

Shaman Representations in the Painted Cave at Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract

An anthropomorphic image is a very significant image in the development of a society, especially in terms of the socio-cultural aspects and early beliefs of that society. In this context, the figurative images produced on the walls of the Painted Cave, Sarawak can be considered as a representation of the 'shamans'. The Painted Cave was believed to have been used by the prehistoric people at that time as a burial site. A shaman is believed to have acted as the head of the ritual and had led the community at that time in conducting the death ceremony.

The objective of this research is to understand the physical features that clearly show this figurative image as a shaman's image. Based on the appearance and the shape of the images produced, this research identified several shaman images found on the cave walls through observations during fieldwork and numbers of images taken using photography.

The paper concludes that the Painted Cave has been a holy place for the people who had lived in the cave because the site houses several boat coffins that play a big role in the death ceremony. The Shaman had acted to accompany the spirit of the deceased to the realm of death by holding a ceremony in the cave. The results of the study prove the existence of the shamanic practices and the early beliefs of prehistoric societies in the Painted Cave. These practices have lasted for several centuries.

Keywords: Cave painting, rock art, anthropomorphic, shaman, ancient belief.

Introduction

The ancient people of the Niah Cave may have adapted to their surroundings in the long run. It takes a long time for such communities to evolve and accept the aspects of reform in their lives, through which culture is constructed. This cave painting is a clear evidence of adaptation and production of culture based on the artifacts found. Moreover, the influence of Nature may have strengthened their beliefs. Harrison (1964) says that intellectual and psychological development may have given rise to the ideas for the creation of their necessities.

Investigation of communications through media such as cave paintings allows people to know an event or history that may have happened, as well as knowledge or news which may have easily spread. By investigating communication through this cave painting, we can develop knowledge and deepen our thoughts on what they may have learned based on their experiences or based on the information they would have received from their environment.

It is presumed that cave paintings have been used as a medium of communication. These may have involved communication with other people, spirits, invisible beings, or even ancestral spirits. Motifs may have been used as the language of communication by prehistoric societies in those days before the writing system was known (Clottes, 2008). Before the creation of the letters of the alphabet, long before there was writing, cave paintings were meant as a medium of communication. It was clear that painting was used as the first language used by the humans. This research is to appreciate what makes us human today. Moreover, this cave painting expands our understanding of thought, creativity, and myth by proposing new and original theories.

The Object of Study

This paper presents a research that examined the Painted Cave at Sarawak, Malaysia. It is located near the Niah Great Cave about 100 km from the Miri city. It contains many unique pre-historic paintings that feature images of boats and human beings. Each motif is different from the other and measures between 1 cm to 10 cm and has been painted with a red pigment from *haematite*. The image that has been found on the walls of this cave has the concept of afterlife and the image of the funeral ceremony. At the time, it is assumed that people painted various images in the form of figures, animals, geometry and abstract shapes using *haemetite* materials and they believed that the image gave supernatural powers to help them after death (Sopandi, 2003).

Literature Review

The Niah Cave has been often studied and there exists a vast body of knowledge on this Cave. According to Harrison (1958a), it is the oldest prehistoric cave in the state of Sarawak. Historians assume that the Niah Cave may have been inhabited 40,000 years ago. The relics of the Paleolithic burial provide some evidence for this assertion.

In fact, burial images and coffins can be found in the Painted Cave near the Niah Cave, Sarawak. Throughout the cave walls, various patterns depict figurative patterns, blended with the geometric patterns along with the shape of a 'death ship'. This is followed by images of some *haematite* paintings on an elongated cave wall. Since the technology and way of life in prehistoric times is depicted focused on the cave paintings, the discovery of the cave paintings at the Painted Cave, Niah, and Sarawak has become a key to the knowledge of prehistoric culture and society. This prehistoric material is on display at the Niah Archaeological Museum.

Sopandi (2003) explains the discovery of this cave painting along with various ornaments from snails, beads, ceramics, and boats believed to be coffins used as supplies for the deceased, proving it is considered a ceremonial material for the living in connection with the deceased. This shows how important the role of cave painting is, in the socio-cultural life of the ancient communities.

The research site also houses several boat-shaped coffins. During the artifact excavation procedure, the coffin of the boat found was scattered and so were the skeletons of the ancient people scattered on the floor. Some ancient artifacts such as ancient beads and ceramics have also been found. Previous researchers have concluded that the objects found are related to the red cave wall paintings at that time. Harrison (1958b) found stone pottery, shells, beads, metal utensils, and double-spout pottery as well as several coffins during the excavation work carried out in this cave. The coffin was made of *belian* wood (*Eusideroxylon Zwageri*) which may have been placed on a

pillar that has now collapsed. Two Carbon Dates 14 (14C) indicate that the coffin of this boat was between 2,300 and 1,045 years old.



Fig. 1. Prehistoric Cave Painting in Painted Cave
Source: Author

Prehistoric paintings in the Painted Cave depict an anthropomorphic figure standing on the top looking like a boat or a ship. The space in the Painted Cave is associated with burial activities in a boat-shaped coffin. Harrisson (1964) associated the cave painting with the image of the “death ship” which showed the similarity of style to the boat depicted on the Dong Son drum; similar boat motifs have been found in the Manunggul Philippines jars and Racolo cave paintings in the East of Timor Leste (Hoerman, 2016). Barker, *et al.* (2007) conducting a chemical analysis of color pigments in the Painted Cave shows that the color pigments were not only made from *haematite* as originally thought but were mixed with liquids believed to originate from local tree resins.

Research Methodology: Data Collection

The authors visited the site area on October 15, 2017 for the first time in an effort to obtain preliminary information about the study site and planning the research process. From 29th to 30th May 2018, the data was collected by conducting observations and interviews with the residents around the Niah Cave Abdul Hamid bin Salleh who is the head of village Pengkalan Lobang, Batu Niah, was interviewed. The interview was also conducted with Sarawak Forestry Company biologist, Haidar bin Ali, the person in charge of the Niah National Park, and the officers of the Niah Archaeological Museum, Mohamad Saffri bin Queen and Lester Nelson anak Taip.

The last visit was with Sarawak Museum officer, Mohd Sherman bin Sauffi from 16th to 18th January 2019. During this visit, the author entered the site and recorded 126 images individually and made specific research of the features and design of the images over the five days. Interviews were also conducted with Mohd Sherman in obtaining information as he has experience on conducting archaeological research in the same cave from 2005 until 2008 (Szabo *et al.* 2008).

During the fieldwork, a preliminary analysis was done to obtain as much data as possible to build a cultural interpretation that took place in the Niah's Painted Cave. Among the preliminary analysis carried out is the analysis of artifacts and also the analysis of floating samples from the soil excavated. The purpose of this analysis is to obtain evidence to prove the prehistory of people's activities at the time.

This data is very important to help build an overview of the research site. Other artifacts such as stone tools, pottery, and shells have also been observed to facilitate the initial analysis as well as further analysis in the laboratory and on display.

The past publications in the Sarawak Museum's archive collection are the main reference materials in this research. The museum's archive officer, Lily Sia, has given permission to obtain as much information as possible. Author visited the Sarawak Museum library from 26th to 28th October 2018 to obtain past information as a reference. The author returned to Kuching from 16th to 24th March 2019 for the purpose of making a final observation on the artefacts found in the Sarawak Museum collection. The interview was once again conducted with Mohd Sherman bin Sauffi and the Director of Sarawak Museum, Dr. Ipoi Datan in providing more authentic information on the research site.

The closest reference to similar research has been done by Tom Harrison and his wife Barbara Harrison in 1964. He has carried out excavations at the site of the Painted Cave. The cave is located quite separate from the main cave which is the Niah Cave (West Mouth). During the excavation carried out in the cave, cave paintings have been found on the walls of the caves and at a number of boat-shaped coffins where the bodies have been stored. During the research carried out in 1960, it was found that the cave was full of elements of prehistoric society paintings. Thus, this research is very meaningful in the efforts to record the historical period in Sarawak.

The method of analyzing is one of the methods of knowing which message to convey by a visual form. The process of visual analysis is also an important element that academics need to do in identifying messages as well as making visual comparisons with other visuals. Therefore, the scope of visual communication should also be scrutinized. Visual communication is a combination of language and images used to connect and it is analyzed to the human mind through the senses of the eye (Ballard, *et al.* 2004).

Next, motives and images are associated with themes and mythical stories or legends that find from informants or secondary sources. Thus, the symbolism in question includes a comprehensive description of the motives and images as well as the presentation of meanings. Clottes (2008) explain the results of observations usually recorded in the form of notes. Once the data is collected, all current records of the research will be structured to be analyzed as a whole.

Interview data, analysis of documents, observations and other data related directly and indirectly to the procedure of recording cave paintings, at the Painted Cave, Sarawak are analyzed and compiled based on the research objectives. This research covers the aspect of identifying the design and categorizing images of prehistoric cave paintings. It aims to analyze the images in the prehistoric cave paintings, the Painted Cave and its relationship with the community at that time. It intends to identify the iconography of the prehistoric cave painting.

There was a revival of new interest in the work of art historians by Panofsky (1972), which distinguished 'various levels of understanding in visual images'. The first stage is known as 'Pre-iconography', or the main or natural meaning consisting of the recognition of the pure form. The second stage is 'Iconography', or secondary or conventional meaning consisting of an intellectual interpretation of a common cultural context. The third stage, which is 'Iconology' which is also a symbolic, intuitive and deep meaning that can be accessed only with a subjective understanding.

This theory suggests that visual artwork has "linguistics" which means that the visual image itself has a language to be conveyed through the use of motives, patterns

or images (Vaneck *et al.* 2005). Iconography acts like a ‘sign’ that continues to appear without our consciousness, and it is also possible that iconography exists in the mind that such ‘signs’ are references in the form of images. This thus gives the impression to the author that the signs that exist represent something.

The recorded atmosphere collects useful information as a source of life documentation. This cave painting is used as a manifestation to capture visual images that help in understanding the past events. The effects of cave paintings in life attract nostalgia and memories of the past. This may have influenced the minds of the people who at that time would have thought that cave paintings received attention and value to future generations when placed on a respectable status.

Findings

A total of 41 anthropomorphic images have been identified on the cave walls. Some iconic figurative images are also identified with certain physical features that show the uniqueness of this cave painting. Through the visual analysis, the image of this human figure is identified with human characteristics such as having a head, hands, fingers, feet, and physical characteristics of the human body. Fig. 2 is an author’s interpretation of the anthropomorphic image icons in the cave paintings.

The anthropomorphic or human-shaped images are among the most popular images as they can be found in almost all of these Painted Cave wall panels. The image is drawn using line patterns that vary from fine lines to thick lines. This human image is displayed in various shapes and positions that indicate it is performing a certain activity.

To understand what motivated prehistoric artists to produce these cave paintings is to understand the origins of myth and religion, as explained by Whitley (2008).



Fig. 2. Shaman Representation 1
Source: Author

This image shows a large figure wearing a headdress. The figure's hand is also holding an unidentifiable object. This image shows a shaman who acted as the head of the ceremony in a funeral ritual performing inside the Painted Cave. His hand is holding an object which appears to be a tool used in performing the funeral rites. Haryanto *et al.* (2022) says that the stalk motif is considered a symbol of the sacred. According to him, the prehistoric society was led by a shaman who acted to give an idea of the greatness of the supernatural powers and the forces of Nature and they had to fear and obey these great powers.

Fig. 3 is an image of the most unique figure. With its stylish hand and finger appearance and dynamic body shape composition, it forms a very prominent image. Figures such as the physicality of these aliens refer to the figure that plays a role in performing the death ceremony which is the shaman. This stylistic hand representation is a picture of a hand holding a stick or object for a ritual ceremony. A shaman is a person who plays a role in leading the ceremonies performed in the cave. It is suggested that the importance of the shaman is to mobilize the community based on the influence and belief in the power worshiped and adored by the shaman.



Fig. 3. Shaman Representation 2
Source: Author

The image of this figure is depicted as jumping of three beings with open arms and legs. These three images were identified as human figures symbolizing joy with a jumping position while holding hands. Believed to be celebrating something and dancing with joy throughout the death ceremony, a crowd is conjectured to have held to enliven the event. The image of the figure with open arms and legs is symbolic of the behavior of rejoicing and praying.



Fig. 4. Shaman Representation 3
Source: Author

The figurative image in Fig.4 shows the human position in a state of standing while performing a ceremony or presentation. The description of this worship event is based on the display of human images found on the cave walls of the Toko Cave, Southeast Sulawesi. This human image is depicted in a state of standing with hands opened up and feet open as if dancing in the form of worship or making offerings to Gods. Most of these groups of people's images were wearing ornaments on their heads as if facing or surrounding an object.

Shamanic Practices

Cultures are usually considered to have a systematic pattern of arrangement so that the components of the parts are in harmony. From this research, it is found that the culture of the ancient society in the Painted Cave is composed of various subsystems namely technology, society, religion, ideology, and economy. The basis of these findings is the existence of evidence of small systems that interact with each other.



Fig. 5. Digital illustration of prehistoric images of the first-panel wall
(Measurement: 7 meters horizontal)
Source: Author

As previously explained, cave paintings in the Painted Cave generally feature anthropomorphic (human-shaped), zoomorphic, abstract, and death ship images. Images of human figures have been found in various styles and positions such as standing, dancing, and even fishing. The most dominant image of this entire panel is the image of some shamans leading the death ritual.



Fig. 6. Images featuring unique figures and decorated with dynamic and stylistic shapes surrounded by death ship images
Source: Author

This does not mean that there is no variation in the images but simply states that existing norms can be found archaeologically in the form of patterned relics found at sites. What is important is that there may be significant differences in a site. In extra-

archeological research, one must determine a sample of a site to find out the differences within the site itself and what the relationship is.

The implication is that variation itself has patterns and that behaviors that have different patterns represent archaeological remains that are systematically related to each other. This systematic connection is a rationale that maintains the system. In this context, the shaman was the driving force behind the early beliefs of the prehistoric societies. Fig. 6 shows the image of a unique figure believed to be a shaman who was leading a death ceremony as illustrated by several images of a death ship surrounding it. Riana Adicandra *et al.* (2022) referred to the interior hall called “*ndalem*” in Indonesian as a metaphorical term for home which is a symbol of the “within me”. The painted cave structure represents the hall where all the death ceremonies take place as a sacred place by the ancient people.

The prehistoric society inhabiting the Painted Cave has had a practice of worship by shamans because there is evidence in cave paintings about their function in the community. There is an element of belief in the forces of Nature and supernatural powers that have shaped their lives. They showed that these supernatural powers had formed the world and eventually began to adapt in the mystical powers that were going on around them. These supernatural powers refer to the forces of Nature that have occurred due to the extreme climate at that time.

Conclusion

The practice of shamanistic rituals can result in the practitioner experiencing a ‘spirit’ in the form of an animal, and the shaman can transform into the ‘spirit’ itself. This may explain the occurrence of the anthropic images in the ancient cave paintings. Authors object to such a theory because not all artifacts are interpreted as representing a real mix of humans and other animals.

In this context, It is argued that the prehistoric society in the Painted Cave has been led by a chief ritual practitioner. In the continental Europe, the term shaman in the context of cave paintings refer to individuals who play a role in performing rituals and ceremonies in a community. In the context of the practice of community belief, in the Painted Cave, they are also led by a shaman. He or she has played the role of leading the community in conducting the supernatural powers which aim to apply for safety, health, and protection to avoid major disasters.

The site of the cave painting has revealed that the prehistoric community had a desire to produce the cave paintings (Kimwah *et al.*, 2018). These cave paintings consist of images of boats, human figures, animals and these images are used on a recurring basis. The cave paintings in the Painted Cave depict the cultural aspects that took place during the Neolithic Age (Harrisson, 1958a). The features of the scenery of both human and animal images, depicted with exceptional artistic skills, are often the resulting images of human figures and images of sailboats known as *death ship* images.

This research helps to explain the original conceptual meaning of the culture of the prehistoric society and the importance of iconographic interpretations. The concept of the relevant cultural meaning in the record of being ‘text-free’ in the past which is characteristic of this symbolic image needs to be researched and understood. The results of this research have found many ethnographic analogies in each of the resulting images. There are cultural similarities revealed by the prehistoric society that are now still practiced by a handful of communities who have settled near the Niah Cave complex (West Mouth).

The Punan and Iban people who were the earliest residents have been recorded in the vicinity of the Niah Cave. For example, boat-making activities are still maintained as they serve as transportation in rural areas.

As a result of the analysis presented, it is clear that the cave paintings found in the Painted Cave carry the context of death ritual. The funeral ceremony performed in the cave is an integral part of the entire rite of death. The bodies are left to decay completely and the remaining bones of the corpses are buried at other burial sites. The resulting cave paintings are records produced to retell the myths of ancestral beliefs. The *shaman-led* rituals and ceremonies are aimed at launching the spirits of the dead capable of going through the transitional stages and arriving to a new place safely. This research explains the concept of the ritual practice of death that was practiced by the prehistoric society at that time.

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Author's Contributions

Junior Kimwah is a senior lecturer in the Visual Arts Technology program from the Academy of Arts and Creative Technology, Universiti Malaysia Sabah as the lead researcher in conducting research at the Painted Cave site with Mr. Mohd Sherman bin Sauffi who acts as a supervisor in the field. The process of collecting data, photography and illustration work was also done by Dr. Junior and the process of writing the analysis was guided by Mr. Mohd Sherman bin Sauffi.

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