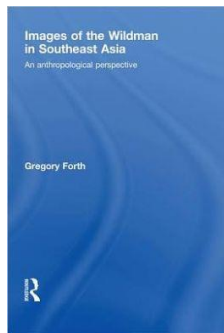


Book Review

Images of the wildman in Southeast Asia: an anthropological perspective. By Gregory Forth. London & New York: Routledge, 2012. xv + 343pp. ISBN 978-0-415-53348-5. \$49.95 (paperback).



People have different reactions to the idea of cryptids: if they are not frauds, or figments of the imagination, then either they are real animals, or else they are a reification of some local cultural construct. This last possibility is quite often put forward, but rarely tested, probably because few sociocultural anthropologists have taken much interest in cryptozoology.

This gap has now been filled, by the noted Canadian cultural anthropologist Gregory Forth. In 1984 he began research on the island of Flores in south-eastern Indonesia, specifically among the Nage people, and became intrigued by their stories of small, hairy, humanoid creatures called *ebu gogo*. The Nage insisted to him that they did not fall within the category of spirit beings or other cultural constructs, and he got the idea of collecting their tales, and comparing them to tales of apparently similar beings elsewhere in Flores, in Indonesia in general, and elsewhere around the world. It was only in 2004 that fossil remains of a small-sized hominin, *Homo floresiensis* (the “Hobbit”), were discovered in Late Pleistocene deposits in a cave in Flores, not far west of the region where the Nage live

– although this immediately sparked global interest in *ebu gogo*, it is important to realise that Gregory Forth’s developing views well preceded the discovery of the Hobbit.

In this book, the stories told about these beings by the Nage and other peoples of Flores (who have different names for them) are recounted in some detail, as the author tries to separate factual recounting from fantasy. There is some consistence in descriptions of their appearance, behaviour and distribution. Some said they are extinct, exterminated by earlier generations, but there are in some regions claims of persistent sightings, and they may have survived regionally. Elements of a fantastic nature seem quite easy to extract from these descriptions, leaving an apparently factual core.

The author then turns his attention to stories from elsewhere in Indonesia. Similar stories from the island of Sumba probably derive from Florenese contacts. There are more equivocal tales from Sumbawa, Timor, Buru, and even Sulawesi, although the latter are perhaps memories of earlier stone-using peoples. The famous *orang pendek* of Sumatra, described by European visitors and residents since at least the 18th century, varies in its descriptions from very human-like to clearly ape-like, and Forth mentions the

forest-dwelling Kubu people, a possible surviving southern population of orangutans, and other possible explanations; despite that it is sometimes called *gugu*, it is obviously, he considers, quite different from *ebu gogo* (and he is much less impressed with it than with its Florenese counterpart).

He briefly considers the stories of hairy humanoids from Vietnam, Sri Lanka and elsewhere in tropical Asia, and of the yeti and Chinese, Mongolian and Caucasian wildmen. His conclusion on most of these: “The most plausible interpretation is a figure substantially grounded in a non-human primate and, more particularly, contemporary populations of orang-utans or culturally retained memories of the apes”. There are brief chapters “Outside Asia” and “Pacific images” – wildmen in Africa, North America, even Melanesia.

This well-researched and well-written book is unusual in that it comes at “wildman” tales

from quite a different perspective, that of a sociocultural anthropologist, used to thinking about mythology, ritual stories and folk tales, and able to disentangle them from something that has a grounding in reality. That reality may be some kind of extinct ape or an unfamiliar human group, or it may be some not-quite-human hominin species, either recently extinct or still existing in small pockets. There are places on Flores where they are supposed to be buried, or (usually caves) where they are said to have once lived. Gregory Forth’s fascinating book has raised new questions and proposed new answers, and is worth reading by anyone interested in cryptozoology, whether believer, sceptic or simple searcher-after-truth.

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