



Why Wogo went nobody knows

Central Flores retains its fascinating culture. **Annemarie and Holli Hollitzer** visited a village that for no apparent reason moved almost overnight

Although most of the 60,000 Ngada people are Christians, they retain many of their traditional beliefs, which makes the Ngada highlands of central Flores one of the most fascinating regions of the island.

We had stayed overnight in the Manggarai town of Ruteng and set off in the early morning through ricefields and villages for Borong on the south coast. We left behind the beaches and the lowland heat and turned north into cool, misty mountains.

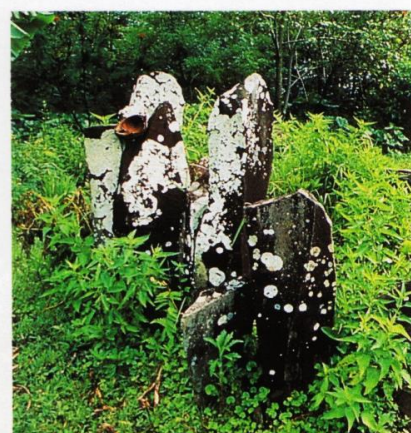
Our initial destination of Bajawa nestled in a lush, high valley. Its red roofs glow in the first rays of the

morning sun—a perfect day for exploring the nearby villages of Mataloko, Wogo and Bena.

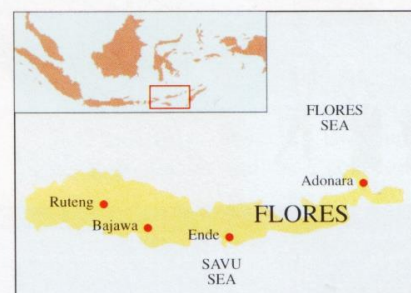
When we drive into Mataloko at 7.30am, the sun is shining brightly on the Sunday worshippers leaving mass. Roman Catholicism is strong; an estimated 85 per cent of Florinese are Christian.

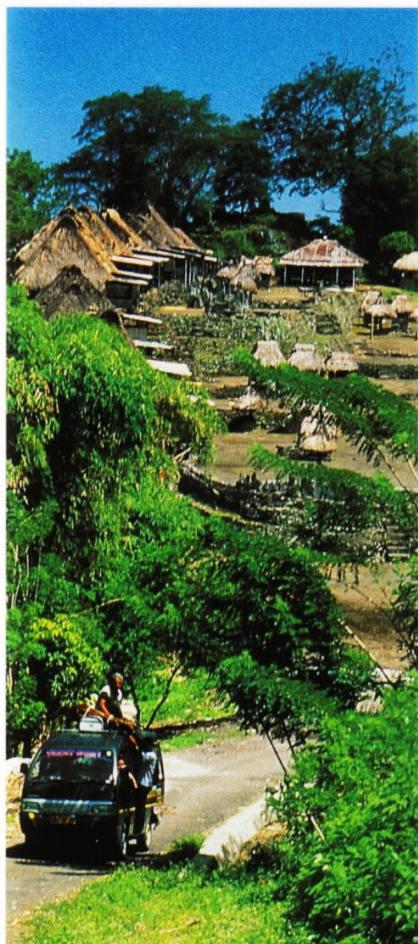
Our first stop was the bustling market where women come from afar to sell fresh produce.

They squat behind neatly-arranged chillies, garlic, ginger, corn and avocados. There is no shortage of fruit, either; bananas, passionfruit, custard



The red roofs of Bajawa glow in the first rays of the morning sun; megaliths in a grassy field are all that remains from the village of Old Wogo





At the traditional village of Bena (above) two rows of thatched steep-roofed houses extend up the terraced hill; worshippers leaving mass at Mataloko; two boys in Bajawa



apples, papaya and other juicy delicacies all compete for space.

It is in the villages surrounding Bajawa that ancestral beliefs and practices are strongest. A few kilometres from town lies Langa. When we arrived, it is late afternoon and, as on most days, the clouds have closed in.

The village, with its damp earth square flanked by rows of grey, wooden houses, looks dull and dark with the only splash of colour provided by an old woman spinning bright-orange yarn.

In the square stands a collection of Ngada houses, one row of "male" *ngadhu*, looking like displaced beach parasols, and another of miniature thatch-roofed houses the "female" *bhaga*.

Next morning we set off early for Bena, perhaps the finest example of a Ngada traditional village.

From every angle the smooth cone of 2245-metre Mount Inerie dominates

the landscape. Then we round a bend and below us the neat rows to Bena's wooden houses climb a hill at the base of the mountain.

A forbidding stone wall seems to block the entrance to Bena, but on closer inspection we find it is hiding high steps leading to the village centre. Here, on low stilts, two rows of thatched, steep-roofed houses extend up the terraced hill. Following ancient custom, the wooden houses face each other across a

wide open space set with clusters of high, sharply-slivered megaliths surrounding large horizontal stone slabs.

Pairs of *ngadhu* and *bhaga* line the square, reminders of the old beliefs. At

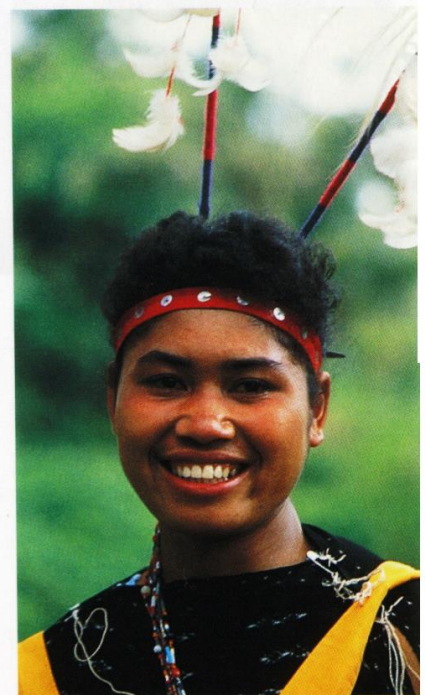
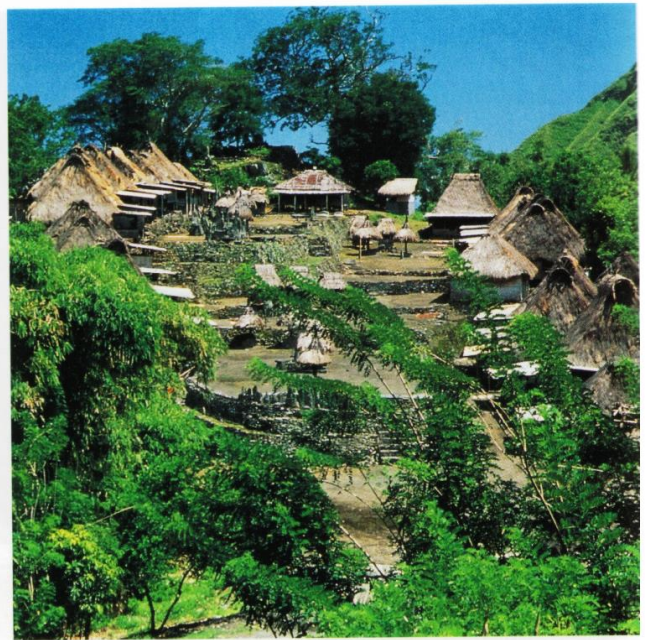
the end of the village, a statue of the Virgin Mary testifies to the new religion.

The "male" *ngadhu* is centred on a carved tree trunk and represents the male ancestors of a clan. It must be made from the hebu tree, which has been dug up with its roots intact. Covered in red cloth, the tree is still considered "hot", dangerous and lustful; women must beware—it might even rape them. Only after three types of designs have been carved on it does it

"cool" and become safe.

The designs are said to represent the three classes of Ngada society. Each *ngadhu* is usually topped by a martial figure holding weapons.

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A martial figure (top left) decorates a *ngadhu* rooftop; rows of *bhaga* and *ngadhu* line the stone terraces at Bena; traders at Mataloko market; Wogo woman in traditional dress

Similar figures also adorn the roofs of some village houses.

But, before a *ngadhu* can be built, its matching "female" *bhaga* house must be completed. The *bhaga* is the womb that will give birth to the ancestral deity.

In the olden days, during funerary rites for clan elders, dozens of water buffalo would be slaughtered at the metre-high stone sacrificial stake.


There are still times when the villagers feel they need the help of their ancestors, and will offer them pigs, chickens or betel nut.

Our next stop is Old Wogo and Wogo. About 30 years ago, the villagers of Wogo decided to move. Why remains a mystery, at least to outsiders.

It must have been something serious since deserting the abodes of clan ancestors would not have been easy.

Every man, woman and child packed their belongings, left their houses and ancestral shrines, and built a new village away from the old site.

Today, a muddy trail leads through bamboo groves to a desolate green field scattered with lichen-covered megaliths—the only relics of the old village. These sacred stones are being swallowed by the jungle.

Still pondering Old Wogo, we head back to Bajawa via Mataloko market, where rows of colourful Ngada traders line a large field. Soon, the noise from the crowds has dispelled any lingering thoughts on the enigma of Wogo. 

The Hollitzers are Sydney-based photojournalists