



PROCEEDINGS OF THE IFRAO CONGRESS
September 2010

2013 # 5

<http://www.palethnologie.org>
ISSN 2108-6532

directed by
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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



THE ROCK ART OF BORNEO

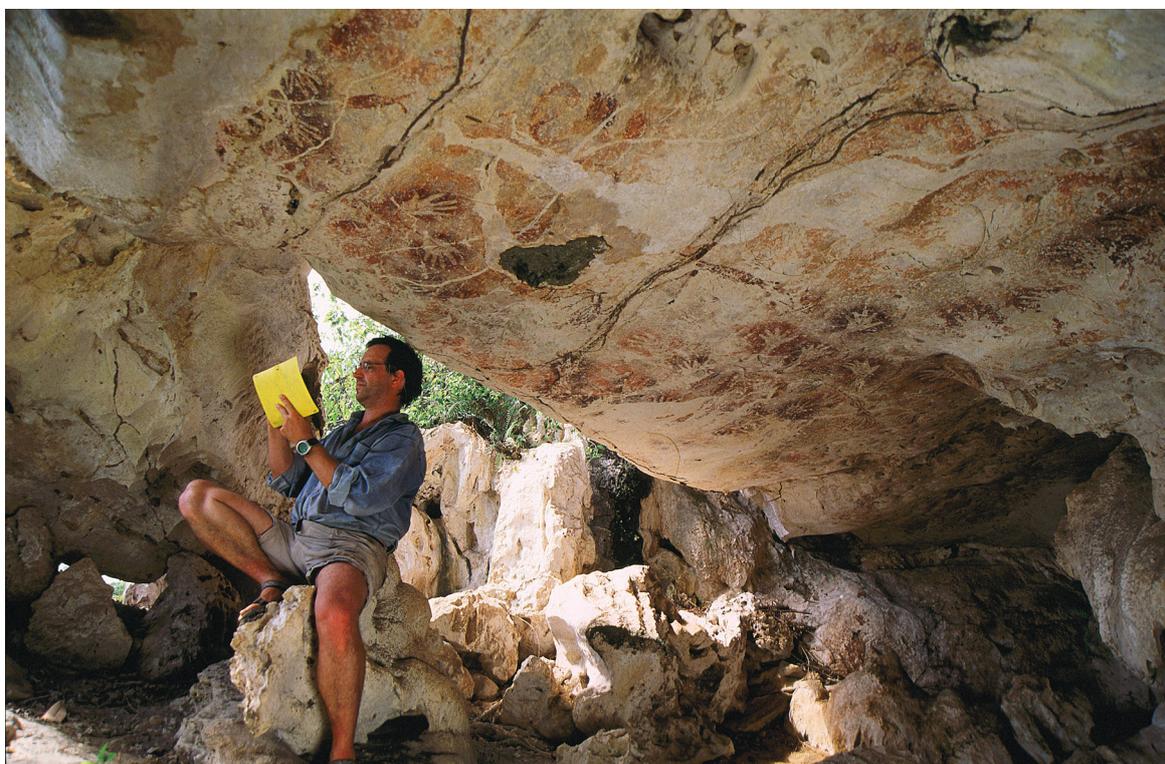
Presentation and New Observations on Some Exceptional Hand Stencils

Luc-Henri FAGE

Borneo's rock art occurs in cave shelters perched in limestone cliffs. To add to their inaccessible location, the researcher's job is made even more difficult by the placement of paintings high up on cave walls. For logistical reasons it was not possible to stay longer than a few hours in some painted caves. Thus we had to develop fast recording techniques using digital photography and summary sketches, leaving the analysis for later. The analysis done for the inventory in "Borneo, Memory of the Caves" led to some new observations of elements not noticed in the field.

Context of the hand stencils

Although Borneo's rock art shares features with other rock art around the world, its uniqueness is due partly to the hand stencils. An age of 9872 ± 60 BP was established by U/Th and ^{14}C dating of a calcite flowstone overlying a hand stencil.



Gua Tewet, the quintessential of Borneo Rock-Art
(photo: S. Caillault).

Some hand stencils occur with anthropomorphic figures, animals and geometric signs. However, some caves on Borneo use hands as the basic graphic unit, forming images consisting entirely or almost entirely of hand stencils. Such compositions are characteristic of Bornean rock art. The hand stencils are combined, decorated, connected with lines, and / or filled with symbols, showing a unique level of complexity in worldwide rock art.

“Animal” hands

Discovered in 2001, Gua Tamrin revealed unusual hands. These are located between five and eight metres above the cave’s ground level. We were not able to approach them but our photos taken with a macro lens show the fingertips were made to look more “pointy” than a normal human hand. We have not found any similar hands in any other cave on Borneo, but they bear a strange resemblance to some hand stencils of Sulawesi, 600 km to the south-east across the Makassar Strait. We interpreted the Sulawesi hand stencils as “animal hands” because they were transformed by reducing the fingertip width and / or the number of fingers. For example, at Cammin-Kanang Cave, five hand stencils became bird feet (three fingers), reptile hands (four fingers), or monkey hands with five very narrow curved fingers. These show how the human hand, a unique feature of mankind, can be transformed into an animal hand.

Fingernails

Our photos from eight Bornean caves have revealed another singularity of Kalimantan’s rock art: clear traces of a fingernail on some fingertips. At Gua Sahak a large left hand stencil has large nails on the thumb and little finger. We were able to reproduce this effect using a female hand with a long thumbnail.

The frequency of this phenomenon and the remarkably clear contours suggest the fingernails did not occur by chance. A group of hunter-gatherers whose hands are in daily contact with materials cannot retain long fingernails. Could these stencils be the work of persons who did not participate in the community’s daily hunting and gathering tasks? This might indicate a different social status, old age, or a special role in the community.

Refining our ethnographic observations

The presence of individuals with long fingernails adds something to our knowledge of hand stencil production, in that it reveals the human dimension of a distant culture which has totally disappeared from the island of Borneo. It complements the information obtained in May 2001 during the discovery of Gua Tamrin, a turning point in our research.

Gua Tamrin, perched 30 m up a cliff face, contains 41 anthropomorphic figures. Some consist of stylised lines dancing around natural concavities in the rock face combined with hand stencils. Others were made with greater accuracy and shown either in dynamic positions (dancing, hunting, rituals) or immobile. These have filamentous bodies, large hairstyles or headdresses, huge feet, feather ornaments near the kidneys, exposed penises, and the arms hold bunches of arrows and possibly bows or spears. There is even a possible spear-thrower.

These images allow us to refine our knowledge of Borneo’s past inhabitants, who seem to have ancient links with the Australian Aborigines based on ethnographic parallels.

Conclusion

While there is much unexplored karst on Borneo, there is still much to learn from the rock art that is now known. The next decade of research will focus on this, namely by extending the photographic inventory and creating a GIS (Geographic Information System) database of cave locations and placement of paintings in the caves in order to further explore the choice of rock art placement according to cave topology.

Our aim is to ensure the long-term protection of Borneo's rock art. It is currently under threat from the chaotic arrival of "progress" in the form of deforestation, oil palm plantations, open-cast coal mines, and cement works. We have achieved the first phase of protection by creating a national park on the Marang Mountains, which house the majority of the painted caves.





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