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Villagers speak of the small, hairy Ebu Gogo

(Filed: 28/10/2004)

Richard Roberts, discoverer of the Hobbit, says local tales suggest the species could still exist

When I was back in Flores earlier this month we heard the most amazing tales of little, hairy people, whom they called Ebu Gogo - Ebu meaning grandmother and Gogo meaning 'he who eats anything'. The tales contained the most fabulous details - so detailed that you'd imagine there had to be a grain of truth in them.

One of the village elders told us that the Ebu Gogo ate everything raw, including vegetables, fruits, meat and, if they got the chance, even human meat.

When food was served to them they also ate the plates, made of pumpkin - the original guests from hell (or heaven, if you don't like washing up and don't mind replacing your dinner set every week).

The villagers say that the Ebu Gogo raided their crops, which they tolerated, but decided to chase them away when the Ebu Gogo stole - and ate - one of their babies.

They ran away with the baby to their cave which was at the foot of the local volcano, some tens of metres up a cliff face. The villagers offered them bales of dry grass as fodder, which they gratefully accepted.

A few days later, the villagers went back with a burning bale of grass which they tossed into the cave. Out ran the Ebu Gogo, singed but not fried, and were last seen heading west, in the direction of Liang Bua, where we found the Hobbit, as it happens.

When my colleague Gert van den Bergh first heard these stories a decade ago, which several of the villages around the volcano recount with only very minor changes in detail, he thought them no better than leprechaun tales until we unearthed the Hobbit. (I much prefer Ebu as the name of our find but my colleague Mike Morwood was insistent on Hobbit.)

The anatomical details in the legends are equally fascinating. They are described as about a metre tall, with long hair, pot bellies, ears that slightly stick out, a slightly awkward gait, and longish arms and fingers - both confirmed by our further finds this year.

They [the Ebu Gogo] murmured at each other and could repeat words [spoken by villagers] verbatim. For example,

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to 'here's some food', they would reply 'here's some food'. They could climb slender-girthed trees but, here's the rub, were never seen holding stone tools or anything similar, whereas we have lots of sophisticated artefacts in the H. floresiensis levels at Liang Bua. That's the only inconsistency with the Liang Bua evidence.

The women Ebu Gogo had extremely pendulous breasts, so long that they would throw them over their shoulders, which must have been quite a sight in full flight.

We did ask the villagers if they ever interbred with the Ebu Gogo. They vigorously denied this, but said that the women of Labuan Bajau (a village at the far western end of Flores, better known as LBJ) had rather long breasts, so they must have done.

Poor LBJ must be the butt of jokes in Flores, rather like the Irish and Tasmanians.

A local eruption at Liang Bua (in western Flores) may have wiped out local hobbits around 12,000 years ago, but they could well have persisted much later in other parts of the island. The villagers said that the last hobbit was seen just before the village moved location, farther from the volcano, not long before the Dutch colonists settled in that part of central Flores, in the 19th century.

Do the Ebu Gogo still exist? It would be a hoot to search the last pockets of rainforest on the island. Not many such pockets exist, but who knows. At the very least, searching again for that lava cave, or others like it, should be done, because remains of hair only a few hundred years old, would surely survive, snagged on the cave walls or incorporated in deposits, and would be ideal for ancient DNA analyses.

Interestingly, we did find lumps of dirt with black hair in them this year in the Hobbit levels, but don't know yet if they're human or something else. We're getting DNA testing done, which we hope will be instructive.

Richard "Bert" Roberts is a University of Wollongong professor and one of the team investigating the Hobbits.

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