

***Niah cupules discovered in 2012  
and 2014 are subject of ongoing  
research: reply to Zhang***

By PAUL S. C. TAÇON, MOHAMMAD SHERMAN  
SAUFFI, IPOI DATAN and DARREN CURNOE

Since 2010, we have been conducting collaborative archaeological research in Sarawak (Malaysian Borneo), with a focus on better understanding rock art and palaeoanthropological remains, under various permits, MOUs and agreements between our institutions. It began with three of us (ID, MSS and PT) visiting various sites in June and October 2010 and mapping out a long-term research strategy. DC joined the team in 2011. Research has since been undertaken throughout the Niah Caves complex, at Gua Sireh, at Santubong



**Figure 1.** An elaborate landscape scene apparently depicting the sun, mountains, a house, trees and other vegetation scratched into a boulder far from the tourist trail within the Niah Caves complex, presumably made by bird nest collectors.

and other field locations, as well as with the Sarawak Museum collections and archives. This has led to new discoveries and insights detailed in publications (e.g. Taçon et al. 2010; Taçon 2013; Curnoe et al. 2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b), unpublished reports (e.g. Taçon and Curnoe 2012; Taçon and Sauffi 2019a, 2019b) and numerous conference papers and posters presented between 2010 and 2019 (including the 2010 Borneo Archaeology Conference). We also collaborated on the development of a 2013 rock art exhibition and associated symposium (see Taçon 2016: 257–259). Research is ongoing with new rock art survey and recording as well as excavations led by DC and MSS. During this period Rachel Hoerman also conducted rock art research in Sarawak for her PhD thesis in collaboration with Sarawak Museum staff and under PT's supervision (see Hoerman 2016) and she made further rock art discoveries.

In the May 2019 issue of *Rock Art Research* Zhang (2019) reports discovering cupules in 'Black Cloth Cave' but we 'discovered' the cupules she refers to in 2012 (Taçon and Curnoe 2012: 4–6) and others in 2014. First of all, the name of the cave Zhang refers to is Lobang Hngas rather than 'Black Cloth Cave'. Black Cloth Cave is the translation of Kain Hitam, another name for Painted Cave, the best known part of the Niah Caves complex for rock art. It was 'traditionally called Kain Hitam or "Black Cloth", because of a local tradition that a Punan forager sold it to a Brunei Malay for a piece of black cloth. Today it is usually referred to as the "Painted Cave" from paintings on its walls' (Barker 2013: 4–5). However, Barbara Harrisson (2016: S18–S19) suggests the name relates to a burial ritual involving the distribution of black cloth.

Secondly, Zhang (2019: 114) states 'Since the British scholar Tom Harrison excavated and researched Santubong River Delta and Niah Cave from 1957 to 1967,

there have not been any reports or research on these cupules'. If Zhang had consulted the Sarawak Museum, as is required when archaeological research is to be conducted in Sarawak, it would have been evident that a new discovery had not been made and that the rock art of the Niah Caves complex, including cupules, was the subject of ongoing research with Australian Research Council funding and Sarawak State Planning Unit permit (4) JKM/SPU/608-8/2/2 Vol 3. In our 2012 report we stated 'Time did not permit the documentation of the cupule boulders but it is proposed that this be part of a future PERAHU – Sarawak Museum collaborative research project' (2012: 4) and the cupules were subsequently referred to in grant applications, although it took a while before we successfully obtained funding.

Besides cupules, we have been documenting other petroglyphs, further painted rock art in Painted Cave, traditional Iban designs in Traders Cave, recent large paintings of faces in various locations within the Niah Caves complex and other Mount Subis caves, as well as elaborate scenes scratched into the rock presumably by bird nest collectors (Fig. 1). We are also producing site histories for the most significant sites available for tourist visitation (Taçon and Sauffi 2019a, 2019b), developing conservation and management plans, making 3D records (with Andrea Jalandoni, PERAHU, Griffith University, Queensland) and analysing pigment with pXRF (with Jillian Huntley, PERAHU, Griffith University, Queensland). DC and MSS are also leading an international team that continues excavations in Traders Cave that commenced in 2017. Major publications with full details will be available after field research is completed in late 2020 and results of our research will enhance new exhibits in the redeveloped Sarawak Museum that is planned to open to the public in late 2020.

#### Acknowledgments

Our research has been generously supported by The Sarawak Museum Department, The Sarawak State Planning Unit (within the Chief Minister's Department), The Sarawak Forestry Department, Griffith University, Queensland and the University of New South Wales, as well as major funding from the Australian Research Council (DP0877603, LP120200144, FL160100123).

Professor Paul S. C. Taçon  
Place, Evolution and Rock Art Heritage Unit (PERAHU)  
Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research  
Griffith University, QLD 4222  
Australia  
[p.tacon@griffith.edu.au](mailto:p.tacon@griffith.edu.au)

Mohammad Sherman Sauffi William  
Asst. Curator, Archaeology  
and Ipoi Datan  
Former Director  
Sarawak Museum Department

Tun Abang Haji Openg Road  
93566 Kuching  
Sarawak, Malaysia

Associate Professor Darren Curnoe  
ARC Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and  
Heritage and Palaeontology, Geobiology and Earth  
Archives Research Centre, School of Biological, Earth  
and Environmental Sciences  
University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052  
Australia

Malaysia: a report into its history and management. Un-  
published report, 20 February 2019, Griffith University,  
Gold Coast.

TAÇON, P. S. C. and M. S. SAUFFI 2019b. Painted Cave, Niah  
Caves complex, Sarawak, Malaysia: a report into its his-  
tory and management. Unpublished report, 20 February  
2019. Griffith University, Gold Coast.

TAÇON, P. S. C., M. S. SAUFFI and I. DATAN 2010. New engrav-  
ings discovered at Santubong, Sarawak, Malaysia. *The  
Sarawak Museum Journal* 67(88): 105–121.

ZHANG, J. 2019. Cupules discovered in Niah Cave, Sarawak,  
Malaysia. *Rock Art Research* 36(1): 113–115.

RAR 36-1303

## REFERENCES

- BARKER, G. 2013. The Niah Caves and the prehistory of Island  
Southeast Asia: research themes. In G. Barker (ed.), *Rain-  
forest foraging and farming in Island Southeast Asia*, pp. 1–28.  
The archaeology of the Niah Caves, Sarawak, Volume 2.  
University of Cambridge, Cambridge.
- CURNOE, D., I. DATAN, H. M. GOH and M. S. SAUFFI 2019b.  
Femur associated with the Deep Skull from the West  
Mouth of the Niah Caves (Sarawak, Malaysia). *Journal of  
Human Evolution* 127: 133–148.
- CURNOE, D., I. DATAN, P. S. C. TAÇON, C. L. M. UNG and M. S.  
SAUFFI 2016a. Deep Skull from Niah Cave and the Pleis-  
tocene peopling of Southeast Asia. *Frontiers in Ecology  
and Evolution* 4(75): 1–17. doi:10.3389/fevo.2016.00075.
- CURNOE, D., I. DATAN, P. S. C. TAÇON, C. L. M. UNG and M.  
S. S. WILLIAM 2016b. Deep Skull from Niah Cave and the  
Pleistocene peopling of Southeast Asia. *Sarawak Museum  
Journal* 76(97): 89–120.
- CURNOE, D. I. DATAN, ZHAO J.-X., C. L. M. UNG, M. AUBERT, M.  
S. SAUFFI, G. H. MEI, R. MENDOZA and P. S. C. TAÇON 2018.  
Rare late Pleistocene — early Holocene human mandibles  
from the Niah Caves (Sarawak, Borneo). *PLoS One* 13(6):  
doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0196633.
- CURNOE, D., ZHAO J., M. AUBERT, FAN M., WU Y., A. BAKER,  
HSIAO G., SUN X., R. MENDOZA, L. ADLER, MA S. and L.  
KINSEY 2019a. Implications of multi-modal age distri-  
butions in Pleistocene cave deposits: a case study of  
Maludong palaeoanthropological locality, southern China.  
*Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 25: 388–399.
- HARRISSON, B. 2016. Kain Hitam: the Painted Cave. In G.  
Barker and L. Farr (eds.), *Archaeological investigations in  
the Niah Caves, Sarawak*, S11–S19. The archaeology of the  
Niah Caves, Sarawak, Volume 2. University of Cam-  
bridge, Cambridge.
- HOERMAN, R. 2016. Utilizing rock art to trace human migra-  
tion — case studies from Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo.  
Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Hawai'i at Mānoa,  
Honolulu.
- TAÇON, P. S. C. 2013. Interpreting the in-between: rock art  
junctions and other small style areas between provinces.  
*Time and Mind* 6(1): 73–80.
- TAÇON, P. S. C. 2016. Rock art, cultural change, the media  
and national heritage identity in the 21st century. In L.  
Brady and P. S. C. Taçon (eds), *Relating to rock art in the  
contemporary world: navigating symbolism, meaning and  
significance*, pp. 245–274. University Press of Colorado,  
Boulder.
- TAÇON, P. S. C. and D. CURNOE 2012. Report on a visit to the  
Niah Cave complex, Sarawak. Unpublished report to  
Sarawak Museum, 10 November 2012, Griffith Univer-  
sity, Gold Coast.
- TAÇON, P. S. C. and M. S. SAUFFI 2019a. Gua Sireh, Sarawak,