent. The reluctance of natural scientists to accept ethnographic evidence – or in fact any statements by non-scientists – as a starting point for research is well known and, to a degree, is understandable. Yet *Homo floresiensis* is so unexpected, and in certain respects even mysterious, that surely any potential source of illumination or possible line of enquiry cannot be ignored in accounting for its character.

As Anthony Stocks indicates in his

remarks, local images or reports of unattested or unidentified creatures may have zoological validity or they may not. Reminiscent of entities that populate local cosmologies the world over, the gigantic one-eyed serpents described by the Mayangna people of Nicaragua are obviously less easily reconciled with known components of Central American fauna than are native descriptions of what sounds like a South American deer species. Florenese hominoid images of course parallel these descriptions of the unidentified cervine and therefore, in the present context, are rather more interesting, not least because, from what Stocks tells us, an explanation for the mystery deer has yet to be found. In any case, the creature is evidently far more likely to reflect a so far undocumented species than is the one-eyed snake, and so provides a rationale for a zoological search whereas the serpent does not. On the other hand, Stocks’s interpretation of the serpentine cyclops as the product of ‘a social process that protected ecological “source” areas’ of game animals is not an explanation of the image itself so much as an interpretation of how the image functions (or once functioned). That is, it does not explain why the image takes the form that it does. Nor does it rule out some connection with actual reptiles. It should also be pointed out that functions such as those ascribed to the apparently mythical snakes can equally be served by fully empirical animals, and especially (though not exclusively) by representations of these which include exaggerations of morphological or behavioral traits.

Giant one-eyed snakes are obvious candidates for the sort of interpretation Stocks proposes and, given the apparent absence of any other way to account for them, it is probably correct. On the other hand, images like the Nicaraguan mystery deer – and indeed the locally described Florenese hominoids – may be just as empirically groundless. And if their fictive character can be confirmed, then

we will surely have produced a substantial and significant contribution to our knowledge (if not our understanding) of human culture and cognition. But to attain such a resolution will require following several lines of enquiry and exploring a variety of hypotheses and, as Stocks suggests, not ‘making up our minds too soon’ about what sort of explanation must be correct.

Carel van Schaik’s remarks focus on the ‘orang pendek’ of southern Sumatra. I fully agree with his claim that the ‘orang pendek’ is far less likely than ‘ebu gogo’ or other Florenese hominoids to reflect a small, physically primitive non-sapiens hominin like *Homo floresiensis*, a contrast Van Schaik attributes partly to evidence for endemic dwarfing on Flores that is absent from western Indonesia. In fact, contrasts between the Sumatran ‘orang pendek’ and hominoid images from Flores are explored in detail in a lengthy chapter in my *Images of the wildman in Southeast Asia* (2008) where, also somewhat like Van Schaik, I link the former with encounters with surviving South Sumatran orangutans (essentially the interpretation proposed by the primatologist Herman Rijksen) or another large ape, or memories of recently extinct orangutan populations. (I also suggest that some sightings may reflect encounters with bears or forest hunter-gatherers, both of which, like apes, are present on Sumatra but not on

Flores.) A forthcoming paper on ‘gugu’ – another Sumatran name for the ‘orang pendek’ – reviews linguistic and ethnozoological evidence pointing in essentially the same direction; this is shortly to appear in the journal *Anthropos*. Where I tend to part company with Van Schaik is his suggestion that stories concerning ‘orang pendek’ are variants of Florenese traditions concerning hominoids like ‘ebu gogo’ which have diffused to western Indonesia. This is not to say that such diffusion is impossible, but merely that extant or recently extinct Sumatran apes provide a better explanation – not least because southern Sumatra is the main (though not quite the only) locus of such images in western Indonesia. This too is shown in my 2008 book which, I suggest, goes some way to providing a review of the detailed ‘information on the content of hominin [sic] stories across the region’ which Van Schaik correctly identifies as a necessary step in answering questions raised by Southeast Asian hominoid images. Another purpose of the book is to show that different empirical and non-empirical inputs can, in different societies and historical contexts, result in similar if not identical cultural images.

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