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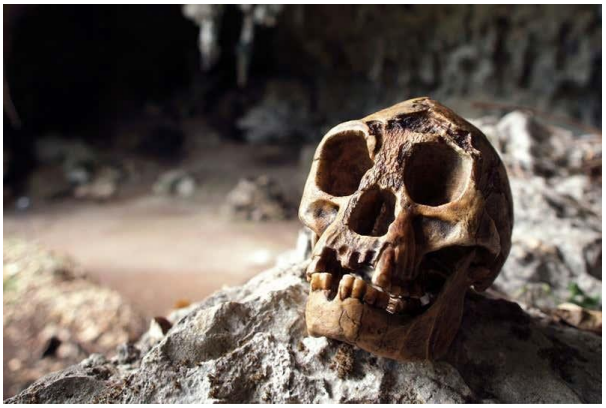
Comment

INVESTIGATING *Homo floresiensis* AND THE MYTH OF THE EBU GOGO



I have been asked by the editor to comment on a short article posted on the internet three years ago. The writer is Paige Madison, at that time a graduate student at Arizona State University. The article bore the title, "Investigating *Homo floresiensis* and the myth of the Ebu Gogo." For those who don't know, *ebu gogo* is the name the Nage people of Flores Island, Indonesia use for a small-bodied hominoid, which they say lived in their territory, in the central part of Flores, until several hundred years ago. *Homo floresiensis* is the name given by paleoanthropologists to a similarly small-bodied hominin discovered at a single site in western Flores, in September 2003, although the discovery was not announced until October 2004. Not just in regard to size, but in other respects as well, hominoids reported by Flores islanders reveal an intriguing resemblance to *H. floresiensis*, not least because of the naturalistic way in which islanders describe them. It should also be stressed that *ebu gogo* and similar Flores hominoids were reported in print by the present writer in 1998, thus well before the 2004 announcement.

In Madison's title, "myth" might be taken to refer to local stories or legends concerning the *ebu gogo*. But it can also be understood in the more popular sense of an "untruth" or "idea without foundation." Indeed, the object of Madison's article is to discredit any suggestion that the local hominoid and the fossil hominin were one and the same. Since a connection was first proposed—by myself and also by the Australian leader of the floresiensis discovery team, Mike Morwood (2007)—it has, Madison contends, been cast in more and more doubt, "and eventually holes in the ebu gogo/*H floresiensis* association grew too large to be ignored."

So what are these supposed "holes"? Madison makes just two points that refer to actual facts. First, she cites a revision in the dates assigned to the discovery site. Initially these were determined to be as recent as 12 or 13 thousand years ago, which is remarkably recent for a hominin whose morphological features eventually revealed closer correspondences with gibbons, great apes, and australopithecines than with other species of *Homo*. Indeed, because of these, one of the principal investigators, Peter Brown, wanted to assign *H. floresiensis* to a now genus, to be called *Sundanthropus*. But following a restudy, the date of the site was put back to 50 to 60 thousand years ago. This, it must be stressed, is geologically still very recent for a

hominin as physically "primitive" as *H. floresiensis*.

But there are other difficulties with inferring from these dates that hominoids like *ebu gogo* could not possibly reflect surviving hominins like *H. floresiensis*. First, the authors of the 2016 article announcing the revision state that "whether *H. floresiensis* survived after 50,000 years ago—is an open question." More to the point, floresiensis fossils have so far been found only at this single site—Liang Bua in western Flores—and the idea that the species developed, lived, and eventually became extinct in a single spot is simply incredible. Earlier in her paper, Madison seemingly counters this by pointing to the fact that the *ebu gogo* hominoids are known from central Flores whereas the floresiensis discovery site is in western Flores. She also suggests that the island's rugged terrain ("treacherous mountains and thick jungle forests") would have prevented them from moving out of the western region. But this is highly questionable, and as Madison remarks elsewhere—floresiensis somehow got to Flores Island in the first place, and did so without the benefit of land bridges. The argument also assumes that the western site was where the species first developed, and it ignores morphological evidence that the hominins would have been more than capable of dealing with the island's accidented terrain. And finally, the author makes no mention of the fact that not just the Nage, but local people in several parts of Flores (including western Flores) speak of small-bodied hominoids like the *ebu gogo*, with some reporting sightings in recent times.

Returning to the redating, it is interesting that one paleoanthropolist (Bellwood 2017:58) has stated that the restudy that resulted in the new dates was motivated by the problematic character of the very recent initial dates (12, 000 to 13,000 years ago). The problem was the overlap between floresiensis and *Homo sapiens*—the latter, he suggested, would certainly have exterminated the former. But this argument is itself problematic. For one thing, the earliest date for sapiens on Flores remains 11 thousand years ago. For another, it cannot be assumed that early sapiens would have indiscriminately wiped out another hominin species. In regard to higher primates, chimpanzees for example are still around. And as Mike Morwood was one of the first to point out, there is no reason to believe anatomically modern humans would have exterminated their smaller cousins because the two species may well have occupied different ecological zones.

To be clear, Madison is right to raise the dating issue, although it is a questionable basis to cast doubt on a possible connection between *H. floresiensis* and a relict hominoid. But other claims she makes are not grounded in fact. Indeed, her argument about the fictional character of the *ebu gogo* is based on a lot of fiction of her own. To cite the most egregious example: Ethnographers (plural) did not document the "tale" of *ebu gogo* "for decades." In fact, the only person to publish on the hominoids was me, as Madison later recognizes when she states that the tale was "originally documented" by Gregory Forth. Secondly, she says that "expeditions [plural again] endeavoured to find still-living wildmen, hoping to gaze into their bestial eyes," but that "each expedition…revealed an empty cave or else, a macaque." ("Macaque" refers to long-tailed macaques, *Macaca fascicularis*, the only monkey and non-hominine primate documented for Flores). So far as I'm aware, however, there has never been a single "expedition" searching for physical evidence of living hominoids on Flores, and certainly none whose results have been published. The suggestion that Flores hominoids might simply be monkeys, by the way, is one of several interpretations I discuss at length—and show to be wanting—in my 2022 book on the possible survival of non-sapiens hominins on Flores titled, *Between*

Ape and Human (Pegasus Books).

Several minor points Madison makes are equally inaccurate. For example, "wild grandmother of the forest, who eats everything," and especially the term "grandmother," is not a valid translation of the name *ebu gogo*—as I discussed in an earlier book (Forth 2008). In a similar vein, there is in fact very little ethnographic evidence for the hominoids being cannibals, or eating "even human [i.e. sapiens] flesh."

Were it not for the editor's request I would not have responded to Madison's paper. (In fact, a colleague at the University of Alberta alerted me to it over two years ago, and I took this decision then.) For one thing, the author, a student of palaeoanthropology at the time, displays all the fervor of the convert, and since then she may have become aware, perhaps embarrassingly, of the inaccuracies and inconsistencies in her argument. Happily, though, I'm able to end on a more positive note. For in concluding her own paper, Madison says that "researchers from geology to palaeontology turn to folklore, and events from volcanic eruptions to fossil discoveries have shown that science has something to gain from engaging with legend." Quite so, though I'm not sure what proportion of geologists and palaeontologists actually do so, and it is perhaps telling that the author does not mention paleoanthropologists. She also rightly states that "the interplay between science and myth has become ever more complex—and more interesting." The only comment I have on this is that the contrast of "science and myth" could obscure the fact that science has its own myths—as indeed, Madison's article tends to reveal. Finally, she asks "if hobbits [an unfortunate nickname for floresiensis] once lived on a remote Indonesian island, what else *was* once possible?" Apparently, the age of miracles, so to speak, is long over, for here the past tense implies that there is nothing equally astonishing for us to discover in the living world today. For my own part, I also find astonishing what Flores villagers say about undocumented hominoids that sound remarkably similar to fossil hominins, and therefore in need of an explanation rather than a poorly-informed debunking.

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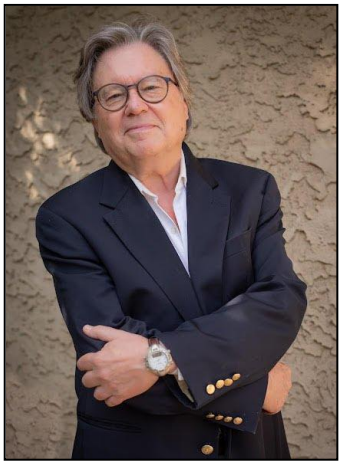

Gregory Forth received his doctorate from Oxford and was a professor of anthropology at the University of Alberta for more than three decades. He has conducted fieldwork in eastern Indonesia and is recognized for his contributions to anthropology and enthnobiology. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and is author of more than one hundred scholarly papers and several academic books.