

# Cave Arts of Karawari

BY NANCY SULLIVAN

**In the hills behind the Arafundi and Karawari Rivers lies one of the largest cave art systems in the southern hemisphere. It may even be the largest, but we don't yet know.**

**However, for the past two years, a team of ethnographers from Nancy Sullivan and Associates in Madang has been working since 2007 to measure and record the caves where the Inyai, Ewa and Penali peoples have lived for hundreds of years.**





The entire complex of intersecting tributaries, loosely referred to as the 'Upper Karawari', ranges some 85 kilometres across the southern end of the Sepik River floodplains. The past is a visible backdrop to all these people.

The limestone escarpments on the horizon are riddled with caves where they once buried their dead, initiated their young men and sheltered from their enemies.

In the past, mobile communities formed loose villages that, until recently, occupied the rainforest tablelands around the Upper Arafundi and Karawari, and their tributaries. These peoples occupied rock shelters and caves in seasonal rotation with hunting shelters and would spend longer periods of time in the caves for ceremonial and mortuary purposes.

They started to move down to the tributaries that run south of the Sepik River barely 60 years ago, after promises of government services and economic benefits, only a few of which have ever materialised.

The Ewa and Inyai people were easily persuaded at the time to sell their mortuary carvings from the caves to early Oceanic art collectors. As a result, some of the best pieces can now be seen at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Jolika collection at the de Young Museum in San Francisco.

Majority of the pieces called yipwon, komanggabi and aripa in the local languages are now in the Museum de Kulteren in Basel, Switzerland. Only the Jolika pieces have been carbon-dated - in an expensive effort to establish historical provenance for the collection.

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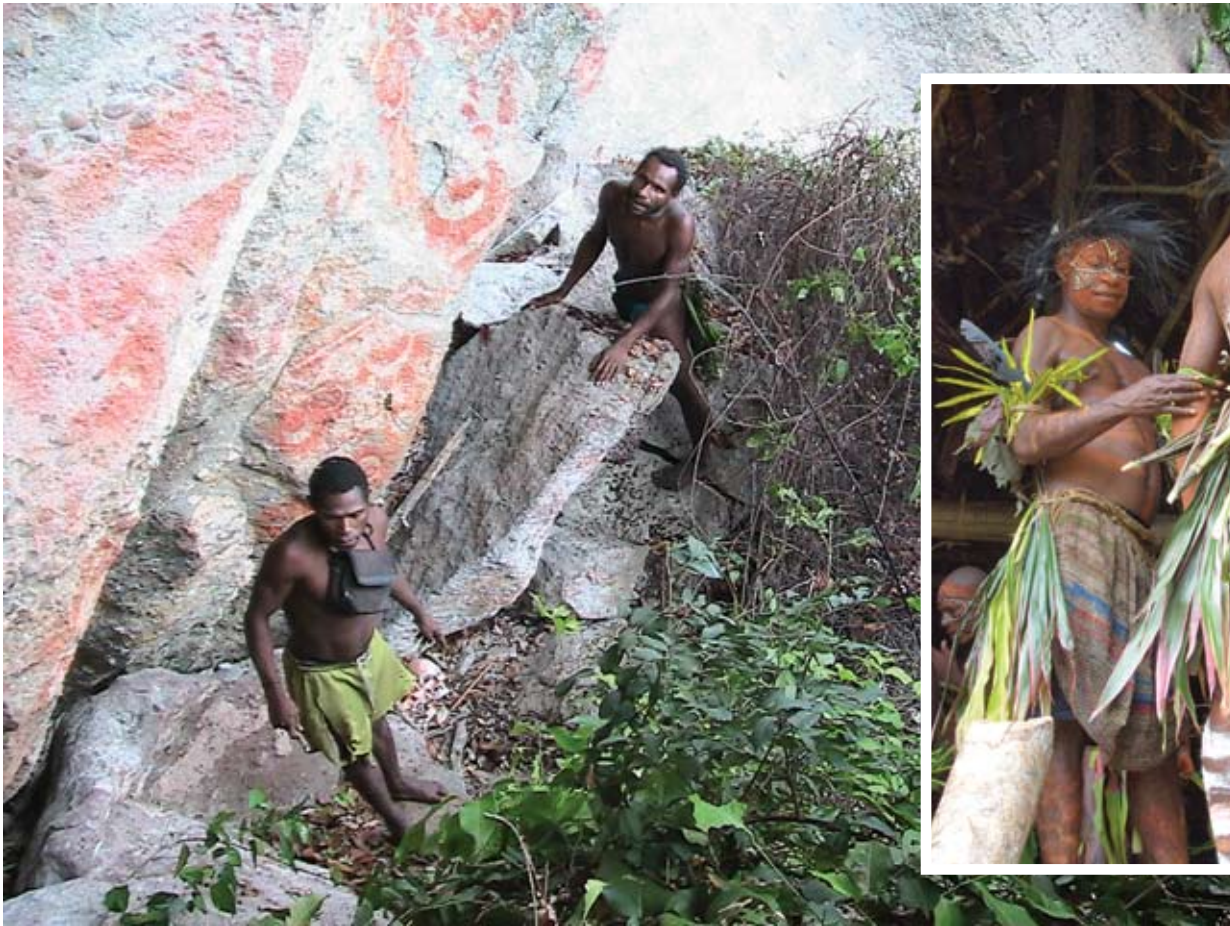


But as a result, we now know that the Upper Karawari people have been in the area since at least the 16th century. Anything they may have made before that time would probably not have survived the weather anyway.

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Some of these semi-nomadic communities were first contacted by the PNG Government as recently as 1966, and as recently as 1987, archaeologists Paul Gorecki and Rhys Jones conducted a survey of abandoned rock shelters in the area that had never before been documented.

They describe the caves as being covered with panels of stenciled and painted images - in some cases "more than 60 metres of cave wall or roof are decorated with continuous panels of art," (Gorecki and Jones 1987:3), constituting "the greatest example of rock art in the whole of Melanesia".



There are roughly 300 caves in these foothills of Mt McGregor and the Auagum Range that are covered with hand and other stencils of unknown age. Unlike hand stencils in Northern and Western Australia, and in Borneo, where we can date the clay to 20,000 years ago, this is a huge complex that's only recently been 'finished.' People have been stencilling over older images that may be thousands of years old.

In 2008, a team of archeologists from Easter Island, including Edmundo Edwards, as well as a Canadian carbon-dating expert, Bassam Ghaleb, came to PNG to train NSA workers in measurement and recording techniques. But they could not establish a reliable date for the images as yet.

In addition, archeologist Sebastine Haraha of the National Museum and Art Gallery joined our team earlier this year when a writer/photographer team from the National Geographic Magazine arrived to report on one section of the caves owned by the Penali people.

Traditionally, the Penali initiated their young men in these caves and marked the process with the young men's hand prints. After being housed in the caves away from women and children and instructed in esoterica by their uncles, the youths would 'bleed' their penes by having cane reeds shoved into the urethra and they would spray the blood on their palms to press handprints on cave walls.

The bark paintings that decorate the Penali men's houses are also associated with male initiation. They are made from the sago trunk leaves, roughly 130 by 40 centimetres, which are flattened and cleaned before being bound by rattan loops to vertical sticks, and sent directly to the house walls.

Using charcoal, lime and brown and white clay, they are elaborate spiral and animal motifs, some more anthropomorphic than others, and each connected with the maker's clan.





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It is assumed the designs function as mnemonic devices for clan stories, as is the case for so many Sepik carvings and paintings. Much like the rock stencils and prints, these are non-transportable works and remain important features of the area's cultural heritage.

Our objective is to produce a publishable document of the Upper Karawari peoples and their history as a collaboration amongst the villagers and ourselves.

Hopefully, this publication will be the cornerstone of a campaign to establish National Cultural Property for these caves. As the jungles and river basins around them are being logged, mined and explored for future resource extraction, these remote communities wish to take a stand against rainforest destruction and conserve their caves for the future of our children and the world.

This project still has far to go. We have enjoyed major funding from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the National Geographic Society, the Firebird Foundation, and Sr Antonio Cruz Mayor. Only half of these caves have been properly recorded. But we will be spending much of 2010 trying to finish the rest.

Our team has already lost one beloved worker, Fred Casi. Communities that work with us are growing anxious to receive schools, aid posts and other vital infrastructure that would make their conservation efforts sustainable. So we wish to thank everyone in the Penali, Ewa and Inyai communities, and their relatives among the Yimas villagers, for their dedication so far. And we cannot forget our world class crew: Josh Meraveka, Levi Ronald, Aiyo Gubag, Frank James, Albert Kamas, Christian Dominic, Jeffery Otto, Robert Tapain, Sebastian Katuk, Justin Waipo, George Tikas, Tony Wamgoon, Timothy Kamuk, Camillus Asukai, Lucas Yami, Solomon Yakari, Manuel Tungi, Martin Meliyap and Sebastine Haraha of the National Museum and Art Gallery.



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BRIAN BELL HOMECENTRE - GORDONS, PORT MORCSBY 325 8469 Email: [bbsales@brianbell.com.pg](mailto:bbsales@brianbell.com.pg)