



Fig. 65 Location of main rock art sites.

## DISCOVERY OF A NEW ROCK ART OFF NORTHWEST OF WEST PAPUA AND IDENTIFICATION OF PAINTINGS LOCATIONS SYSTEM

JEAN-MICHEL CHAZINE\*

### **The discovery of a new set of paintings:**

The Easternmost part of Indonesia was known since a long time, to be rich in Rock Art tracks (Heekeren, Röder...), which had nevertheless only been slightly studied. Located on the eastern side of the Wallace Line, almost all the northern archipelagoes contain different expressions of Rock Art (see fig. 65). At the extreme Northwest tip of Papua new-Guinea (recently changed from Irian Jaya into West Papua), a huge strip of seashore including a large bay (once called MacLuer Bay and also actually changed into Berau Bay) had been surveyed in the 30ties by the pioneering German Röder, member of the Frobenius expedition. The survey had collected numerous data, but, although already very large, had not been able to visit all the places cited by local peoples. The most recent survey organised under Unesco's sponsorship in the 90ties (Arifin & Delanghe, 2004<sup>1</sup>) revisited almost all sites checked by Röder and updated the state of conservation of many of the paintings.

But the extension of the sites on the seashores as much as inland, is so wide that themselves could only quote some of the data cited in the literature, mostly from Netherlands visitors from the end of 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Therefore, the opportunity of visiting some sites in the vicinity of the Misool island, which had not been described by Röder nor Arifin & Delanghe, which was offered to me by the Misool Ecoresort Management was unique <sup>2</sup>.

Located off the South of Misool Island, the area where painted cliffs may be seen, covers a few square kilometres. The aspect of the landscape looks like a group of sunken karstic outcrops, producing an anarchic distribution of tiny fjords or calanques. Many cliffs or overhangs are scattered all along these labyrinthic channels, and some of them present a more or less expanded concentration of paintings.

The awareness of local fishermen, which had been organised by the Resort's management team, appeared to be efficient because local people had already checked 7 places at the end of 2007. After comparing with Arifin & Delanghe's, ina-

1 See the few bibliographic reference infra.

2 I am glad to express my best thanks to «Precious Planet» organisers, who first invited me to visit the Misool EcoResort on the Batbitim Island. Then my warmest acknowledgements to the designers and managers Marit and Andy Miners as much as Cherry and the whole team of the Resort, who took with such an enthusiastic interest, a lot of their time to introduce me to the first painted cliffs of the area.

\* *Maison Asie-Pacifique / CNRS-Marseille, France*  
*jmchazine@mailcity.com / jm.chazine@wanadoo.fr*



Fig. 66 Exceptional representation of a stencil led "yoni" with a negative hand print deciphered as female with ©kalimain program

smuch as Röder's data, which are the only accessible bibliographic references for the whole area, these latter appeared to be the very first which would be surveyed. They would also provide a large and surprising set of paintings. Located indifferently from the lowest part of rock walls up to more than 8 meters high, their colours, when they are not decayed or covered with calcite, are mostly plain red.

They mainly consist of marine fauna, i.e. tuna, sharks, dolphins, dugongs, barracuda, large cods, gilthead or sometimes squids or turtles. If sizes vary from small silhouettes to large profiles, without any mean average of proportional reproduction, what is noticeable is the fact that the majority of representations are vertical. They are mostly "diving" into the sea or "emerging" from it. Moreover they frequently are represented by pairs, and often unequal.

Besides that typical marine fauna, are many hands stencils. They appear almost on all painted panels, sometimes apparently associated with explicit figures, sometimes in isolated situations.

On a few number of panels there are also lines of dots, regular and broken lines or patches of colour. Within that kind of representations, there are almost no anthropomorphic features. These latter, when they appear are in black colour and seem to have been made more recently.

But what is much more noticeable and which will be considered as a specific clue later (see *infra*), is the fact that in many places, the edges of small erosion hollows or cupules (from 8 to 15/20cm in diameter) have been overlined, would they be isolated or apparently included in a general motif.

The representations of the large fishes, sharks, dolphins or tuna, although very schematic, show an acute capacity of detailed figurations. For instance, the mean and precise movement of dolphins or sharks, when they suddenly change their trajectory and bent their silhouette, are as very precisely as fully aesthetically represented.

Although the general display of that marine fauna was new (the Röder's inventory of paintings in the Macluer/Berau Bay does not provide such a bestiary), at least one motif appeared to be quite unique and surprising. It consists of a stencilled representation of the "Yoni" (see fig. 66)<sup>3</sup>. Possibly correlated to this

3 As far as I could know from different contacted colleagues, none of them had ever seen such a motif in any

latter, the handprint located just above it has been deciphered as female using ©kalimain program. Both of them would possibly be correlated to an environment dedicated to fecundity, female or similar concepts.

Not far above are also unusual representations of stencilled circles, which possibly could correspond to circular thin basketry. A closer view using picture treatment computer program has revealed that in fact 5 motifs had been stencilled, some of them being blown in superimposition (see fig. 67).

Another rare if not unique motif, are the two stencilled large flat fishes in one large hollow (see fig. 68). Also stencilled are two adzes which have been blown in the frame of a large dolphin or shark feature (see fig. 69). Apart hands, only very few artefacts have been stencilled and fishes are the most scarce, whereas adzes are to be found in Aborigines Rock Art of Australia.

As far as we know, it's the first time that such motifs have been yet observed in the whole Insulinde (Western Indonesian archipelagoes).

During the very first survey of that area, no tangible trend could be isolated from what appeared to be a random distribution of painted walls, lost in a mazelike mix of erratic channels. Only one thing could be isolated: each site was not visible from the next neighbouring one.

Therefore the planned second survey<sup>4</sup> was primarily just intended to enlarge the number of locations and for sorting the painted motifs of the areas.

Second survey of painted panels and identification of location parameters

The main aim was to visit 2 new sites with rock paintings, which had been recently surveyed by the EcoResort team and to try to select samples of calcite covering some of the paintings hoping they would fit for dating them.

Concerning the possible dating of these paintings, as in most of the Rock Art sites, the red colours used probably does not contain any organic stuff, forbidding any direct 14C datings. For the local communities settled in the near vicinity, i.e. more than half an hour of dug out canoe travel, the paintings do not belong to their culture or pantheon. They think that as most of the paintings are located



Fig. 67 Stencilled circular basketry (?) shapes

rock art sites.

4 One more time, thanks to the support of "Precious Planete", and the warm welcome of Andy and Marit Miners in Batbitim, I was able to stay from the 5th until the 10th of April 2009 on the Misool EcoResort.



*Fig. 68 Very rare stencilled fishes inside a hollow. The orientation of the painting burst shows that they have been held from below*

high on the cliffs, they have necessarily been made by “flying spirits”, totally foreign for them. Their oral tradition tells that their ancestors came there to settle around 4- 500 years ago from Northern Territories of Australia, possibly Arnheim Land area. This latter data has to be more precisely surveyed and studied in the future by anthropologists and/or bio-anthropologists to find out not only from where the actual communities did really come from, but what became the original painters and when they would have realized these obviously ritual paintings.

During that visit on the two first days, we could practically discover 6 new sites, which enhanced already the total of sites to 14.

Within these new sites a large number of hands stencils have been observed. They would appear, apart two cases, in all painted places. While awaiting an exact account and description, it could be observed that hands were mainly “normal” in size, although sometimes badly decayed by surface water pouring.

The other confirmation in content and expression concerns the subject of the paintings, which continue to be in majority related to the sea fauna. Tuna, sharks, dolphins and general more or less fishes’ features compose the main core of representations. In these latter cases, the animals are also represented in majority in a vertical position. This is a strong indication that they are not a direct realistic

representation, but isolated, or at least « out » of their natural environment. It would thus probably correspond somehow to a basic symbolic figure. Many signs, dots, patches, thin or bold lines, are also scattered within these new paintings. Negatives imprints show that sometimes, the colour has been strongly “splashed” or even smashed, and not only spat upon the stencilled artefact.

The new cases found are rather badly decayed, which would explain why they had not been so rapidly checked as others. The decay process, if it has ceased by now has led in some cases to the almost complete disappearance of the paintings. And only a precise observation with good lightning conditions let the previous paintings become discernable.

That extension of the number of ornate cliffs is particularly important and helpful, not only to study the content and begin the sorting of the different paintings, but also to elaborate a preliminary inductive procedure of discovery of ornate sites.

In fact these discoveries are resulting from the combination of a long lasting reflexion concerning the use of ochre, the ethnographic data related to the cultural or ritual use of that specific coloured stuff, and the natural environment where paintings are to be found.

The intuition that there were some common parameters which were always present in each painted cliff emerged once the 2 to 3 new sites were shown to us.

Leaving one first site and keeping in memory its appearance, the view of a similar second one, followed and thus immediately confirmed by a third one, provided the “missing link” of these sites. We checked then immediately the validity of the common elements, first in re-finding by ourselves the first ornate sites surveyed a year before. Then we could discover by ourselves new sites yet totally unknown from our informants<sup>5</sup>.

Practically, in thirteen of the sites visited, all had a cavity (cave or cavern entrance, or at least a wide fissure or crack) between the base of the cliff and some



*Fig. 69 Stencilled adze besides a large fish (dolphin?)*

<sup>5</sup> The very first results of that second survey have been published in INORA N°55, p.12-17. We are highly acknowledging Jean Clottes for permitting us to borrow some pages, which thanks to him have been translated into English.



*Fig. 70 Overlined cupules and large dots in hollows*

ten metres in height (see fig. 70). Additionally, the cliff needed to have a relatively large surface and to be tall enough (roughly corresponding to a minimum area of around 10m in base for 15 to 20 m in height). To these two necessary elements could be added the indispensable presence of a fairly large coloured outflow (between reddish-yellow and dark reddish-brown), either arriving into the cavity or flowing out of it, wether in the middle of the wall or wether level with the base of the rock, forming a submarine mini cave at the water's surface. It can also be observed that the coral plateau was nearly always present, under several meters of water, at the base of these painted panels.

The paintings are at nearly all heights, from some 50cm above average sea level, up to more than 12m high. When the latter is the case, this implies the use of scaffoldings to accede to such heights and meant that the coral "step" might have proved useful.

Once having identified these three or four elementary parameters, we carried



out again the localisations in the sector, in a “blind” attempt, and we found the whole of the sites already pinpointed the previous year, as well as those recently discovered.

These parameters thus seem (even though the number of cases -13/14 up to now- is not high enough) to present a sufficiently high success rate to be credible. We can add that in three cases where the concomitant presence of the parameters would lead to the supposition that there “should” be paintings while they were absent at first sight, we finally identified them, but they were very faded and had almost vanished. The prediction was thus each time corroborated by the observation.

Even if several interpretations could come to mind concerning the internal logic linking the three parameters<sup>6</sup>, the previous vision we had of the zone is radically modified; its empty and abandoned aspect hiding a hoard of rich rock art. On the one hand, very few sites are visibly “favourable” to a durable settlement, and on the other, no archaeological remains have yet appeared, on the surface at least. The area is reputedly uninhabited by aboriginals, as for less than a thousand years they have settled at a distance of over half an hour’s journey by pirogue. It would in fact seem quite improbable that human communities, even in the past, should have settled for any length of time on these ragged islets, without any accessible fresh water and without any flat surface other than a thin band on the water’s edge, without accessible fresh water and with sparse vegetation. The paintings were therefore placed outside habitation zones, thus ensuring the necessary privacy for particular practices or rituals, in reality, a similar sort of isolation to that of the caves in the east of Borneo<sup>7</sup>. The grouping of karstic channels, similar (on a reduced scale) to Nordic fjords or Mediterranean calanques, in which the painted panels appear in a random or even incomprehensible manner, thus takes on a meaning.

The panels, even though, apparently spread nearly everywhere, only in fact make use of what the nature and the geomorphology of the site have provided. The logic that decided the choice of one or another site, which, a priori, should be impossible for us to access, as belonging to a totally unknown cultural community, could even so be attained, if the reasons behind such choices, still escapes us. If we are still left to find out the original reasons that contributed to the rigorous choice of these particular spots, the presence –or absence- of paintings relates only now the distribution –natural, and not, or no longer cultural- of this convergence of parameters. One could even think that the choice itself of these sites was not made *stricto sensu* by the painters themselves but that, once selected, there were these minimum elements that made them up and which indicated a potentially “good” site. The latter was in fact identified by nothing but the geomorphological distribution of the site (see fig. 71). It is even possible to say that our field surveys, once the elementary and constituent parameters for the sites of paintings were identified, were carried out exactly in the same manner as those of the prehistoric

6 The fourth parameter, a « step », is less obligatory, unlike the others which are absolutely necessary.

7 Chazine J.-M., 2005, «Rock Art, burials and habitations : caves in East Kalimantan », in *Asian Perspectives* Vol 44, N°1, Hawaii, University Press, p.219-230.





*Fig. 71 Panoramic view of the combination of: a large cliff, one (or more) outflow(s) linked to cavities/hollows and a shallow coral step*

painters who had preceded us. A random cruise along the channels enabled the successive localisation of the cliffs, as well as of the coloured cavities that could be associated with them.

Up to now, we have only been able to examine a small sector of a few square kilometres and a future field trip should complete –and very hopefully– confirm the validity of the identification of the elementary parameters used to choose the site locations. Even if the success rate has been quite high up to now (thirteen cases out of fourteen, i.e. over 90%), one needs to be cautious about the definitive validity –originality, perhaps one should say– of those parameters, as the frequency with which they appear could very well hide others which have escaped us. Only an even larger number of cases will confirm that it is these parameters that are really functional.

It is no less obvious that the logic here presented is “tainted” with ethnocentricity –even eurocentricity– and that the symbolism we see, even though apparently just in terms of its practical results, is perhaps completely false and foreign to a thought pattern that if not “primitive” is at least original to its authors... One can however legitimately associate, by a symbolic structural linkage, the choice of a wall presenting both a “secret” obscure cavity and a coloured outflow, which is automatically in association. It has been possible to verify that the presence –or not– of paintings is independent of the state of the rock as well as of the wall itself. The paintings were in fact placed whatever the state of the surface (partially damaged, undergoing severe weathering or perfectly smooth and intact happened to be).

This would confirm that it is the action of painting at such and such a site that was important and not the quality of the rock wall itself. We are here in the presence of highly symbolic actions, for which it is the cultural parameters, associated with the choices determined by the physical nature of the site that determine how those actions develop and are carried out. Putting in the paint is perhaps the only remaining and visible part of much more complex activities. It should be added that it has been confirmed that when the outflow is not linked to a cavity, even if the wall would seem suitable, there are no paintings. The conjunction of cavity and outflow is thus the crucial element of choice for a painted site.

Regarding this juxtaposition and the combination of the parameters demonstrated –and presupposing that they really coincide with the original motives- several explanatory hypotheses are theoretically possible.

One could imagine that, from the moment that a single minimal association “fairly obscure cavity, reddish-coloured outflow on a high, wide wall” enabled – or justified- the placing on the wall of ochre-coloured motifs (hand, signs and/or fauna) that it is a question of an evocation, which is at the least allegorical. A basic schema associating the mechanisms linking fecundation and/or sexuality could explain this symbolic association. For a Western cosmology, this association of a sombre cavity with ochre and its red colour, if not evoking explicitly an equivalent representation to that of “L’Origine du Monde” so bluntly painted by Courbet, may nevertheless be if not a correspondence then at least approaching one. The reference to the principle of fecundation can only be allegorical and apply to a founding element relating to the gods of earth and underworld (the womb?), assuring the mediation between the “earth” forces or spirits and the world of the living or its mediators. Even if reduced to a speculation, the material affirmation of this generic constant cannot be underestimated and it could be considered that it must correspond to an at least symbolic and functional relation between these different elements.

In the absence until now of any comparative ethnographic information (*emic*) providing clues for our analysis, it can at least be noted that there does exist a structural relationship associating a geographical distribution which is not only local but spatial and the symbolic signs. There is thus evidence of a structuring both of space as well as the function(s) of the rock paintings.

The motifs first found are essentially those of marine fauna: dolphins, tuna, sharks (see fig. 72), dugongs and turtles. They are particular in that the vast majority are shown in the vertical, going up as much as down. This could be interpreted as a way of representing them abstracted from their natural environment and in another, already symbolised reality. One might wonder if this is not the image of some totemic type of projection in which the animal is deliberately extracted from its natural environment so it only conserves its symbolic power. The idea of a symbolical or allegorical context is reinforced by the presence of hands stencils (negative hands) in virtually all the sites with paintings. The sexual determination of these stencilled hands will be undertaken



*Fig. 72 Details of marine fauna with inside representations (flat perspective or duplication/reproduction symbols?)*

in the near future using ©kalimain software<sup>8</sup>, but it should be noted that the first identifications made in 2007/08 have already confirmed female participation. What until now appears is that these sites were devoted to at least one, and probably two or more specific rituals including -or expressed through- the paintings.

The exclusive importance of the natural aspect of places and/or the assemblage of specific elements, which appear to be necessary altogether is a strong indication

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<sup>8</sup> See bibliography.

of precise goals or intentions. If we are –and probably will remain- unable to describe or decipher the complete hidden intention of the process which was engaged because of its prehistoric cultural background, the fact that we know and are –almost- sure that the action of painting could only happen in very precise and required conditions provide already a strong clue. Like places devoted to pilgrimages, processions or healing actions scattered all over the world and through countless cultural behaviours, whose genesis of their creation is too far behind in the past to be described, those Misool's paintings having all of them a few parameters in common should have had punctually a similar function.

First of all, the association of a large wall with a cavity, more or less black or at least dark intimately linked in all cases to a reddish coloured outflow would possibly –I would dare say probably- be a strong if not clear indication of an evocation of a chthonian, primary or issued from the origin, form of representation. Something like attracting forces attached to genesis, procreation and/or reproduction process. Then the over-lining of small cupules could be interpreted as possibly reinforcing tracks associated with some “holes”, possibly a symbolic evocation of the female matrix, in fact an anthropologised reduction of the natural assemblage gathering hole-outflow and red paintings. If that hypothesis fits, then these many feminine signs would fit also with a function dedicated to fertility and general reproduction process. The numerous artificial representations of fishes symbolising the spontaneous riches and the natural and universal reproduction cycles. These latter, whose associations and localisations within the whole bestiary has to be more precisely studied, would probably have had a different function or involved other categories of rituals. We have also to keep in mind that a probable chronology has been in action and modified the original process. Nevertheless, the regularity of the spatial distribution of painted walls means that if changes happened, they did not apply upon the choice of the places. This, at least remained constant indicating that it was important and not likely to be adapted and changed. The integration of this natural assemblage has been not only accepted during all the use lap, but deliberately chosen independently of any other cultural interpretation or function.

Altogether that identification of parameters enabling the localisation of painted sites is a significant advance on the road leading to the interpretation of the function that these rock paintings might have had, at least in this part of the world and for the periods concerned. We have already been able to very precisely localise the spots selected by prehistoric people and, to make a risky analogy with the Eisenberg Uncertainty Principle, which says that one cannot, at any given moment, both know the position and the trajectory of an electron, for these rock paintings, we have already partially defined their trajectory...

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## RIASSUNTO

Nuove scoperte di arte rupestre in una regione poco esplorata dell'Indonesia sono analizzate nel tentativo di definire le motivazioni e la logica che ha portato alla creazione delle immagini.

## RÉSUMÉ

Nouvelles découvertes d'art rupestre dans une région peu explorée d'Indonésie sont analysées dans une tentative pour définir les motivations et la logique qui a conduit à la création des images.

## SUMMARY

New discoveries of rock art in a little explored region of Indonesia are analyzed in an attempt to set the motivations and logic that led to the creation