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***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insights detailed in publications (e.g. Taçon et al. 2010; Taçon 2013; Curnoe et al. 2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b), unpublished reports (e.g. Taçon and Curnoe 2012; Taçon and Sauffi 2019a, 2019b) and numerous conference papers and posters presented between 2010 and 2019 (including the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 Hargas 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.

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