

Inter- and Intraregional Variation in the Austronesian Painting Tradition: A View from East Timor



SUE O'CONNOR AND NUNO VASCO OLIVEIRA

INTRODUCTION

IN 2003, A LARGE NEW CORPUS OF PAINTED ROCK ART from East Timor was reported in this journal (O'Connor 2003). The paintings were from nine previously unrecorded cave and shelter sites on the north coast and were reviewed within the context of painted art sites previously recorded in East Timor (Almeida 1967; Cinatti 1963) and the larger body of painted rock art known from the western Pacific earlier argued by Ballard (1992) to form a coherent painting tradition owing its inception to the arrival of Austronesian speakers in Island Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Ballard used the sobriquet "Austronesian Painting Tradition" (APT) to characterize this widespread body of painted art, which he suggested shared locational, contextual, technical, stylistic, and motif features and that largely corresponded with the distribution of current Austronesian-speaking areas.¹ The positioning of some paintings up to 10 meters or more above the floor of the shelters, in inaccessible cliff locations overlooking the sea, was identified as one of the most consistent prime features of the APT. It was suggested that this placement may have had significance in terms of the association of the paintings with funerary rites/beliefs as indicated by the locational co-association of the painted art with human burials, including boat/canoe burials. The potential for symbolic signaling implicit in the locational context of the paintings was subsequently further developed by Ballard and colleagues (2004).

In the discussion of the new art sites from East Timor, O'Connor (2003) argued that while they conformed in many ways to the defining attributes of the APT, there were some regionally distinctive features, such as the placement of some of the most weathered of the red pigment paintings well inside deep caves that were not coastally located. In addition, it was pointed out that most of the East Timor paintings occur in areas that, at least today, are linguistically non-Austronesian (NAN), although this was thought to be due to recent language

Sue O'Connor is a senior research fellow and Nuno Vasco Oliveira is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Archaeology and Natural History, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University.

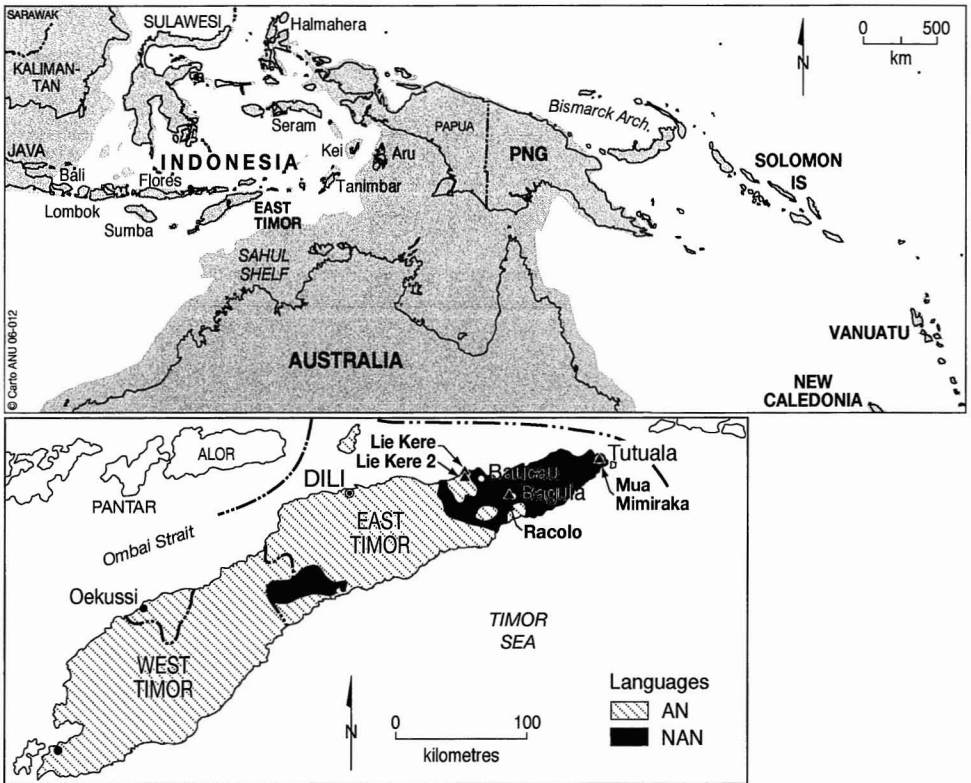


Fig. 1. Location map of East Timor showing AN and NAN language areas, the Racolo site in Baguia, and the Baucau Plateau sites, which together form a distinctive East Timor rock art region; also shown are the east-end sites near Tutuala, which form a separate region.

shifts or population movement resulting in the replacement of Austronesian (AN) with NAN languages (Fig. 1).

Since the nine new East Timor sites were reported, a major review of the engraved and painted art of the western Pacific has been undertaken by Wilson (2002). Wilson's study, which focused specifically on the rock art of Vanuatu, essentially upheld the integrity of the APT as defined by Ballard (1992) but suggested it needed refinement. In particular, Wilson demonstrated that in Vanuatu the earliest art largely conformed to the rules of the APT in that it exhibited three prime features: highly visible positioning in inaccessible coastal locations, use of exclusively red pigment, and a combination of amorphous solid pigment forms and stencils (predominantly hand stencils) (Wilson 2002:216). However, after about 1500 B.P. the rules governing motif location, context, color, and style begin to break down; there is more diversity in placement of motifs within sites and pigment color and styles diverge (Wilson 2002:225). For Vanuatu, she divided the APT into four separate subsets.

This article develops the discussion about the coherence of the APT in the context of reporting another newly located painted art site from the inland region



Fig. 2. Overview of Racolo panel showing relative positions of most of the motifs (two photos have been stitched in Photoshop to produce this panel). Divisions of the ranging pole are 20 cm.

of Baguia in central East Timor (see Fig. 1). From the perspective of the painted art of the wider western Pacific, including the sites previously reported from East Timor, the Baguia site is unusual in that it is well inland in the central mountainous spine of the island, on its southern slopes and 15 km from the coast. The art does not conform, therefore, to one of the main criteria of the APT: that of coastal proximity and execution on panels prominently located on sea cliffs or shelters overlooking the sea.² The Baguia paintings also stand apart from much of the other East Timor painted art in terms of the style of motifs depicted. The possible implications of these locational and stylistic differences are explored here.

In 2004, one of the authors (Oliveira) carried out archaeological reconnaissance in the Baguia region with the aim of locating high-altitude inland caves and shelters that would provide an inland database against which to compare the excavation results from the coastal sites at Baucau excavated by Ian Glover in the 1960s (1972, 1986) and the cave sites at the east end of East Timor in the Los Palos District excavated between 2000 and 2005 by members of the East Timor Archaeological Project (O'Connor 2002; O'Connor et al. 2002a,b; O'Connor and Veth 2005; Spriggs et al. 2003; Veth et al. 2004). With the exception of Glover's work on cave sites near Venilale, most surveys and excavations had been focused on the north coast within 10 km of the current coastline and below 400 m in altitude. Baguia was selected as the focus of Oliveira's research because Alfred Bühler had earlier carried out reconnaissance and established the presence of prehistoric occupation of cave sites in this region. Bühler had tested this proposition by excavation of one cave (Glover 1972:323–350; Sarasin 1936). No radiocarbon dates are available for Bühler's 1935 excavations at Baguia. Pottery, stone artifacts, and the bones of domestic animals were found to the lowest excavated levels, and the sequences were characterized as Neolithic (Sarasin 1936).

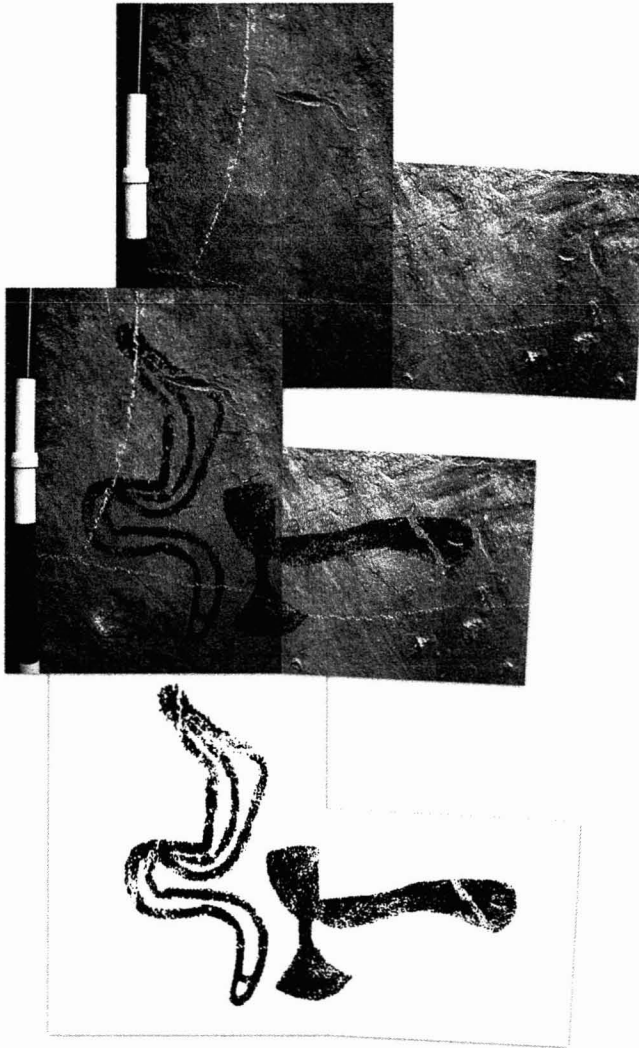


Fig. 3. Possible snake or rope motif and socketed axe in solid red pigment showing haft.

The pottery was predominantly from simple globular restricted vessels and largely undecorated (Glover 1972:343).³

Oliveira (2006) surveyed in the Baguia region and test-pitted two caves in 2004. The painted art site reported from Baguia, known locally as Racolo, was recorded during the course of this field survey (see Fig. 1). The prime focus of Oliveira's research was to investigate changes in food production through time and the transition to an agricultural economy. The results of the test-pitting program in Baguia were not promising because, while one of the two caves tested had evidence for human occupation, no macrobotanical material or phytoliths were preserved. Oliveira's research efforts were subsequently shifted to Baucau,

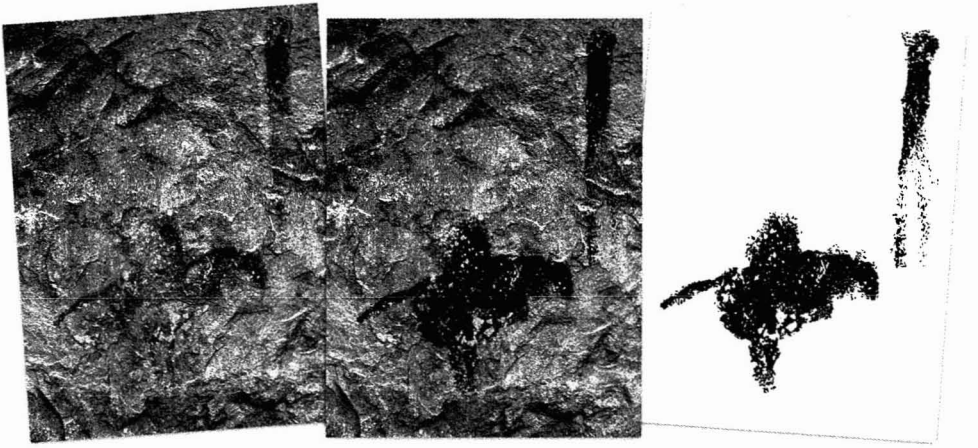


Fig. 4. Possible bird and red linear shape.

the coastal area where Glover had reported good preservation and identified macrobotanical remains from his excavations.

THE RACOLO SITE, BAGUIA

Racolo is located 150 m above the village of Sorocama (Suco Alaua Kraik) at 524 m above sea level ($8^{\circ}36'46.7''S$, $126^{\circ}39'15.9''E$). Most of the motifs are on a shallow overhang within a limestone wall that is approximately 6 m wide and 10 m high and faces northwest (this includes all those in Fig. 2). A few motifs are separated from the main panel by a narrow break in the limestone wall and are approximately 10 m to the northeast of it. The site contains a number of motifs all painted in red pigment. Preservation is extremely variable. There is some variability in pigment hue, from a dark purplish red through to a paler orange-red, although the extent to which this is due to variability in preservation is unknown. Most of the motifs are only 1–2 m in height above the narrow floor of the overhang and could not be classified as inaccessible.

Some of the paintings were so faded that no motif features could be discerned by eye until the photos were subsequently enhanced in Adobe Photoshop (eg., Figs. 3, 5a,b). Where the original motif is unclear, the figures are presented both as raw images and as enhanced images. The images were enhanced through associative and disassociative selections and excisions of color. In this way residual pigment was able to be distinguished without augmenting or reconstructing the form of the original artwork, allowing the pigment to be literally extracted from the background rock surface, hence the deteriorated appearance of the enhanced motifs. A few lines, partial motifs, and patches of applied pigment could be made out following red pigment saturation and enhancement, but they were still too incomplete or indistinct to describe. Sections of the main panel have faint scrawled lines in a white pigment, and in some cases these lines cross the red pigment motifs (Figs. 3, 6). The white lines never underlie the red pigment.

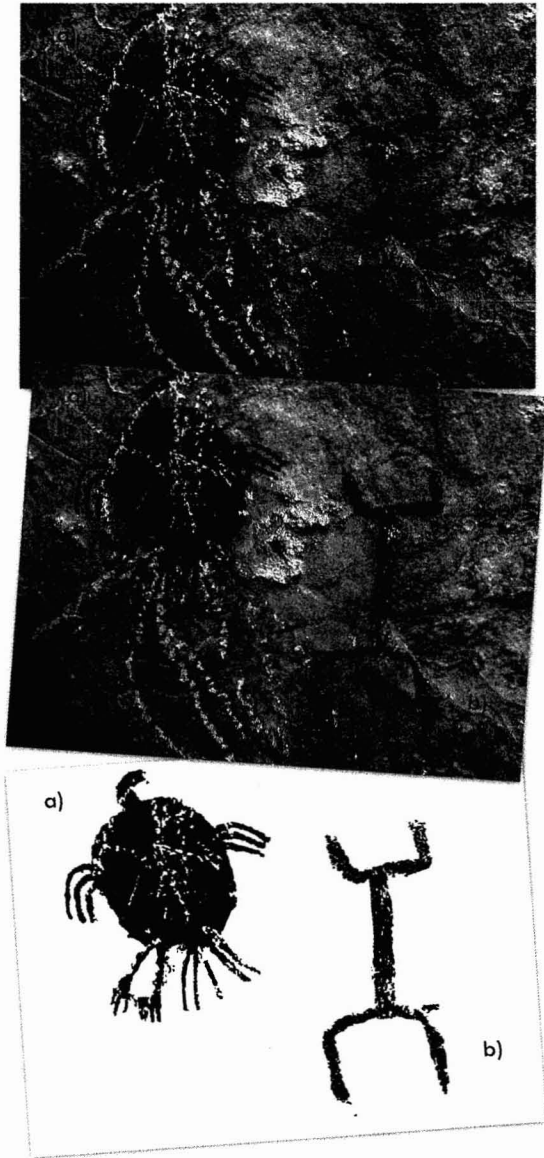


Fig. 5. a: Possible turtle; b: red stick figure anthropomorph showing no detailed features.

The dominant motifs at Racolo are small anthropomorphs (Fig. 2). Other motifs include a possible snake/rope (?) in outline and a socketed axe shown in solid pigment (Fig. 3), a possible bird (Fig. 4), and possible marine motifs, including a possible turtle (Fig. 5a) and a possible stingray or jellyfish (Fig. 6). There are also two in-filled diamond-shaped motifs, which have small scrolled or flattened points (Fig. 7a).

There are at least five anthropomorphs. All are shown in full frontal stance, with upturned arms bent at the elbows and splayed legs with bent knees. Two



Fig. 6. Possible stingray/jellyfish.

anthropomorphs are shown with fingers and toes (Figs. 8, 9); one has an unusual arrangement of the fifth finger coming off the second finger rather than off the body of the hand and is wearing what looks like an axe slung across the waist (Fig. 8). Figure 9 also has an appendage at the waist, but whether this represents an axe or exaggerated genitals is unclear. Another two anthropomorphs have V-shaped antennae or headdresses (Figs. 10, 7b). The hands and feet are stylized and show no details. One (Fig. 7b) also has an object/appendage shown at the waist. The fifth figure is a simple stick figure in the same flexed position with no head or detail depicted (Fig. 5b).

In a central position on the main panel is the insignia FRET LIN 28-1-1977 GAC (Fig. 2). The insignia, presumably of a member of the Fretlin independence

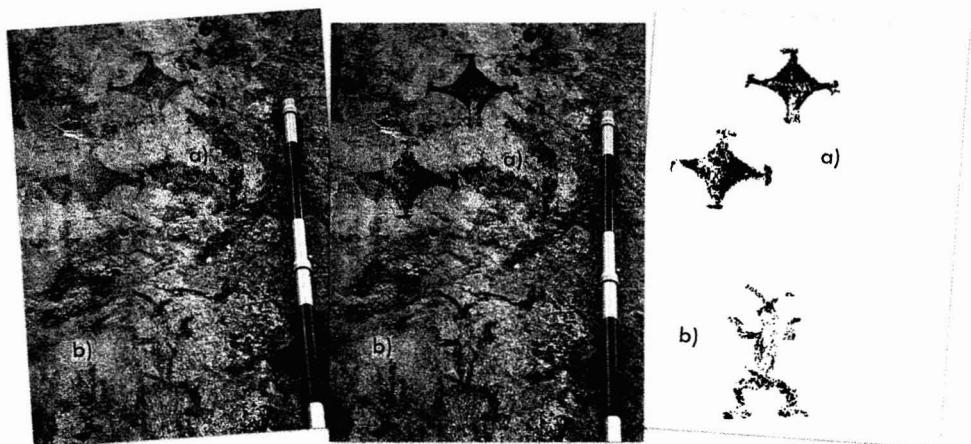


Fig. 7. a: Red solid pigment diamond motifs with flattened or slightly scrolled tips; b: red anthropomorph with V-shaped antennae or headdress. The hands and feet are stylized.



Fig. 8. Red anthropomorph showing body detail.

movement, was carved here a little over a year after Indonesian occupation of East Timor (December 1975). This was a time when thousands of East Timorese fled their villages and took refuge in remote and inaccessible parts of the mountains, where many lived for years resisting Indonesian rule (Pannell and O'Connor 2003). The anthropomorph shown in Figure 8 also has what may be a less distinct Fretlin inscription beneath it (?FRE H217'A).

INTER- AND INTRAREGIONAL COMPARISONS

Both the individual anthropomorphs and the range of motifs show similarities and differences with other rock art sites in East Timor and those characterized by Ballard (1988) for the APT elsewhere in Island Southeast Asia. Similarities include

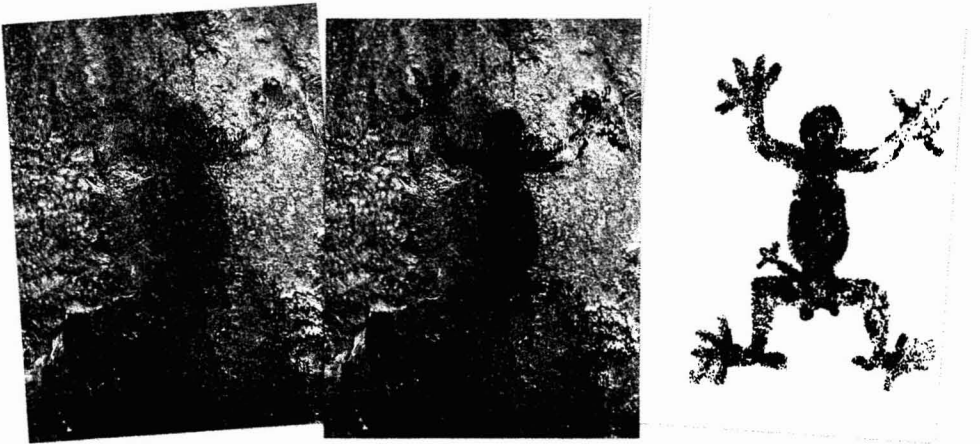


Fig. 9. Red anthropomorph showing body detail.

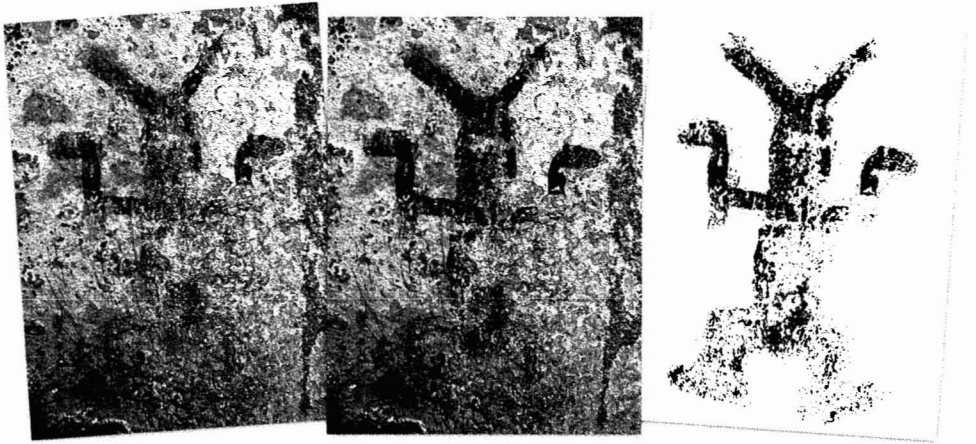


Fig. 10. Red anthropomorph with V-shaped antennae or headdress. The hands and feet are stylized.

the fact that the dominant figurative motif category is small red anthropomorphs. These are prominent in the painted panels at the Dudumahan site, Kai Kecil (Ballard 1988), and in the art sites in the Tutuala region, but they are usually shown in profile or partial profile and are active figures, often depicted dancing or fighting and holding weapons or other objects above their heads, such as the example in Figure 11 from the Mua Mimiraka site. Those at Racolo are shown exclusively in full frontal position and are very static, despite their flexed stance.

Further regional comparisons demonstrate that the Racolo anthropomorphs are similar to those at Lie Kere on the Baucau Plateau, which are also shown in full frontal position (O'Connor 2003:104, fig. 9, 106, fig. 12).⁴ Lie Kere was originally reported by Glover, but the motifs were not described in any detail (1972:54, vol. 2, pl. 3:33). Some additional motifs were reported in O'Connor (2003:102, figs. 8–12), but recent enhancement in Adobe Photoshop has allowed a more complete assessment of the motif categories to be attempted. Lie Kere contains at least 15 anthropomorphs (red), 3 lizard/crocodile zoomorphs (2 red, 1 black), several amorphous red figures, a red stylized face, a possible boat (red), a variety of geometric images, including several crosses (some with scrolled ends), and an elaborate leaf/foilage motif that appears to form a composite image with a decorative yellow motif of interlocking triangles and yellow and red zigzags. Lie Kere therefore has a wider range of motifs than Racolo and includes rectilinear and curvilinear motifs, often employing more than one color.

Racolo lacks many of the most common geometric motifs that feature in the painted panels in the APT—particularly the rayed circle or sun motifs widely reported across the western Pacific (Ballard 1992). Circular or spiral motifs, often with external rays or internal spokes or divisions, are one of the most common geometric motifs in the Tutuala region (O'Connor 2003:116, fig. 21, 123, fig. 27) (see Fig. 11). At Racolo and Lie Kere, rectilinear shapes such as diamonds, zigzags, squares/rectangles, and subdivided squares and crosses dominate the geometric motif suite. Simple circles in red pigment and a rayed circle in black, however, have been recorded at Lie Kere 2 (O'Connor 2003: fig. 14a,b).

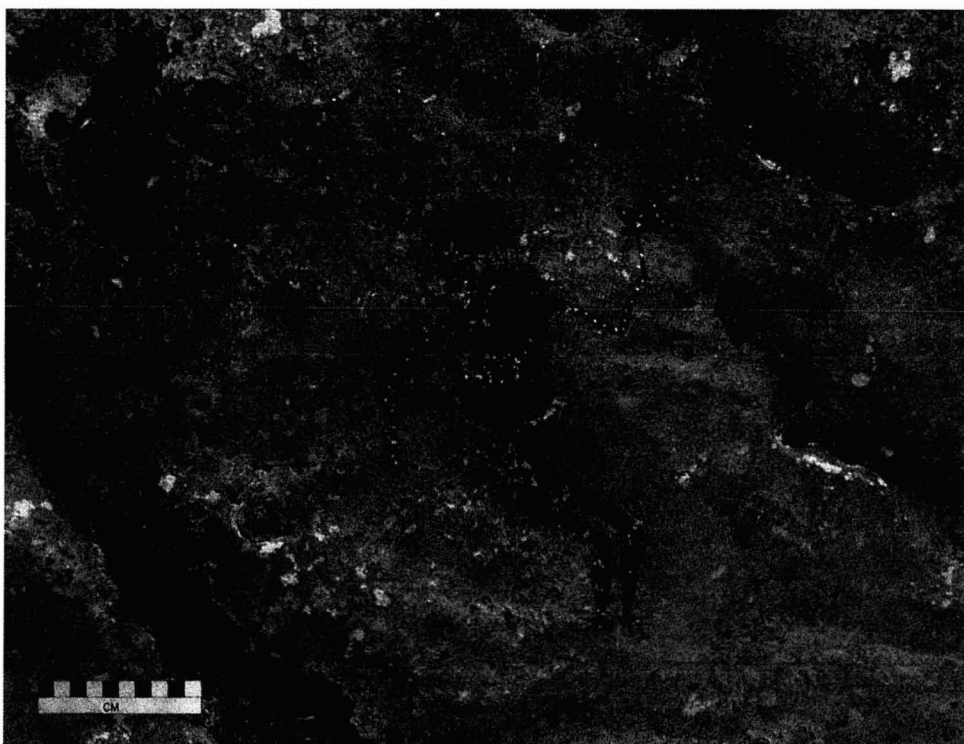


Fig. 11. Anthropomorph in partial profile from the Mua Mimiraka art site in the Tutuala region.

Boats, one of the most common painted figurative motifs elsewhere in the Kai Islands and the western Pacific generally (Ballard 1988), are so far unrecorded at Racolo and are rare or absent in the Baucau sites. However, boats feature prominently in the art of the Tutuala region (O'Connor 2003). Racolo also lacks the hand stencils found in the Tutuala sites and widely in the western Pacific that are thought to be one of the earliest expressions of the APT (Wilson 2002:216).

Linguistic Distribution of Racolo

Both Makasai (NAN) and Nauti (AN) languages are spoken in the Baguia region. It would appear, however, that Makasai represents a fairly recent expansion of a NAN language into an existing AN language area (John Bowden pers. comm.). If this is so, then Racolo is like the sites around Tutuala: within an area that was linguistically AN when painted, but where recent language shifts have introduced NAN languages (O'Connor 2003:118). It therefore conforms to the definitional requirements of the APT as mapping onto AN language distributions (Ballard 1992).

Intraregional Summary

The painted rock art at Racolo, Baguia, shares more common features with the Baucau Plateau site, Lie Kere, than with the painted shelters and caves from the

Tutuala region at the eastern end of the island, although the sample size of motif categories in Baguia suggests comparisons should be tempered with caution. A larger sample size from Baguia may introduce a greater spectrum and diversity of motif categories and change this picture dramatically. No attempt has been made, therefore, to summarize these differences statistically. The most common figurative motifs in the Tutuala region are anthropomorphs, followed by boats and simple and complex rayed circles and concentric circles. Hand and arm stencils also appear in the Tutuala sites. In the Baucau and Baguia regions, anthropomorphs are still the dominant figurative motif category, but they are exclusively depicted in full frontal stance and, while mostly shown with splayed arms and legs, appear less active than the profile figures from the Tutuala art sites. Boats and hand stencils are not depicted at Racolo, and only one putative boat is known from Baucau.

CHRONOLOGY

Estimating the age of the rock art at Racolo is problematic. While Ballard (1992) has argued convincingly that most of the painted rock art of the western Pacific, including the East Timor sites he considered, should be regarded as postdating Austronesian expansion into this area c. 4000–3500 years ago (Bellwood 1997), there is no reason why older art should not be found in Island Southeast Asia, aside from the poor preservation attributes of limestone walls as “canvases.” With the possible exception of Flores (Morwood et al. 2004), most islands investigated appear to have been occupied by modern humans at least 28,000 years ago or earlier (Bellwood 1997; O'Connor et al. 2005), and East Timor has returned dates of 35,000 B.P. from occupation sites that also contain painted art (O'Connor et al. 2002a). The systematic rock art dating program undertaken recently in southeastern Borneo has demonstrated that in some circumstances, painted pigment can survive from terminal Pleistocene times in limestone caves, even in tropical environments. Selected Borneo images have produced a range of Th/U (thorium-uranium) and ^{14}C (radiocarbon) dates with a minimum age of c. 9800 B.P. (Plagnes et al. 2003). Thus there is no a priori reason for believing that a painting tradition or traditions would not have been in place on the mainland and in Wallacea well before any external cultural influences accompanying the expansion of Austronesian-language speakers into Island Southeast Asia. In respect of its inland location, the Racolo site is similar to the southeastern Borneo sites. However, the southeastern Borneo images are very different stylistically from those found in Racolo or elsewhere in East Timor, being dominated by clusters of hand and arm stencils with elaborate decorative infills that resemble clan tattoos.

There is almost no superpositioning of motifs in either Racolo or at the Baucau sites, although retouching or overpainting in the same color pigment has been detected on some motifs, particularly the anthropomorphs. The Racolo motifs are all on limestone surfaces, and the faded and deteriorated condition of many indicates that most do not have a long life span. Some motifs—such as the axe at Racolo, which probably represents a Bronze Age socketed axe—are so faded that they could be discerned only after image enhancement. The axe head is in typical Dong Son style. It is depicted with the blade facing down, and the axe head is balanced by the projection on the “knee-bend” haft, which would

also put weight behind the axe when it was swung. The axe head has a narrow or swallowtail socket (see Fig. 3). This type of bronze axe is likely to have made its first appearance in Wallacea in the early to middle first millennium A.D. Socketed axes with blades in Dong Son style have been found in some numbers in Java, Bali, and elsewhere in Indonesia, and there is good evidence for an Indonesian casting tradition (Bellwood 1997:280–281). Glover (1986:22) found a socketed bronze axe on the surface of a site in Baucau, and the high copper content suggested that it may have been produced from locally acquired ore (Glover 2001). While this type of axe is unlikely to have been available to be painted before 2000 B.P., such objects were valued and kept as heirlooms, as in the case of the Baucau find, which means that some may have remained in circulation into the historic period. However, the fact that the Racolo axe painting depicts the wooden haft, which is absent from historic surface finds and heirloom axes, suggests that the Racolo axe is likely to have been painted at the time such axes were being produced. A date of about 2000 to 1500 B.P. therefore seems probable for this image.

Taken together, the style, subjects, and apparently short life span of pigment on these limestone surfaces would indicate that none of the paintings at Racolo have the deep antiquity of those found in southeastern Borneo. The earliest images in East Timor are likely to be the red pigment images in a number of caves and shelters in the Tutuala area that are covered in thick flows of reprecipitated calcium carbonate. Some images are wholly or partly buried by carbonate flow and are barely discernable. Recent advances in thorium-uranium dating of very thin lenses of carbonate overlying and underlying pigment in rock fragments exfoliated from the wall at Lene Hara cave, Tutuala, raise hope that in the future this technique will be able to provide minimum and maximum ages to bracket the time of application of the art (Aubert et al. 2007).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the paintings on the panels at Racolo would fit within the APT were it not for their inland location and their mostly accessible execution low on the walls of the overhang. Certainly the socketed axe with haft would seem to place it within the right time frame for the later diversification of the APT. As Wilson (2002) has noted for Vanuatu, this later phase of painted art is characterized by regional diversification of style and motif categories, and the rules governing motif location and color appear less strict. Alternatively, it may be that the current distribution of rock art in East Timor, at least to some extent, reflects the distribution and intensity of archaeological research. To date, there has been comparatively little reconnaissance in inland regions, with most survey work being concentrated close to the northern coastal highway between Dili and Tutuala. We suspect this type of distributional bias may apply to much of our recorded archeological data for Island Southeast Asia and the western Pacific. More inland surveys will undoubtedly produce more inland art sites.

The broad stylistic similarities between some motif categories, such as anthropomorphs, from Baguia and the coastal Baucau Plateau may indicate that the rock art was produced within a central interactive cultural sphere that stretched from the north coast and into the mountainous spine of East Timor about 2000

years ago. Comparisons with the painted rock art from around Tutuala in the east show significant stylistic differences in some shared motif categories, and some motif categories that are prominent in the east are absent or uncommon in the central region. This comparison has helped to establish that the painted art in the Tutuala area itself forms a coherent stylistic region.

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NOTES

1. Ballard's (1992) review included "Papua New Guinea including Buka and Bougainville Islands, together with the eastern Indonesian provinces of Irian Jaya, Maluku, Timor Timur and Timor Barat."
2. Ballard (1992:95–96) found that the majority of the painted art sites in his sample of 187 were located within 1 km of the current coastline.
3. Glover (1972:323–353) provides a detailed summary of early archaeological endeavors in Timor.
4. *Kere* is the Tetun word for marking, painting, or writing.

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the discovery of a new rock art site from East Timor that is located inland on the southern flanks of the central mountainous spine of the island. One particular painted motif, a socketed axe with haft, indicates that at least some of the motifs were painted c. 2000 B.P. This date and the stylistic and technical features of the art would place it within the later body of painted art associated with the Austronesian Painting Tradition (APT) elsewhere in the western Pacific. This later phase is characterized by greater diversity in style, color, and placement of motifs than is found in the earlier APT. Comparison with the other known art sites in East Timor shows significant differences between the rock art of the eastern and central parts of East Timor, indicating that these areas comprised separate stylistic regions. KEYWORDS: Austronesian Painting Tradition, rock art, Timor, Island Southeast Asia, western Pacific, iconography.