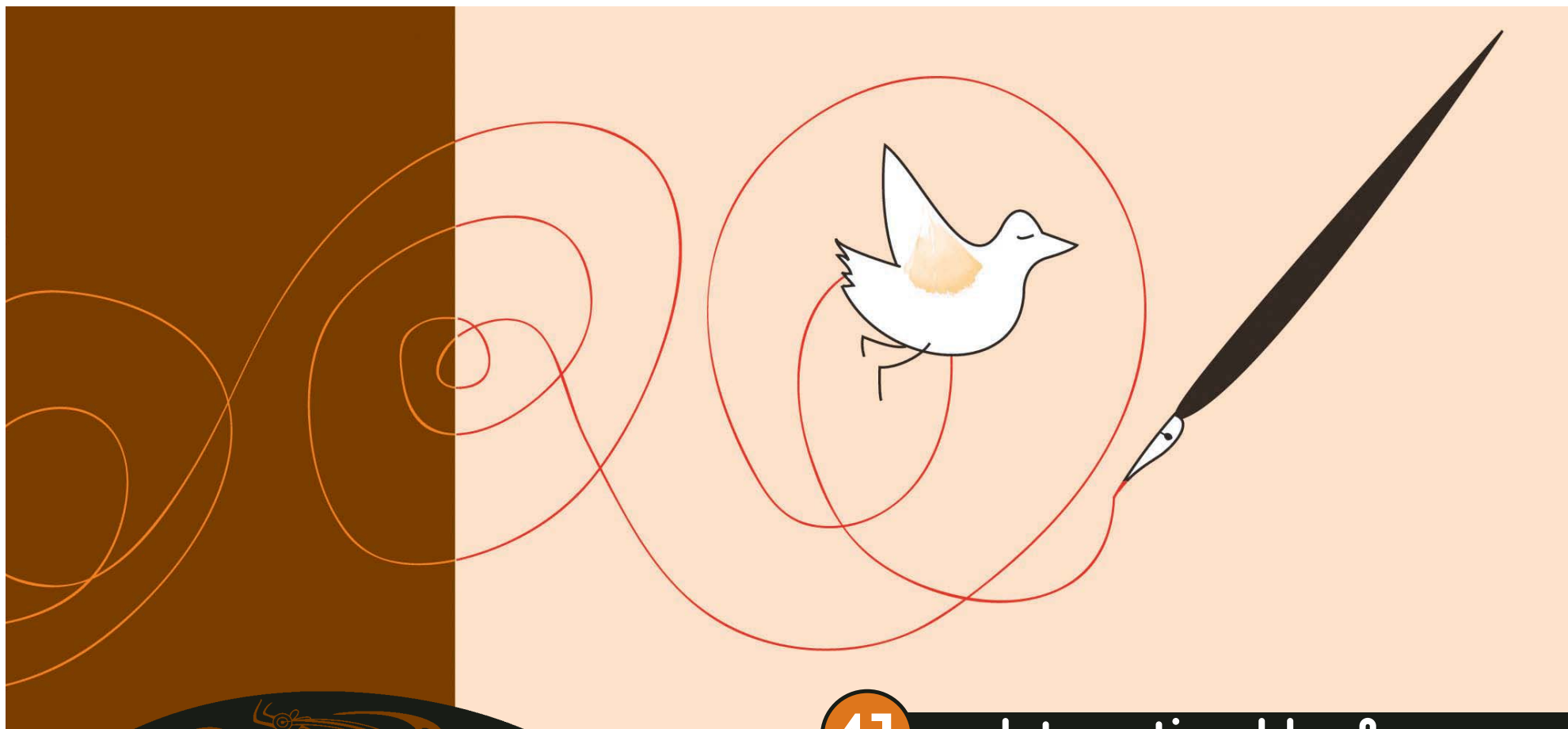


Illustration by Chiara Dissette, www.dissette.com



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# NEWSLETTER

# wildman



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refers to a widespread image whose ontological status is unclear. We don't really know what wildmen are, whether or not they exist, or in what sense they could exist. Are they purely imaginary categories (as cultural anthropologists, historians and other practitioners of the humanities have usually supposed) or do they have a substantial grounding in empirical, or zoological, reality? What is their relation to beings that anthropologists usually call spirits, which have typically been conceived as the very opposite of the empirical? This is the abridged introductory lecture to the IIAS masterclass 'Images of the Wildman in Southeast Asia'.

Gregory Forth

My interest in Southeast Asian wildmen was first sparked during doctoral field research some 30 years ago on Sumba, in eastern Indonesia, where I heard about a large hairy figure variously called *makatoba*, *meu rumba* or *mili mongga*. In particular, I was struck by the apparent similarity between this Sumbanese wildman and the *sasquatch* or Bigfoot, a creature I had heard much about during my previous residence in western Canada. Then, some years later, shortly after beginning further field research in the Nage region of central Flores (also in eastern Indonesia), I came across another figure, a kind of hairy hominoid called *ebu gogo*, which was generally similar to the Sumbanese *mili mongga* but different in some respects and seemingly more realistic. (For one thing, the *ebu gogo* were described as extinct, having been exterminated by Nage ancestors some 200 years previously. For another, Nage were able to describe the physical and behavioural features of the reputedly extinct creatures, and to do so consistently and in some detail.) From subsequent reading, I discovered that creatures similar to the wildmen of Flores and Sumba had been reported from several parts of Indonesia and main-

land Southeast Asia, and I started to think about producing a book-length comparative study. When I began I was not at all sure what form the book might eventually take. But I was interested primarily in the wildman as a cultural image and how, or how far, this sort of image could be understood symbolically, as an expression of social, ideological, or historical factors. By the same token, I did not think it would be necessary to pay too much attention to possible empirical bases of the images.

But then something happened that diverted my largely cultural anthropological interests in the topic and drew them in a rather different direction. Not long after I started writing about Southeast Asian wildman figures, using the Florenese *ebu gogo* as my point of departure, the news broke of the discovery on Flores of *Homo floresiensis*. This, as we all learned in October 2004, was a new species of the genus *Homo*, possibly a descendant through endemic dwarfing of *Homo erectus*. The skeleton was a fairly elderly female who stood just over a metre high and who had a brain no larger than a chimpanzee's.

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More remarkable still, the remains of nine other individuals indicated that *Homo floresiensis* had been living on Flores until just 12,000-13,000 years ago. Although we do not have certain evidence for the presence of *Homo sapiens* on Flores at that time – which in geological terms is virtually the present – we do know that by 13,000 BP, modern humans had long been living in Indonesia. Thus, there is a strong possibility – some would say a virtual certainty – that *Homo floresiensis* and the ancestors of modern Florenese actually met one another. This leads directly to another astonishing feature of the palaeo-anthropological story. Some members of the research team that made the discovery, as well as other scientific commentators, suggested that *Homo floresiensis* might have survived on Flores until much more recently, and that direct descendants of the little hominids might even survive to the present. What is more, the suggestion was made that *Homo floresiensis* might be one and the same as the creature called *ebu gogo*, the wildman of Nage, whom I had described in several pages of a book on Nage cosmology published in 1998.

What this amounted to, then, was a claim that wildman categories like *ebu gogo* might reflect local human experience of a non-sapiens hominid encountered some thousands, or perhaps just hundreds, of years ago. By the same token, the claim was made that the type of skeleton of *Homo floresiensis* might represent our first physical evidence of a real, living wildman. Such suggestions should of course be treated with caution. Nevertheless, I do not believe that they can simply be dismissed as outlandish. Rather, they should be considered dispassionately as well as critically, and, moreover, with a view to reassessing the anthropological orthodoxy which immediately classifies categories like the wildman as no more than socially and culturally constructed fantasies. To do so, however, requires a thorough investigation of wildman images not just in eastern Indonesia but elsewhere in Southeast Asia and indeed the world over.

### The wildman as a cognitive universal

As I employ the term, ‘wildman’ refers to creatures more humanlike than any known ape. They are usually bipedal, sometimes attributed with a rudimentary technology and even a language. Expressed another way, if great apes are apes, then wildmen are rather more like ‘ape-men’. In as much as apes are conceived as (non-human) animals, the wildman representation concerns creatures intermediate between animals and humans. This raises the complex issue of the distinction between humans and animals and how the contrast is conceived cross-culturally. The category of the wildman, wherever it occurs, presupposes a distinction between humans and non-humans which the creature in question appears to confuse.

Throughout the world, images of the wildman depict a being covered in hair. Particularly in Southeast Asia – but to a surprising degree elsewhere as well – wildmen are also described as small, or smaller than local humans. (Even the Himalayan *yeti*, often misleadingly called the ‘abominable snowman’, is sometimes conceived as a creature just over a metre in height). Both of these attributes – hairiness and small size – are significant. While some wildmen are reputedly larger than human beings, the attribution of extensive body hair serves to distinguish the wildman from a host of smooth-skinned beings – sprites, elves, dwarfs, leprechauns – which are similarly diminutive but otherwise quite different in physical appearance and reputed powers and abilities from hairy hominoids like the Florenese *ebu gogo*.

Features commonly attributed to the wildman point to a universal figure, and indeed variants of the image seem to pop up almost everywhere. In Indonesia, they occur not just in Flores and Sumba, but in southern and northern Sumatra, in Borneo, Sulawesi, and Sumbawa. On the Southeast Asian mainland, similar hairy hominoids are reputedly encountered in Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and the Malay Peninsula. Further afield, the Chinese have their wildman (usually named *yeren*), reported in several mountainous regions of that vast country, while the Himalayas is of course home to the *yeti*. Less well known are comparable figures from Central Asia and Sri Lanka. (Described in a series of publications appearing in the 19th and early 20th century, the Sri Lankan creatures are known as *nittaweo* and bear an interesting resemblance to the Florenese *ebu gogo* insofar as they, also, were reputedly rendered extinct by human neighbours just a few hundred years ago, and in much the same way.) Outside of Asia, wildman images occur in several parts of Africa, Oceania, Australia and the New World. Finally, one should not forget the European



wildman, a figure of late mediaeval literature and iconography, who as the art historian Richard Bernheimer demonstrated some fifty years ago, is rooted in an earlier and ultimately pre-Christian folk image.

Since the image is found in so many places, periods and cultures, it is difficult to see how the wildman could be explained as a function of particular cosmologies, social systems or historical experiences. One is therefore inclined to view the figure as something ‘non-cultural’, or ‘pan-cultural’, a cognitive universal or archetype of the human imagination. This, of course, poses problems for those who would reduce the wildman to a cultural or ideological artefact. Yet it is equally problematic for the thesis that wildmen might reflect something empirical or substantially zoological. In other words, if human imagination is inclined to conjure up wildmen anywhere, then it might seem unnecessary to consider the possibility of real creatures existing in the wild.

Gibson, Walter M. 1856, *The Prison of Weltevreden; and a Glance at the East Indian Archipelago*. London: Sampson Low, Son, and Co. New York: Riker

Also casting doubt on the zoological reality of wildman figures is what might be called the ‘weakest link’ argument. This is the idea that if one instance of a reputed phenomenon can be shown to lack empirical foundation, then chances are that other instances, and possibly all of them, are similarly without substance. But as remarkable as the similarities between images of wildmen encountered in different parts of the world may be, there is nevertheless another side to this apparently universal coin. For a closer look at the images reveals that they are in fact rather diverse. Recently, I have been reviewing a series of physical and behavioural features attributed to nearly two dozen wildman categories from around the world. The results so far suggest that all they have in common is a generally humanlike (or higher primate) form, more or less erect posture, bipedalism, and a more or less hairy body. Diversity is revealed in size and general degree of human-like appearance. While some local hominoids are decidedly larger than humans, many others – like the Florenese *ebu gogo* and the Sumatran ‘short man’ or *orang pendek* – are smaller than local *Homo sapiens*. In addition, whereas some wildmen appear decidedly human – for example, they may be attributed with some form of speech or the use of fire – others seem far more like some sort of ape.

Another kind of diversity concerns the biogeographical plausibility of wildman images. Simply stated, while some of the creatures appear extremely unlikely (even impossible) in ecological and evolutionary terms, from the same perspectives others are not quite so improbable. An example of the highly unlikely variety is the North American *sasquatch*, particularly in view of the evident absence of primates in the New World (other than South and Central American monkeys). In contrast, an ‘ape-man’ in Sumatra, the home of siamangs, gibbons, and orang-utans, is rather more credible, especially in relation to the possibility that the local category – and here I refer to the aforementioned *orang pendek* – might in fact reflect a hitherto unconfirmed or undiscovered species or variety of ape (as suggested by such primatologists as Herman Rijkse and David Chivers). Even if one accepts that some, perhaps the majority, of wildman representations are empirically unfounded, this does not mean that all of them are. And if biogeographical plausibility differs from case to case, then the possibilities of explanation must vary as well.

This brings us back to the wildman’s apparent universality. Even if an image – in this case a hairy manlike creature – suggests a natural proclivity of human thought, and is evidently quite fantastic in some of the contexts in which it occurs, this does not preclude certain instances from coinciding with something empirical. To cite the most obvious example: European folk possessed representations of hominoidal creatures corresponding to great apes well before the proponents of an emerging European science ‘discovered’ orang-utans and chimpanzees in the 17th century. It could be argued that ‘pre-scientific’ European images of wildmen are, ultimately and indirectly, derived from some ancient but unsustainable experience of non-human primates. This is certainly an interesting possibility, but it would be difficult to prove. The point is simply that representations with different epistemological roots (such as ape-like creatures posited in northern North America on the one hand, and in Borneo and West Africa on the other) can resemble one another closely. By the same token, it is arguable that western scholars would still be sceptical about the existence of orang-utans, for example, had Europeans not documented the apes’ existence just three centuries ago.

Another demonstration of how the widespread image of the wildman does not preclude subsequent concordance with empirical creatures is found in striking similarities between wildmen and palaeoanthropological models of ancient hominids. According to Stoczkowski, the resemblance reflects an implicit yet continuing influence of the European figure on modern anthropological science. In this regard, however, Stoczkowski refers more to behavioural and cultural (including technological) aspects of palaeoanthropological theorizing. He does not, so far as I can tell, deny that fossil remains of pre-sapiens hominids indicate physical resemblance to representations of the European wildman in regard, for example, to morphologically primitive cranial features or a robust frame. The hairy bodies regularly attributed to *Homo erectus*, *neanderthalensis* and all the rest are another matter, since we simply do not know when or how, or for that matter why, members of the genus *Homo* became largely smooth-bodied. Thus the hairiness of reconstructions of *Homo erectus*, for example, really could reflect older European representations of wildmen. On the other hand, in view of the hairiness of all non-human primates, it is a fair inference that some of our



ancestors were hairier than we are. The resemblance between reconstructions of non-sapiens members of the genus *Homo* – including, of course, *Homo floresiensis* – and the wildman therefore remains a puzzle. And, since I have largely been referring to the European wildman, I should mention that non-European exemplars, including such putative Southeast Asian hominoids as the Nage *ebu gogo*, sound even more like palaeoanthropological reconstructions than does the European variety.

### Cultural and sociological approaches

If some features of wildman images seem quite plausible, especially insofar as they coincide with features of attested species, the same images nevertheless incorporate other features, both physical and behavioural, which appear much less credible, indeed quite fantastic. One example is the inverted feet attributed by local Sumatrans to the *orang pendek*. Another is pendulous breasts so long that they can be tossed over the shoulder, a feature ascribed to the Flores *ebu gogo*, the *mili mongga* of Sumba and also, interestingly enough, to the wildman of Europe. By the same token, some fantastic attributes of wildmen, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, are further ascribed to spirits (as are the two just cited as examples).

In social or cultural anthropology, the time-honoured approach has been to explain seemingly fantastic images as symbolic expressions or reflections of cultural values, social relationships and the like. (An older variant of this paradigm is functionalism, whereby such images are interpreted as serving to promote or maintain important values and relationships.) In some respects this approach, or more modern symbolist versions thereof, is perfectly reasonable. Certainly, one should expect to find some connection between a community's social institutions and practices and ideational themes which find regular expression in its culture. Moreover, one should expect attitudes attaching to particular images to reflect a community's dominant values. Ultimately, however, this social anthropological approach to the wildman is as problematic as the view that such figures reflect real creatures or culturally preserved memories of such creatures.

An example of the wildman image apparently serving a particular social purpose is found in the widespread figure of the bogey (or bogeyman). In several diverse cultural settings – including the islands of Flores and Sumba in eastern Indonesia, possibly China, and Europe during the late middle ages – images of wildmen have been invoked as ways of threatening and hence controlling disobedient children. Yet wildman representations are not employed in this way everywhere they occur. For example, the Sumatran *orang pendek* is not used as a bogey; nor are all categories of wildmen found on the island of Flores. What is more, even where wildmen are bogeymen, they are usually only one of several frightening figures which can be so deployed. The Nage of Flores thus threaten children not only with their local wildmen, *ebu gogo* (and do so even though they otherwise represent these creatures as long extinct). Nage parents also invoke the threat of witches, stealers of human heads, malevolent spirits, and nowadays even 'tourists'. As this shows, virtually any kind of human, or part human, figure can be used for this disciplinary purpose. Moreover, tourists, at least, are empirical beings, as were Dutch colonialists, who according to Nage and other Indonesians were once the ultimate perpetrators in the theft of local human heads.

While lending an air of fantasy to the figure of the wildman, therefore, its possible use as a bogeyman hardly determines its ontological status. The more general methodological point is that attributing fantastic features to a category does not preclude its empirical existence. After all, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, local people credit many animals – including non-human primates, large reptiles and tigers – with powers and characteristics which certainly have no zoological support. Such creatures might, for example, be thought capable of assuming human form or harming humans by mystical means, and yet no one would therefore argue that these animals should be understood as entirely or primarily imaginary beings.

Another essentially sociological approach would be to interpret wildman images as a form of ethnic slander, a derogatory representation of ethnic others considered less cultured and somehow more 'primitive' than the own group. In fact, this should be among the first possibilities an anthropologist investigates in studying particular wildman categories. For the interpretation to be valid, however, the slandered group should at least be identifiable. Furthermore, in regard to physical features, the distortion should presumably extend

no further than attributing hairy bodies and ape-like features to the target group. For once one starts crediting them with tails or horns, for example, one is dealing with a rather different representation. To take this point no further, I would just mention that in my investigations of the Nage category *ebu gogo*, I have found little evidence for these putative hairy hominoids reflecting, for example, an aboriginal or phenotypically distinct population once inhabiting the Nage region. I still do not rule this out as an explanation. In fact, in western Flores (the region in which *Homo floresiensis* was discovered), earlier populations identified by name are mentioned in the myths of currently dominant groups, where they are described as coarse, hairy and as having initially lacked fire and other technology. But no such aboriginal groups, named or unnamed, are identified in Nage mythology.

Similar criticisms can be made of a basically functionalist approach that construes the wildman as a model of uncultured, disorderly humanity, and as an allegorical device affirming the value of social order. In the Nage case, I am thinking of the narrative portrayal of *ebu gogo* as possible child abductors, but more definitely as cultureless crop raiders who eventually met their end as a direct result of their thieving habits. Again, there are many ways for a community to make this moral point. Also, the lesson does not require a villain with the specific physical form of *ebu gogo*. The view of the wildman as an imaginary construct serving to promote certain social ends, while somewhat credible, therefore leaves several questions unanswered.

### Wildmen, spiritual beings and an ethnozoological approach

Thus far my objective has been to demonstrate the epistemological ambiguity of the category I label 'wildman'. On the one hand, wildmen, being described by Southeast Asian communities largely in naturalistic terms, appear to anthropologists rather more credible as empirical possibilities than, say, the spirits and witches whose study has long been a mainstay of anthropology. Their greater plausibility draws not only on the fact that wildmen are typically not able to disappear, change shape or turn into animals, as spirits are able to do, but also on their resemblance to the reconstructions of another branch of anthropology, the hominids of palaeoanthropology. On the other hand, wildmen appear to anthropologists as not quite credible enough, particularly if construed as zoologically 'undiscovered' non-sapiens hominids or even as some sort

of ape far more humanlike than anything so far known to science. It is this 'betwixt and between' quality that has rendered the wildman, if not actually taboo subject in academic anthropology, then a topic of at best peripheral interest.

By the same token, wildman figures have received rather more attention from historians and other students of the humanities. A few anthropologists have indeed dealt with them, yet in virtually every case, they have treated the figures as spiritual beings. An example is found in Steedly's work on the Karo of northern Sumatra, where she discusses a category of beings that Karo call *umang*. Occasionally, Steedly refers to the *umang* as 'wildmen', but for the most part she describes them as 'supernatural' beings and focuses on the role they supposedly play as familiars of spirit mediums. In fact, especially in regard to their physical description, recorded by several colonial ethnographers, these northern Sumatran figures appear very similar to the *orang pendek* – the creature that some primatologists and journalists are still looking for in southern Sumatra. Moreover, older ethnographers described how Karo regard *umang* not as 'spirits' but as 'humans'. Acknowledging one of her predecessors (the German ethnographer Hagen), Steedly herself appears to agree with this feature of local Karo classification, remarking how 'the characterization of the *umang* as a special kind of human (or rather, quasi-human) being is still current among Karo today' (1993: 259). But this does not dissuade her from treating the *umang* as essentially imaginary, spiritual beings.

Radically distinguishing wildmen from spirits appears to be a feature not only of Karo classification but also of local knowledge in other Southeast Asian societies. The distinction certainly applies among societies of Flores Island, where named spirit categories (such as the Nage *nitu*) expressly exclude locally posited hominoids. People on Sumba also deny that their wildmen (the *mili mongga*) are a kind of spiritual being, pointing out several ways in which the two categories are significantly different. I would suggest, then, that if we are to get anywhere in understanding wildman images, in Southeast Asia or elsewhere, we need to respect distinctions recognized by local people themselves. In other words, we can do no better than follow the old anthropological prescription of beginning with what Malinowski long ago called 'the native's point-of-view'. This indeed will be the starting point of what I describe as an ethnozoological approach, concerned with situating the wildman in the broader context of local knowledge systems partly through a study of classifications. This approach does not promise a definitive answer to the question of whether or not wildmen 'really exist', but it may demonstrate two crucial ideas. The first is that, in order to deal comparatively with figures like the wildman, we need to develop analytical categories besides 'spiritual being' – or at any rate a larger class of 'non-empirical beings' that takes into proper account distinctions fundamental to local epistemologies. The second is that the category of the wildman, despite its relative neglect, really is an important topic for anthropology, and perhaps especially for the anthropology of Southeast Asia. ◀

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Stone figure of a wildman (*makotoba*) forming part of a tombstone in the eastern Sumbanese village of Parai Yawangu. The creature depicted is known by several other names, including 'mili mongga' and 'meu rumba'. According to the author's estimate it is about 100 years old.

Photo taken by author, June 2006