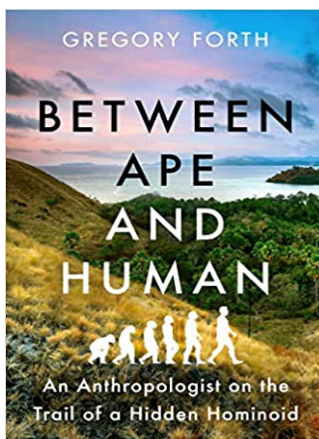


**BOOK REVIEW**

# Between Ape and Human: An Anthropologist on the Trail of a Hidden Hominoid by Gregory Forth

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Dr. Gregory Forth's latest publication, *Between Ape and Human*, is his first monograph directed to a general audience. While maintaining a scholarly approach, it provides a more accessible, welcome, and authoritative voice (Forth, 2012) addressing the timely anthropological question, "Are other hominids alive today?" His decades of ethnographic field research are juxtaposed with the discovery of fossil hominins on the eastern Indonesian island of Flores. The discovery of 50,000-year-old skeletal remains of an australopithecine-like hominid seem to lend substance to the traditional and contemporary stories of hairy diminutive ape-men who may survive to this day.

The announced discovery of *Homo floresiensis* came on the eve of a department seminar as part of my bid for promotion to full professor. I hastily prepared and added a preamble to my presentation, highlighting the implications of the discovery for the prospects of the persistence of relict hominoids, including the sasquatch, which has been a central element of my research program. Based on feedback following my presentation, the bearing of the unfolding of the discovery of *H. floresiensis* for my research, considered questionable by many of my colleagues, was utterly lost on them. Indeed, the discovery of the "Hobbit", and other indications of additional persistent hominin lineages of an ever-bushier hominin tree, has likewise been seemingly lost on the anthropological community at large, as well. This in spite of isolated comments, such as *Nature's* managing editor Henry Gee's (2004):

"The discovery that *Homo floresiensis* survived until so very recently, in geological terms, makes it more likely that stories of other mythical, human-like creatures such as yetis are founded on grains of truth . . . Now, cryptozoology, the study of such fabulous creatures, can come in from the cold."

I was struck by the fact that some reviews of Forth's *Images of the Wildman* seemed reluctant to acknowledge and engage the central topic. One reviewer applauded Forth's methodology and contributions to ethnozoology without a single mention of the word "wildmen"—the very essence of his thesis. A few were more explicit in their praise of his "solid, ground-breaking" and "refreshing openness to the possibility" of an extant mystery primate (Corbey, 2009). Forth observed that the general reaction to his monograph might be characterized as "quiet respect." He noted that his election to the Royal Society of Canada came shortly thereafter, and was seemingly unphased by any passive resistance to his research topic.

Forth is now retired from his position at the University Alberta, after a tenure of more than 30 years. He received his doctorate in cultural anthropology at Oxford University (1980), where he studied the perceptions of the natural world by the indigenous populations of Indonesia, and thereby established himself as one of the few specialists worldwide in ethnotaxonomy and ethnozoology. *Between Ape and Human* carries forward the theme developed in his previous publication, *Images of the Wildman in Southeast Asia* (2008), in which he explored the image of the *ebu gogo*, described by the Nage



people. He proposed that throughout Southeast Asia and elsewhere, ‘wildmen’, known by a variety of names, e.g., *orang pendek*, cannot readily be explained solely as imaginary constructs rooted in cultural values and social institutions, nor as simply another kind of ‘spirit’. He argues for the evidence for these creatures as “empirical entities.”

Noteworthy is the fact that Forth’s proposal that the stories referring to the *Lai ho’a*, the Lio name for a diminutive relict hominoid, might still exist, preceded the announcement of *Homo floresiensis* by several years, in something of a prophetic manner (Forth, 1998). In *Between Ape and Human*, Forth more explicitly makes the case for connecting the dots. Indeed, the stated purpose of the book is to question the off-handed dismissal of similarities between the ape-man, as he refers to the *Lai ho’a*, and *H. floresiensis* as merely coincidental. He bolsters this argument by emphasizing the australopithecine-like, even chimp-like, qualities of *H. floresiensis*, calling into question its dubious allocation to the genus *Homo*, with the implicit assumptions often attached to that moniker. Forth rightly reiterates the unsettled question of fire or stone tool use by *H. floresiensis*, further emphasizing its non-human primitive attributes. He emphasizes that the presumed extinction date for *floresiensis* is inferred based upon a single site. Given the rarity of fossilization and subsequent discovery, the last known fossil almost certainly does not represent the last surviving representative of that species. Therefore, even a revised age of 50,000 years ago for the *floresiensis* site readily leaves open the possibility of recent survival of the hominoid.

Being foremost a sociocultural anthropologist, Forth acknowledges this is a book of stories—cultural images that originated long before local colonialism. But he remains impressed that he never encountered anyone who did not think the *Lai ho’a* were real. But they are assumed to be very rare entities and encounters with them were always fortuitous, albeit quite natural, matter-of-fact. While there is no contemporary body to substantiate an extant relict hominoid, these stories are retold and evaluated by Forth against the backdrop of a recent fossil record—a mere tens of thousands of years removed. This backdrop consists not merely of mute fossils, but the descriptions of contemporary encounters with ape-men that have seemingly anticipated numerous physical and behavioral attributes of the *H. floresiensis*. Forth provides a replete enumeration of the extensive correlations between them.

As Forth puts it, “. . . the challenge for social anthropologists is to discover the correct relationship between the palaeontological and ethnographic images and the true source of their resemblance.” *Between Ape and*

*Human* is an important contribution in navigating that relationship.

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