

# Interpretations of Zoomorphic Images in the Painted Cave at Sarawak, Malaysia

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## Abstract

The Painted Cave, located within in the Niah Cave Complex is a cave believed to have been inhabited by the Neolithic people. Inside the cave, there are numerous artefacts including boat-shaped coffins, jewelry made of shells, bones, and ceramics. There are also cave paintings drawn on the cave wall using hematite materials mixed with a mixture of plant liquid material.

Zoomorphic refers to images of animals. In this cave, there are several animal images, which have not been adequately interpreted or understood. This paper examines these zoomorphic images which are significant to the community.

The paper interprets the zoomorphic images found inside the cave by recording them digitally. The research re-produced the images using Adobe Photoshop's digital software. By analysing the characteristics, this research identifies these images as being of chicken which it argues could have been important at the time.

The paper concludes that the images demonstrate the significance of chicken during the Neolithic period as a source of food. Based on the premise that ancient people drew the images on the cave wall when they believed they are important as part of the history the paper argues that ancient society could have started consuming chicken as their source of protein at that time.

**Keywords:** Cave Paintings, Painted Cave, Zoomorphic Images, Saravak, Malaysia

## Introduction

Niah Cave is located in the Niah National Park which is a part of the Miri district of Sarawak. There are large caves there in large lime block formations, in an area about a kilometer long, and about half a kilometer wide, oriented North-South. The cave is considered an important prehistoric site where the remains of a 40,000-year-old human skulls have been found. In fact, this site is the oldest human settlement recorded in East Malaysia.

The Painted Cave located about 500 meters from the Niah Cave of the South-east end block, has prehistoric cave paintings produced using haematite material, believed to be more than 3000 years old. The first investigation of this conducted by Tom Harrisson in 1950 has

recorded the activities of the folded and sitting human burials found in this cave since 20,000 BP (Harrison, 1960).

Prehistoric painting is an important phenomenon in the world of modern painting art. Artists are encouraged to understand the history of art and its development through art historiography that will determine the future direction of modern paint art in Malaysia. The cave paintings are fading due to numerous fragile physical factors. Therefore, these ancient images need to be recorded as evidence of the history for the understanding of the future generations. With the advantages of today's technology, these faded images can be identified and redrawn using technological software (Kimwah & Sauffi, 2023).

The beauty of the prehistoric paintings clearly demonstrates the existence of cultural elements as well as the level of intellectualism of primitive society during the ancient times. Its uniqueness lies not only in the aesthetic value and subtlety of imagery but in the philosophy implicit behind it. The drawings of this age are clear evidence that humanity at that time had already become civilized and socialized. This is clearly documented in the drawings. Thus, the Neolithic painting is a solid proof of the situation that existed 35,000 years before AD.

In this context, the primary objective of this paper is to record all the images of animals found within the walls of the cave. The secondary objective is to strive to digitally document images of animal drawings reproducing them using Adobe Photoshop digital software. In so doing, it interprets the meanings of the images as could be deciphered from the characteristics of the images.

Therefore, this research discusses the iconic zoomorphic images and aesthetic aspects in the field of visual arts and discovers each of the resulting zoomorphic motives. Among the objectives of the research was to collect information related to the activities of animal hunting and agriculture. They also found many animal bones around the Niah Cave Complex.

## Literature Review

Lape et al, (2007) say that the ancient people believed that by producing drawings of animals on the walls of caves, they would make the spirit of such animals come to them and bring good luck to them. Indeed, some people believe that cave paintings are intended to send a message to others who pass through or live in or around the caves in the future.



**Fig. 1:** Part of the Horse Painting Panel in Chauvet Cave, France.

Source: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2015/01/05/shooting-chauvet-photographing-the-worlds-oldest-cave-art/>

Cave paintings are also called cave art, or rock art (Hasan, 2003). In Fig. 1 shows a horse painting. This artwork is about 36,000 years old. In June 2014 UNESCO voted the Chauvet Cave as a World Heritage Site. People who see cave paintings, especially archaeologists, can explain how ancient societies lived. Cave paintings are considered the most important way to show the interaction between ancient societies and the world (Ballard, et al., 2004). Interestingly, most cave paintings have existed during the Paleolithic period.

History begins with a real documentation activity about events. Prehistory is an assumption of what happened before any tangible evidence existed through the available documentation. Therefore, the study of art in this prehistoric period in the form of assumptions and hypotheses is based on evidence of abandoned art artefacts. Art historians and

archaeologists do research from the relics of artefacts and form theories and assumptions through the artefacts (Naziree, 2013).

In ancient times, before humans used the writing system as it is now, they used some records or some sketches on the walls, especially in deep caves (Kimwah & Sauffi, 2021). The same applies to ancient societies who believed that by producing drawings of animals on the walls of caves, they would make the spirit of such animals come to them and bring good luck to them. Some people believe that cave paintings are intended to send a message to others who pass through or live in caves in the future. (Clottes, 2008).

Previous research of archaeologists and scientists, they believed that the phenomenon of cave painting has lasted between 10,000 and 4,000 BC. They also found that cave paintings are found on all continents around the world but only in different styles and forms. For example, hunting, collecting food and other daily activities or real conditions are often highlighted in cave paintings in Europe and Africa. While, cave paintings in Australia and America are more abstract and symbolic, and it is not easy to understand them. As of the end of the 20th century, in Europe alone there are 277 cave paintings that have been identified by art historians and anthropologists, 142 sites are located in France, Spain has 108 sites, Italy has 21 sites and other countries such as Portugal and Germany own at least 2 sites in their countries. (Johnson, Adam, 2012).

Hasan (2003) stated that the art of painting has begun to exist in the Paleolithic period. The results of this Paleolithic painting still remain today and are found in France and Northern Spain. The purpose or reason humans of this stone age paint is still uncertain. But in terms of assumptions all forms of painting that exist it has to do with belief in power. Man in this day and age has a belief in subtle and supernatural forces or animism. They believe this power saves them or gives them food. Therefore, it is believed, they paint as if claimed by the supernatural forces that they believe in and this belief to be a form of early religion. Cave paintings are usually made by specific people for certain ceremonies and occasions. This can be identified by taking a deeper look at the one-on-one works of this stone-age painting.

According to Tansey & Kleiner (1996) a painting on a cave wall was discovered in France and Northern Spain about 120 years ago. The discovery proved that the community was as early as 35 000 years old before AD had used paintings, images, emblems and symbols. In addition, four places in Asia and Africa have been found various historical relics that prove that the art was born in prehistoric times.

Clottes (2008) a prehistoric cave painting expert agrees that in order to produce and to understand two-dimensional images requires a high imagination ability to produce and understand the depiction of icons in two-dimensional form. In order to understand such a phenomenon, researchers consider what we now know about the creation of the first human being, a figurative or iconic image in a circular composition.



**Fig. 2:** Drawings in Image Breakdown from Babirusa (*Babyrousa sp.*) and Stencil Hand from one of the Caves in Sulawesi, Indonesia

Source: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/rockart-ages-indonesian-cave-paintings-are-40000-years-old-180952970/>

Many cave paintings have been uncovered and interpreted. For example, in a cave named Lubang Jeriji Saléh, cave paintings have been found in Sulawesi, Indonesia. The image edges out the cow-like creatures which sketched on the wall, with the largest standing more than seven feet across. The new dating analysis suggests that these images are at least 40,000 years old, earning them the title of the earliest figurative a portly *babirusa*, or ‘pig deer’.

Three caves of the Marang River appear to have been used specifically as burial sites. They are located high in the middle of the cliff, the middle between the bottom of the cliffs and the height at which there are caves decorated with cave paintings. Early researchers found artefacts and human bones scattered in the ground in varying quantities, usually at the floor of the wall, in flat places, or on the inside.

Many decorated coffins, various motifs on ceramics including those known throughout Southeast Asia. The shape of some coffins is similar to the images of Neolithic death boats found at the Niah Cave and Sireh Cave sites in Sarawak (Datan & Bellwood, 1989; Harrison, 1958), Madai (Bellwood, 1997) and Baturong in Sabah (Harrison & Harrison, 1971), even Tabon in Palawan (Fox, 1970). The fact that similar forms of Neolithic pottery seem to have been used throughout Borneo suggests that the origins of this tradition may be more complex than the theory of northern coastal colonization received from Austronesia originating from the sea. The duration of the activity shown is different and the pottery style from 3,500-3000 to 2,500-1,500 years ago.

Recent research on Mulyoharjo sculptures feature characteristics and qualities primarily seen in the exquisite carving embellishments. Other elements include the composition of Jepara sculptures located in Java, Indonesia, which are often symmetrical and have thin concave carvings. According to Sugiyanto et al. (2023), there are also animal motifs, such as horse, which usually include motifs with bird items as part of a supporting composition of plant motifs.

There are deposits of marine life shells found in the Niah Cave, Bone Lobang and the Painted Cave. In interpreting them, Harrison (1964) says that shell residues are only casual evidence and has nothing to do with burial ceremonies. However, researchers argue that shell residues can be associated with funeral activities. This finding was reinforced by the discovery of shells and snails used by prehistoric societies as jewelry. Ballard et al. (2004) also note the relationship between shells and snails used in funeral ceremonies at the Tabon Gua Palawan site, in northern Borneo in the southwestern Philippines.

Further observation techniques associated with bone-ornament production are presented in the artefacts. Holes drilled through the teeth of leopard, civet cat and dog, as well as those seen in the bead spacers are absolutely straight, with no evidence of countersinking. Such perforation morphology is generally indicative of the use of metal- tipped drills. Also worthy of note are four shark vertebrae, one of which has a large, worn, central perforation and an abraded perimeter (Szabó et al, 2008).

The closest reference to similar research was done by Tom Harrison and his wife Barbara Harrison (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 were found on the walls of the caves and numbers of boat coffins lays on the cave floor. During the research that was carried out in 1960, it was found that the cave was full of elements of prehistoric paintings. Thus, this research is very meaningful in the effort to record the historical period in Sarawak.

## Research Methodology

Researchers has identified 10 images of animals. The physical properties inherent in real objects are then compared with the recorded zoomorphic images. The features that have been identified on the image determine the category of zoomorphic images produced. The use of icons in zoomorphic images were noted.

The research was carried out in 2001. The group of researchers led by Graeme Barker (2016) subsequently resumed the research on 8 April 2002. The third research further strengthens the evidence of the arrival of the prehistoric community to Kuala Lobang (West

Mouth) before 43, 000 B.C. It also leads to an increase in evidence of the existence of a farming system since the existence of modern society in Borneo.

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

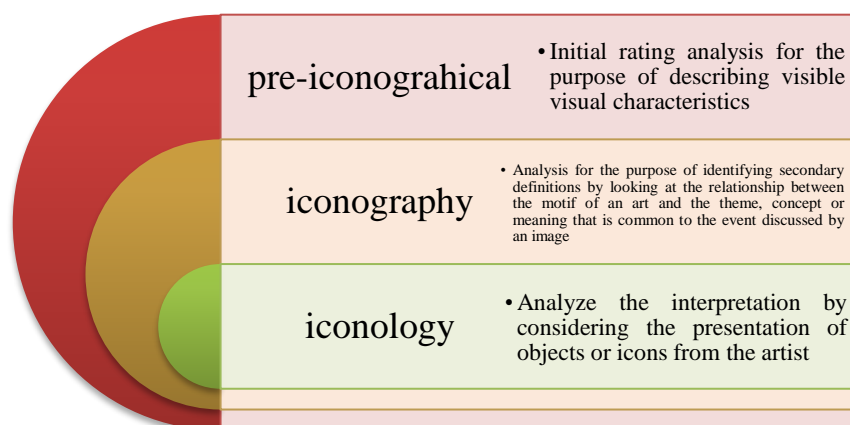
This research focuses on 50-metre-long indoor cave paintings in the Painted Cave area of Niah, Sarawak. The 50-metre-long cave wall is divided into seven main panels and analysed each. The studied aspect is the images and pictures produced by ancient society. The process of taking pictures and recording each image is a key aspect in documenting the cave painting.

Past research had discussed on archaeological, scientific and geological, and biological aspects and had placed less emphasis on the visual aspect of the cave painting. Research explaining in detail about the iconography of the images produced on the walls of such caves is limited. In this context, this research plays a major role in identifying the importance of the 'death chamber' which houses the boat-coffin.

This research drew up a documentation procedure and recorded each image found on the cave wall. Each image is identified with iconographic elements and symbolic elements used by ancient people in producing images. An analysis is made based on iconology according to Erwin Panofsky.

The research examines each image and depicts the subject that has been produced in the form of a 2-dimensional drawing and elaborates the art elements and design principles and further explains the iconographic aspects contained in each of the images. Here, research has recorded and labeled zoomorphic images found on the cave wall. The features in the images are translated through the appreciation aspect of the artwork and this conservation effort can protect the image from being lost.

According to Panofsky (1972), the discussion of art elements can be carried out through two iconographic and iconological approaches that also go through three stages of analysis, namely;



**Fig. 3:** Iconography analysis by Erwin Panofsky  
Source: Panofsky (1972)

This research is carried out through iconographic research found in prehistoric painting images. Iconographic analysis further examines the image as an interpretation of meaning in depth and subjectively. This research sees this method as being through the main iconography implicitly while aspects of the process involve the process of interpreting images that are carried



out carefully and made repetitively. In the context of this research, iconographic analysis is an analysis of visual displays to see the iconographic context found in the artwork. Iconographic analysis is used to analyze and make a detailed and systematic exposure to the motives found in zoomorphic images to obtain information that can explain the meaning.

Iconography also expresses certain attitudes, ideologies or myths against the background of a combination of such signs. There are several ways to analyze a picture to explain the iconographic theory inherent in the image. Theoretically, a piece of picture gives many meanings. In order to visually analyze the images based on the iconographic theory, one should begin with the reading and observation session on each object and image to be studied, then perform the marking and select the images that show the presence of cultural signs, life, colors and elements of the fine arts used.

## Findings

The cave paintings produced are believed to have supernatural powers to encourage and inspire them when hunting. This spirit has a connection with everyday life and is depicted in the form of a symbolic icon that carries the meaning of spiritual strength. Painting images of amazing creatures had a special function in the culture at that time (Whitley, 2008). This symbolism records the dreams, ideas, feelings and life experiences of the people of that time.

Zoomorphic images are identified through the physical characteristics of the images. For example, the shape of the hands and legs that resemble animals is the key to the symbolism used by the prehistoric painters. Thus, the following image is a representation to animals that existed in the Neolithic period.

On the entire walls of this cave, researchers have identified as many as 10 images of the appearance of animals. Significant physical characteristics such as four-legged animals, anatomical limbs such as head horns and even chicken fronds are the main icons of the identified images.

### Case Study 1



**Fig. 4:** Softshell turtles

The image in Fig. 4 shows an animal shape with anatomy of the front legs and open back legs. The oval shape of the body and the pointed tip of the body clearly indicate the tail of the animal. This image suggests the representation of softshell turtles. A type of reptile believes freshwater animals that have an oval or slightly round, flattened body shape without scales. Softshell turtles do not have teeth where their jaws are covered by a sharp beak. The nose of the elongated softshell turtles is gently shaped like a proboscis.

### Case Study 2



**Fig. 5:** Monkey

The image in Fig. 5 clearly shows the appearance of a primate animal, a monkey. A pronounced physculatory characteristic of the body structure and anatomy of the tail and hands of the animal indicates that the animal is a monkey. The presence of a tail, along with heir narrow-chested bodies and their hands and feet are both used for grasping and typically have five digits, the thumb and big toe being divergent from the others.

**Case Study 3****Fig. 6:** Snake, monkey, and leopard cat

The Fig. 6 consists of three zoomorphic images. The first image produced from a circular line shows the characteristics of a snake-like animal. Meanwhile, inside the circle there is a small image that shows the shape of a small monkey. The obvious features of the third image are the fronds on the tail and the small head, short narrow muzzle, long rounded ears clearly indicating that the animal is a leopard cat. Asian leopard cats are similar in size to large domestic cats.

**Case Study 4****Fig. 7:** Marine Bivalve Mollusks

The Fig. 7 shows the image created as circularly. It is believed that this image is a reflection of marine life such as oyster and clams. As a result of archaeological finds previously, the Painted Cave is believed once surrounded by sea coast. Hence, such marine is source of daily food at the time. Most species live just below the low-tide line; some have been obtained from depths of more than 500 metres and a few live in the intertidal zone.

**Case Study 5****Fig. 8:** Two Hammerhead worms

Dalam Fig. 8 menunjukkan dua imej serangga yang diberi nama Hammerhead worm. A hammerhead worm (*Bipalium sp.*) known with their flattened head and slimy body. Hammerhead worms are described as hermaphroditic and said to be predatory as they prey on earthworms. Some species are even found to have tetrodotoxin, a dangerous neurotoxin.

**Case Study 6****Fig. 9:** Two Junglefowls

The Fig. 9 features two faded images. However, it is still clear to show the characteristics of junglefowl with the shape of a tail and a beaked head. Compared to the more familiar domestic-chicken, the Junglefowl has a smaller body mass. Junglefowl tail is composed of long, arching feathers that initially look black, but shimmer with blue, purple and green in direct light. These birds can be found in tropical moist forests, mangroves and scrub areas.

**Case Study 7****Fig. 10: Sambar deer**

The Fig. 10 is an image of a sambar deer due to the shape of the horns that are rounded and also displayed with four legs in a standing position. Sambar deer has dark brown with rusty hues on its inner legs, chin and tall underside. The male has three-point antlers that can reach 1.2 meters in length. They can be found in broad-leaved forests, coniferous woods, bush lands, grass slopes, and forests of low and middle-height mountains.

The two images in Fig. 9 are of jungle chicken with beaked heads and a crested on the top of the chicken's head and a sling under the beak. Two of these images have two legs with large claws. The shape of its tail feathers clearly shows that the chicken of the image is a rooster. The icons used by the prehistoric painters in the images above are, chicken beaks, crests, and claws.

Animals such as chickens are easily found around the island of Borneo. Junglefowls in Fig. 9 shows image of the resulting chicken is believed to be a forest chicken inhabiting around the Painted Cave Forest. These chickens were hunted for the use of protein sources in the daily life of prehistoric societies. The prehistoric community that inhabited the caves around the Niah Cave Complex has begun to adapt and hunt for their food. This survival activity is a testament to the intellectual development of the society at that time.

This image is taken from the wall of the cave painting. This image depicts a myth spread across generations through word of mouth, with permanent imagery aimed at preserving meaning so as not to be lost in history (Datan, 2022). Ahmad (2006) explains, "Previous images actually show complex compositions that characterize prehistoric art in visual form".

Snakes in Fig. 6 with painful venomous pats seem to have become part of prehistoric community life. In this cave painting, the image of a snake in a circle position has been definitively identified on several panels of the cave wall. The resulting pictograph shows that the image of a prehistoric animal undergoes a transformation with the head, body, and tail. This transformation has been reflected in prehistoric art.

This research found that the interpretation of these cave paintings is quite open and the images are depicted as part of an "orderly change of landscape," with image creators having centralized the conceptuality of their universe to the natural world in which they live. This happens in three stages, with the upper (*celestial in nature*), the middle (plants and animals) and the lower (darkness, death and danger) which is an afterlife that corresponds to the concept of life in the region.

Nowadays, most people think only about the sophistication of modern technology. They rarely recall back to world history, how the first civilizations appeared, what happened in ancient times, how ancient people lived, how to find food and so on. In ancient times, before human beings used writing systems as it is now, they used some records or some sketches on the walls, especially in deep caves (Bellwood, 1997). Some archaeologists have found many cave paintings, especially on the European continent. Cave paintings have different histories, meanings, methods to produce cave paintings to hunt more animals to get food easily.

Others identifiable images of animals include images of crocodiles, snails, turtles, four-legged mammals, and figures with bird and human characteristics. This symbolism can be said that some human figures wear headdresses and clothes. However, the general symbolism of the figure hides in the ambiguity of human or physical nature of animals. As Harrison (1958) has proven, the recognizable features of the scattering of artefacts and prehistoric relics in the Painted Cave are clearly closely related to the symbolism of death, and have a correlation with the cave paintings that have been produced.



## Conclusion

It is noted that most of the iconic images in the Sarawak painted cave are painted in red. The images are diverse: some are shaped so abstract that they are difficult to translate. Through this cave painting, one can identify the activities carried out by the prehistoric community: mainly the hunting activities that are still carried out by the indigenous community.

The painted Cave in Sarawak, Malaysia has its own ancient cave painting culture that can be the gaze of today's generation. It reflects the creative expression of an ancient society. This suggests that human activities in ancient times took place universally in visual form. The creation of cave paintings is also in line with the history of the development of human culture and our knowledge of the culture of prehistoric society.

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