

Title: “THE ROCK ART TRADITIONS OF SARAWAK, MALAYSIAN BORNEO IN ISLAND-WIDE AND REGIONAL CONTEXTS”

Malaysian Translation of Title: “Tradisi Lukisan Batu Sarawak, Borneo Malaysia Dalam Konteks Seluruh Pulau dan Serantau”

Abstract: Modern humans have been creating rock art on Borneo in Island Southeast Asia (ISEA) for at least 40 ka, yet it is unclear how the timing, geographical distribution, and anthropological associations of the plentitude of rock art found at 31 sites in the coastal Malaysian state of Sarawak, fit into island-wide and regional rock art traditions and archaeological narratives. This article reviews and synthesizes Sarawak’s multivarious rock art traditions, in island-wide and regional ethnographic, historical, and archaeological contexts. Tremendously biodiverse, Borneo is the third largest island on the planet. Within this context, Malaysian Sarawak possesses a variety of rich, living cultural traditions and an approximately 50 ka history of modern human habitation, migration, and interaction at the Niah Caves Complex. Existing search and data as well as new discoveries are used here to survey the geographic distribution, landscape contexts, styles, and cultural, historical, and archaeological affiliations and significances of Sarawak’s many rock art traditions. While there remains much to know about Borneo’s local and regional ethnographic, historical, and archaeological narratives, Bornean rock art informs understandings of storied cultural landscapes, ancestral knowledge of past and living human cultures, as well as early modern human migration, adaptation, resource use, and innovation. Under these auspices, Sarawak’s rock art represents a direct record of millennia of human settlement, migration and interaction, and cultural practices that evolved through time. Embedded in storied cultural landscapes, Sarawak’s rock art signifies ancestral markings representing claims to territory, physically evinces indigenous oral traditions and cultural practices, and dynamic religious/spiritual practices that continue through the present. Academic research, the inclusion and emphasis on rock art throughout the recently-completed Sarawak Museum Department’s Borneo Cultures Museum in Kuching, and the integral role of rock art in Niah National Park’s United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage listing in 2024 underscore its continued significance and value to indigenous and local communities as well as the state government.

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Land Acknowledgement: Hawai‘i is a pae ‘āina (*archipelago*) recognized by Indigenous Hawaiians as their ancestral grandmother, Papahānaumoku. Her majesty Queen Lili‘uokalani yielded the Hawaiian Kingdom and these territories under duress and protest to the United States to avoid the bloodshed of her people. Hawai‘i remains an illegally occupied state of America. Generations of Indigenous Hawaiians and their knowledge systems shaped Hawai‘i in sustainable

ways that allow all inhabitants of the pae ‘āina to enjoy these gifts today. Everyone with aloha for Hawai‘i has the kuleana (*responsibility*) to support the varied strategies that the Indigenous peoples of Hawai‘i are using to protect their land and their communities, and commit to dedicating time and resources to working in solidarity.

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Biography: Dr. Rachel Hoerman is an archaeologist, Oceanic rock art researcher, and principal at a Native-owned cultural resources management firm in the Hawaiian Islands with 19 years of academic and applied heritage sector experience throughout Oceania. She is a member of the Hawai‘i-based Kali‘uokapa‘akai Collective and board member of the Rock Art Network Association, a global non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of rock art heritage. Her collaborative partnerships with the Sarawak Museum Department include rock art research, heritage preservation, museum, and collections-related initiatives.

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Keywords: Borneo rock art, Sarawak, Austronesian Painting Tradition, Bornean Highlands, Migration

Malaysian Translation of Keywords: Lukisan Batu Borneo, Sarawak, Tradisi Lukisan Austronesia, Tanah Tinggi Borneo, Migrasi

INTRODUCTION

Some of the world’s earliest rock art, including the oldest figurative motifs, are found in Borneo and Island Southeast Asia (ISEA), yet despite evidence for a roughly 50 ka history of human habitation at the Niah Caves Complex, the array of distinctive rock art traditions present in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, have yet to be integrated into island-wide and regional archaeological narratives. This article reviews and synthesizes Sarawak’s rock art traditions and, where possible, contextualizes them in local and regional ethnographic, archaeological, and historical contexts. Existing literature and data as well as new discoveries contribute to an understanding of the geographic distribution, landscape contexts, styles, and cultural, historical, and archaeological associations of Sarawak’s many rock art traditions. Published research, archival materials from the Sarawak Museum Department Archives (now on file at the new Borneo Cultures Museum in Kuching), as well as data (photographs, fieldnotes) gathered by Dr. Hoerman in collaboration with Mohd. Sherman Sauffi William, and many other Sarawak Museum Department administrators, staff, and research affiliates during field research between 2010 and 2015 (see Hoerman, 2016), inform the discussion. This article is a starting point for additional research that demonstrates chronological and cultural affiliations as well as ethnohistorical and ethnographic interpretations

of Sarawak's rock art are in some instances possible. Sarawak's rock art is integrated into island-wide and regional contexts in order to understand potential chronological and cultural affiliations, whether discrete endemic and introduced rock art traditions are present, and whether any potentially Neolithic and distinctively Austronesian rock art observed in East Kalimantan, Borneo (see Aubert et al., 2018, p. 554), is present in Sarawak.

For ease of reference, the site names "Lobang Tulang" and "Lobang Ringen" (versus Lubang Ringen) are utilized throughout the discussion below. Rock art types – paintings, drawings, bas-relief, engravings, and stencils – are described as accurately as possible based on the information available. The term "painting" is used for rock art evincing a fluid, wet medium used in application. "Drawing" describes rock art evincing that a solid, dry medium was utilized in its creation. "Black pigmented rock art" here references drawn or painted rock art executed in black. In some instances, the term refers to black colored rock art whose medium is unknown. In others, the term is used to describe a grouping of black colored rock art of known and unknown mediums.

The Archaeological Importance of Borneo and Sarawak

The third largest island on the planet, Borneo is divided between the geopolitics of Malaysia, the Sultanate of Brunei, and Indonesia. Deeply ancient geology and tremendous biodiversity, including tracts of ancient tropical rainforest and thousands of unique species of flora and fauna, characterize Borneo. Until 12 kya, the equatorial island was attached to the Asian subcontinent (see Voris, 2000). Over deep time, fluctuating coastlines and river systems further shaped Borneo's rich ecosystems and biota, including the migration and settlement patterns of ancient humans and indigenous populations (Barker et al., 2007; Barker et al. 2013; de Bruyn et al. 2014).

Borneo's geographic location, concentration of dynamic, living cultures¹, history of immigrant arrivals, and archaeological record (Table 1) uniquely position it to inform on human immigration and movement throughout the region beginning in deep time through the present. Oral traditions - myths, legends, songs, and chants – of Borneo's indigenous people are vessels of ancestral knowledge and memory relayed across centuries and generations, and valued and stewarded by people through the present (Sutlive, 1978; Sari, 2000; Hitchner, 2009; Janowski and Langub, 2011; Janowski, 2014; Gani, 2020; Janowski, 2021). Linguistically, seven of the ten primary languages spoken on Borneo are Austronesian (Blust, 1988, p. 57; Adelaar, 2008). Borneo's deeply ancient record of human habitation includes some of the oldest rock art in the world dating to between 51.8 and 37.2 ka and subsequent Pleistocene rock art traditions (Aubert et al., 2018, pp. 254), anatomically modern humans in ISEA dated to c. 45–39 ka at the Niah Caves (Barker et al., 2013; Hunt and Barker, 2014; Curnoe et al., 2016), the world's oldest surgical amputation at 31 ka (Maloney et al., 2022), and Neolithic and Holocene human skeletal remains and rock art (B. Harisson, 1967; T. Harisson, 1958c; Barker, 2005; Chazine, 2005; Szabó et. al., 2008; Fage and Chazine, 2010; Cole, 2011; Curnoe et al., 2018). Historical-era arrivals in Borneo included the Malays, Indians, Chinese, Dutch, British, and Japanese (Andaya and Andaya, 2001, pp. 24, 128, 142, 147, 160, 258).

¹ Indigenous Borneans include but are not limited to the Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Kayan, Kenyah, Kajang, Lun Bawang, Kelabit, Bisaya, Tagal, Kedayan, Penan, and Punan (Andaya and Andaya 2001:4,5)