‘DEATH SHIP’ IMAGE IN PREHISTORIC CAVE PAINTING OF KAIN HITAM CAVE (THE PAINTED CAVE) NIAH, SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

This article will discuss a research on images on the cave walls of the Kain Hitam caves in Miri, Sarawak. This cave is also known as The Painted Cave as discovered by Barbara Harrisson in 1958. The scope of this research focuses only on aspects of preserving the image as a legacy that needs to be protected as initial efforts to conserve. Sources of reference and previous records are also used to identify previously documented images. Photographic and sketch methods are the initiative of researchers in recording images that are still present on cave walls. Selected iconic images will be discussed in this paper. The aspects to be discussed are the icons, elements of art and detailed sketches. Key features in the images need to be identified so that sketches can be digital effectively. As the result of the sketch, a clearer image can be generated and subsequently become a new record in the collection of existing images. Hence, the concept of digital image sketching is important in preserving the image. This paper aimed to add more resources and become a reference for the future.

Keywords: Kain Hitam Cave, Cave Painting, Iconography, Death ship, Form.

Introduction

This research is a descriptive research of the cave paintings in the Kain Hitam caves at Niah in the Miri division of Sarawak. The researcher targeted this area as a research site because of the potential and importance of preserving the site as a first step in the conservation process. In addition, previous research has touched on the aspect of excavation, exploration of artifacts and also conservation. However, the aspect of visual arts in the cave painting is less emphasized and that the cave paintings are very valuable for commercialization. This study is a research that can provide many additional research findings as well as provide exposure and knowledge about the site for future researches.

Research on cave paintings and engraving found in ancient relics in the Kain Hitam Cave is classified as rock art. In the cognitive archaeology held, it is recognized as one of the new sub-fields called New Archaeology. This field focuses on the early forms of community thought based on archaeological remains. Cave paintings and primitive engravings are a rich source of cognitive information and involve art history researchers.

In the early stages of the research on the Kain Hitam Cave, images on the walls of the cave were only decorative because few records been found. In fact, the early record by the local artist Paul Kerek in the writing of Szabó, Piper and Barker also cannot be identified. This record is particularly valuable because the image is still clear at that time and the sketches are the most important sources in the efforts to document national heritage.
This research is designed to find and record all the motifs in this site. The cave paintings found in the Kain Hitam Cave (The Painted Cave) Niah, Sarawak are among the historical sites that have not been fully explored. This research is an effort to preserve the nation’s heritage.

Literature Review

Prehistory brings the notion of time before the start of history. History begins with a significant documentation of events. Prehistory is an assumption of what is happening before evidence exists. Therefore, research on art in this prehistoric age is in the form of assumptions and hypotheses and archaeological researches on artifacts and theories plus assumptions from these artifacts.

The earliest references to similar research done by Tom Harrisson and his wife, Barbara Harrisson is in year 1964. He has run excavations at the site of Kain Hitam Cave. The cave is quite separate from the main cave, The Niah Great Cave (West Mouth). When the excavation were carried out in the cave, she found cave paintings on cave walls and boat shape coffins as a place to store corpses (Fig.1). During the 1960s research, they found that the cave was full of elements of prehistoric paintings (Fig.2). Hence, this research is meaningful attempt to record historical periods of a Sarawak.

Fig.1: The boat-shape coffin.
Source: Sarawak Museum Archive Collection.

Wairah Marzuki (1998:71) also discussed the topic of paintings on the Niah Caves. According to her, these cave paintings prove the nation’s civilization and country through art form dating back to 15,000 years ago. Niah’s Cave paintings depict Hoabinhian-style culture, a community of hunting and migration-based cultures for food. Hence, the images of the boat and the human form lead us to the realm of human life in Sarawak thousands of years ago.
Overall, previous research has documented cave paintings in the Kain Hitam Cave (The Painted Cave) but there has been no detailed research on the icon and aesthetic aspects of the cave painting image. Therefore, this research discusses the aspects of the icons and aesthetics in the scope of visual arts and examines each of the motifs produced. Furthermore, research also moves towards the conservation aspect, which is to preserve the motif in the visual arts form.

**Methodology**

Researchers use the theory of iconography for the analysis stage. According to Erwin Panofsky (1939), ‘the interpretation of the intrinsic meaning or content, dealing with what we have termed ‘symbolical’ values instead of with images, stories and allegories, requires something more than a familiarity with specific themes or concepts as transmitted through literary sources. When we wish to get hold of those basic principles which underlie the choice and presentation of motifs, it gives meaning even to the formal arrangements and technical procedures employed.

**Table 1: The relationship of the theory of iconography**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION</th>
<th>ACT OF INTERPRETATION</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Primary or natural subject matter – (A) factual, (B) expressional-, constituting the world of artistic motifs.</td>
<td>Pre-iconographical description (and do-formal analysis).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories and allegories.</td>
<td>Iconographical analysis in the narrower sense of the aspect of subject by searching for sign.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of ‘symbolical’ values.</td>
<td>Iconographical interpretation in a deeper sense (iconographical synthesis).</td>
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According to Sylvan Bernet’s (2008:240-243) stated that a particular type of study that holds the image in view is iconography (the Greek word refers to ‘writing an image’), or identification of an image with a certain symbolic content or meaning. Erwin Panofsky explained iconography as being concerned with ‘conventional things’, that the iconographer stage shows us that the certain forms are maybe saints or Gods or certain metaphors.

The researchers made documentation procedures and recorded every image on the cave wall. Each image was identified with an icon and symbol element that was used by ancient humans in producing images. Through the iconography theory, researchers made analysis according to the stages that Erwin Panofsky had mentioned in his book entitled *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. This iconography theory is a theory based on several stages in analyzing images and artworks.
Photographic methods are used in this environment to obtain visual data intended for the storage or management of visual information, visual data analysis, as well as the presentation of research findings. It also involves the selection and classification of images in terms of specific activities and environment. If the image is taken for research purposes, the photo needs to be explained, identified by the type of data available to be useful evidence.

‘Death Ship’ Image of Kain Hitam Cave (The Painted Cave)

The selection on this aspect of the research is due to some important elements. The first element is the heritage factor. The images found on the cave walls are faded and disappeared due to several identified factors, such as erosion and moss. The Sarawak Museum Department has taken cautious steps by laying the fence and visitors can only see it from a distance. But, this has suppressed the artistic deception to enjoy the aesthetic and artistic values of the cave paintings.

An early survey of these prehistoric cave paintings suggests that significant erosion effects have resulted in fading and unclear images (Fig.2). Some early records indicate more clear evidence in identifying the images. Among them is the excavation record by Barbara Harrisson (1964: 192-194) showing clear evidence of the placement of ancient communities through the discovery of several boat-shaped coffins as well as precious artifacts on the cave with an image of red \textit{haematite}. The cave been found in 1958 and the excavation process began around 1959 and extended to a larger scale in 1961.

The Painted Cave in Sarawak’s Heritage chapter in Sarawak’s Heritage book also reveals the unique nature of this legacy. In this separate cave, the Kain Hitam Cave has an attractive cave painting that is the 32 meters long. Each image in this cave painting is the size from a few centimeters to one meter and is painted with thick strokes using red \textit{haematite}. The resulting image clearly shows the

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1 According to Douglas Dixon (1996) \textit{haematite} is a type of rock that has a 5-6 hardness with density of 4.9 to 5.26 color streak between dark red to dark brown (Achmad Sopandi, 2003:68).

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arrangement of boats (Fig.3) and human figures dancing with open arms like the shape of eagle wing (Fig.4). It is believed to be related to the practices and beliefs of the deaths of the ancient people at the time.

Although the image of the death of a boat in the Kain Hitam Cave can be compared to those of Timor (Glover 1972: 42; Lape et al 2007:4) it is unclear whether the two are related. While it is said that the Timor boat contained a visual trail showing the past maritime technology, the illustration of the fatal boat image in the Kain Hitam cave was considered insufficient to contain information, and is only a symbolic representation. At least eight images of the boat have the ‘living trees’ growing from the deck and two recessive crescent motifs associated with the bow (Adams 1977:97). Most of death ship images contain a series of very fashionable figures (Fig.5), some with extra stylish anthropomorphic open arms positions. Individual anthropomorphic outside the image of the death ship are usually in an active state, though we hesitate to consider such a posture of dance (Harrisson 1958:202).

Sources from the Archives and Department of Museum as well as materials from the Sarawak Museum and Niah Archaeological Museum have been acquired to redefine the ‘hidden image’ that is being discuss in this writing. Based on these sources, research on images can be implement. While resources are minimal, but the sophistication of today’s technology, various digital software can help in this research based on the visual arts aspect, especially in identifying the fading image in the cave paintings.

Result and Discussion
The importance of this research lies in the discovery but the information obtained from the research contributes to better humanitarian development by taking lessons from past. The archaeological research technique will assist in contributing information to various disciplines. It can produce beautiful and attractive cultural objects; which can reveal the history of humanity; while archeology can contribute to the current understanding.

Analyzing the data on the sites and laboratories is an important step in this research. Analysis of the material depends on the type of material found. Each method of analysis requires phased stages of research in generating comprehensive information. Physical analysis and the context of innovation has gained information about the past.

The rapid development of technology has brought a lot of changes toward many things. Analytical research on this art exploration provides a new approach. Hidden images of motifs provide space for exploration of iconic and cultural symbolism. The systematic research of these motives and images give the opportunity to highlight the basic images or the base symbols. These symbols can illustrate the form of their beliefs, the life and cultural situation of the community at that time.

Conservation activities certainly can be executed as an important effort in preserving this valuable treasure. Like cave paintings in other states, the Kain Hitam cave painting (The Painted Cave) certainly holds various implicit meanings and this research reveals the meaning that the past community was trying to convey. The overall view will require long term of fieldwork to be display in museums and for books publications.

In the final stage, the researcher will conduct one conservation procedure in the context of art appreciation. Here, previous researchers have recorded and labeled a ‘death ship’ image on the cave wall (Fig.6). Next, on the structure of the existing image, the researcher draws the design and produces the same image in 2D-Digital (Fig.7). The features in the images will be translated through the artwork and this effort will record the image from disappear without trace.

Fig.6: The iconic image of ‘death ship’.
Source: Sarawak Museum Archive Collection.

Fig.7: The iconic image of ‘death ship’.
Source: Researcher collection.
Conclusions
This research is carried out through research on the visual content. Content analysis studies the image as a deep and subjective interpretation of meaning. Content analysis research is basically used in media and communication but a distinct advantage that distinguishes content analysis (qualitative research) as an advantage in identifying the content based on contextual content and processes. Researchers see the contextual method through the main content while the aspect of the process involves the process of interpreting the image carefully and repeatedly.

The death ship image on the walls of the Kain Hitam Cave is characterized by Tom Harrisson’s ‘emerging tree’ from the bottom of the boat. Images are generated using bold line elements and form with a complex uses of art elements. Each line formed is dynamic and illustrates the dimensions of turbulence in this image. The aspect emphasized in re-creating this image is to identify the main features of the image, which is the variety of lines used to get a dynamic form of image.

The Sarawak Museum department has played an important role in the conservation and preservation the research sites. The museum not only serves as a place to exhibit historical remains but also a research center and strives to bring developments in this field. The museum will usually join or collaborate with other institutions such as universities or non-governmental organizations to carry out the conservation work of research sites.

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