

Ritual in the rock-art of Kanchanaburi and Uthai Thani province, western Thailand?

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Abstract

The rock-art of Kanchanaburi and Uthai Thani Province, Thailand provides a potentially rich database for ritual-oriented interpretations. Of the research undertaken in the region, discussion of ritual in the rock-art is limited. The aim of this article is to encourage debate concerning ritual in rock-art studies in Thailand and to highlight the ritual interpretations of its content.

Introduction

Until recently archaeologists have ignored rock-art as evidence for ritual activity. Rock-art has since advanced with archaeologists realising that tangible prehistoric art carved, pecked or painted onto rocks has the potential to mediate intangible aspects of the world. Rock-art has the potential of representing the belief systems of a society, and can encompass topics such as kinship, religion, class, gender, ethnicity and, of importance in this paper, ritual. The study of ritual itself has also received its equal share of neglect in archaeology, with critics labelling it “a catch-all for ‘odd’ or otherwise not understood behaviour” (Howey & O’Shea, 2006: 261 – 262; Insoll, 2004: 2).

The prehistoric rock-art of Kanchanaburi and Uthai Thani Provinces, western Thailand, provides a potentially rich database for ritual-oriented interpretations. Of the research undertaken in the region, documentation, typology and technique have been the main focus, with limited discussion, critique and application of archaeological and

anthropological material in general around the interpretation of rock-art, and in particular, of ritual in the rock-art. This is a generalised, and by no means a blanket claim, on the current state of rock-art studies in Thailand as there are some exceptions (Sangvichien et al (1989), Wongthes (1994), Schoocongdej (2002), Sukkham (2007)).

This article highlights not only the ritual interpretations of rock-art at sites in western Thailand, but also the ambiguity of rock-art. The aim of this article is to question past and new interpretations to encourage debate concerning ritual in the rock-art of western Thailand, and by extension, the interpretation of rock-art in general, which has often been guided by stereotypes and biases. This research found some patterns in the rock-art that could be “read” as indicating ritual ideologies or constructs; however, due to the ambiguity of rock-art meanings, the results of this article are left intentionally inconclusive, as like Tilley states “any attempt to establish a totalising framework... is doomed to failure. There is always a surplus of meaning” (Tilley, 1991: 173).

Rock-Art in Western Thailand

Thailand boasts the largest number of rock-art sites in Southeast Asia (Tan & Taçon, 2014: 72). There are at least 200 documented sites in Thailand (Srisuchat, n.d.: 4), of which six are located in the western region. This article will discuss three of these sites: Tham Ta Duang and Pha Daeng located in Kanchanaburi province and Khao Plara in Uthai Thani province. An in-depth study of all six sites can be found in the author’s doctoral research (n.d.).

Tham Ta Duang is located on Khao Wang Gula Mountain, approximately 1.25 kilometers from Khwae Yai (Big River) and 300 meters above sea level (Figure 1). Despite the site name beginning with *tham*, meaning cave in Thai, the rock-art is located on the wall of a rock shelter with two shallow caves beside it. There are a total of 51 motifs across two panels (Figures 2 and 3). Based on relative dating with Ban Kao and Ongbah in Kanchanaburi province (Sorensen, 1973: 96; 1988: 29), the occupation of Tham Ta Duang dates between 4,000 and 2,000 years b.p. (Supakijwilekakarn, 1990. In: Shoocongdej, 2002: 192).

Fifty kilometers north of Tham Ta Duang is the rock-art of Pha Daeng located on a limestone cliff face on Khao Daeng (Red Mountain), approximately 450 meters above sea level (Figure 1). 75 motifs are depicted across three panels (Figures 4, 5, 6). Pha Daeng has also been relatively dated to between 4,000 and 2,000 years b.p. to Ban Kao in Kanchanaburi province (Srisuchat, 1989: 73).

North of Kanchanaburi, and approximately 102 kilometers from Pha Daeng, Khao Plara in Uthai Thani province is named after the limestone mountain in which the site is found (Figure 1). Approximately 598 meters above sea level, 40 motifs are painted along a rock shelter wall (Figures 7 and 8). Khao Plara has been dated to 2,000 years b.p. based on relative dating with Ban Lum Kao in Uthai Thani province (Napintu, 1988. In: Shoocongdej, 2002: 197).

No archaeological excavations have been conducted at Tham Ta Duang, Pha Daeng or Khao Plara. All three sites are painted in red ochre and in relatively close proximity to one another. They share a similar style in their rock-art suggesting that the three sites could be related (Shoocongdej, 2002). The majority of rock-art studies in western Thailand have focused on motif identification and classification only. Rock-art requires a multi-dimensional analysis, using archaeological evidence, where it exists, and anthropological evidence, where it is suitable (spatially and temporally). By investigating each motif, using both archaeological and anthropological evidence, this article will highlight the ambiguity of rock-art and discuss the various interpretations one motif can have, whilst also attempting to identify and offer interpretations of the possible ritual content of the rock-art sites.

“Praying Figures”

At Tham Ta Duang, Pha Daeng and Khao Plara, the most dominant and frequently painted motif in the rock-art is the anthropomorphic figure. These figures vary from simple stick figures to detailed anatomical figures; however, they are usually depicted with upraised arms and some with their legs bent – this posture in rock-art is often referred to as a “praying figure” and is a graphic expression found in rock art all over the world from Valcamonica in northern Italy to Guangxi in south-western China.

Several comparisons have been made between the style of rock-art found in Thailand and southwest China. Up until now, only a metaphoric comparison of the stylistic form of the “praying figures” at Tham Ta Duang, Pha Daeng and Khao Plara has been made to the rock-art that features along the Zuojiang River Valley in Zhuang Autonomous Region, Guangxi, southwest China (Shengmin et al, 1994:70). The region borders Vietnam and is home to one of the largest ethnic minority groups, the Zhuang. However, there has been no significant study and substantiation of this apparent association, only encouragement to take it further (Lorblanchet, 1992: xx). With only simple stylistic comparisons made to the rock-art in both regions, this article explores the association further by looking at the possible meanings attached to the rock-art utilising the ethnographic records of present day people who have a direct connection with it. This approach will allow for differing perspectives, which could shed light on the ritual meaning behind the rock-art of western Thailand, whose artists, Wongthes (1994: 22; 2005: 180) suggests, possibly originated in southwest China and migrated into western Thailand around the first century BCE (Wongthes, 1994: 22; 2005: 180). This is in line with Charles Higham’s (1996) migratory theory for agricultural expansion out of southern China into Southeast Asia in the early to mid second millennium BCE.

Along the steep sided limestone cliffs bordering either side of the Zuojiang River Valley and its tributaries, there are a total of 81 rock-art sites, including Huashan or in the local Zhuang language, “*Pay Laiz*” (“a mountain with colourful pictures”), which is considered to be the most impressive. It is believed amongst most Chinese scholars to have been the work of the ancient ethnic group the Luo Yue who occupied the Guangxi and the Red River Plain in Vietnam between the Warring States Period (403-221 BCE) and Eastern Han Dynasty (26-220 CE) (Qin et al. 1987: 137). The Zhuang, as well as the Viet (the ethnic majority in Vietnam) and the Muong (an ethnic minority of northern Vietnam), are believed to be descendants of the Luo Yue (Dao, 1976: 233).

All motifs depicted along the Zuojiang River Valley are painted in red ochre. There are an estimated 5,000 motifs, with more than

4,000 of these being “praying figures”. Over time the “praying figures” have acquired a number of legends and myths, one of which is the frog totem of the Zhuang people. This totem is one of four spiritual gods worshipped by the Zhuang: Thunder, Water, Flower and Frog. The frog represents all animals, particularly those related to agriculture (Liao 2002: 6).

The Zhuang’s local economy is highly dependant on agriculture, which in turn is heavily reliant on the climate. Thunder is seen as a mysterious weather phenomenon amongst the Zhuang, whose thunderous roar is followed by abundant rainfall, an essential element for a good year’s harvest (Liao, 2002: 68). The Zhuang believe that the frog was sent by the frog’s father, the Thunder God – who represents all things related to the sky, including the weather – to mediate between the heavenly and earthly realms. Legend holds that villagers could tell the frog when their crops needed more rain, and the frog would then carry the message to the frog’s father. However, relations between the Zhuang and the Thunder God took a turn when a villager accidentally killed the frog and from then on droughts and floods occurred destroying their crops. To appease the Thunder God, the villagers declared an annual holiday, known as Maguai or Toad Festival, held during the first month of the new agricultural year in honour of the frog (Kaup, 2000: 42). A detailed ethnographic description of the Toad Festival follows as it is necessary to describe the festival in detail since elements of the ritual practice will be referred to throughout this article when discussing interpretations of the rock-art in western Thailand.

On the first day of the festival villagers are awoken at dawn by the sound of booming bronze drums, a signal for people to search and unearth a hibernating frog from the fields. A frog’s croak is said to echo the sound of thunder, which sends a message to the Thunder God calling for rain. Similarly, the boom that resonates from the beating of bronze drums may simulate the cry of the frogs, inviting or demanding heaven to respond with thunder and rain (Wright, 1994: 195). The village’s religious leader, *shigong*, sacrifices the frog whilst reciting eulogies. The frog is placed on a colourful sedan chair decorated with motifs similar to those found in the rock-art of the region and for thirty days village children parade the toad and beat drums in procession to

each village household (Figures 9 and 10). A constant vigil is kept over the frog, and incense and offerings are made. After at least twenty days of offerings, the festival reaches its climax and the ceremony ends with villagers performing a frog dance, or “*xingma* dance”, to the beating of drums. The previous year’s frog is unearthed and if its remains are golden brown the villagers rejoice in this omen for an abundant harvest. If it is dark brown/black it signifies forthcoming floods or droughts and thus a difficult harvest. This year’s frog is then buried in its place (Kaup, 2000: 42).

Ethnographic sources of the Zhuang’s veneration towards the Thunder God and the frog totem have led to anthropological interpretations of their regional rock-art. Given the Zhuang’s reverence and reliance to a spiritual being who in effect controls their livelihood, it has been proposed that the systematic depiction of the “praying figures” could have been created in worship of the Thunder God (Yu, 2004:164) for agricultural prosperity. While others have suggested it could have been a form of ancestor worship (Qin et al, 1987: 175).

Anthropologists and archaeologists cannot be sure whether rock-art is merely an accurate representation with no symbolic meaning, or whether rock-art itself is a visual representation of a whole panoply of meanings. The “praying figures” in southwest China and Thailand are no exception, with several interpretations of what they represent offered by as many scholars. The systematic depiction of the “praying figures” could represent worshippers; alternatively the form of the figures, which are analogous to zoomorphic manifestations of a frog, has led to interpretations that they are representations of the totemic frog (Liao, 2002; Wongthes, 1994). Others have suggested that all the “praying figures” in southwest China (Zao Fu, 199: 381; Wongthes, 1994: 10) and western Thailand (Shoocongdej, 2002: 192) are dancers. Shoocongdej (2002: 192) proposes that the upraised hands of the figures at the three sites in Thailand may simply depict anthropomorphs dancing, which may be part of their ritual ceremony, in celebration or worship of what exactly, is unknown. Wongthes (1994: 17) and Mingjun Liao (2002: 82) go further and explain that the stance adopted by the anthropomorphs along the Zuojiang River is an imitation of the frog dance performed during the ceremonies finale and

thus a representation of the *xingma* dance during the Toad Festival. However, these hypotheses raise several questions in regards to what role the rock-art played in ritual practice, if it did at all. Was it created in worship of the Thunder God before, during or after the ritual? Or is the rock-art a depiction of the ritual activity, and not actually form part of the ritual itself?

Rock-art may represent the “real” historic past, akin to a biographic style of rock-art depicting the events of individuals, families and/or communities. It may also represent the “supernatural” and “mythological”. The depiction or reference to ritual in rock-art may be a convergence of these two kinds of representations. Ritual practice can be an enactment of important past events; it can revitalise myths and connect individuals with ancestors through trance, spirit possession, puberty rituals and/or other lifecycle transitions. Therefore, it is impossible to say whether rock-art represents “real” events or images of the spirit world (Hays-Gilpin, 2004). Consequently, it is impossible to say whether the “praying figures” are a depiction of ritual performance, representing worshippers, or images of frogs acting as messengers between different realms, or dancers of some ritual activity or event completely disconnected to the Thunder God.

The stylistic similarities between the rock-art of southwest China and western Thailand have been highlighted by Shengmin, et al. (1994: 30), claiming only slight differences in the rock-art. These differences are possibly a result of influence/integration into an already existing western Thai culture. However, can we say the same for its meaning? Can meaning remain consistent over distances and between different cultures? The meaning of rock-art and other forms of material culture is not stable or unchanging, and although meaning can remain consistent for long periods of time, some meanings change; therefore, there can be no single relationship between specific motifs and their interpretations (Conkey, 1997, 362-3). This statement alone may signify, to some readers, the end to any further investigation into these two regions; however, the interpretation of rock-art requires the exploration of a range of sources. Associated artefacts provide further evidence for a regional connection and related ethnographic sources can offer suggestions towards meanings through shared/similar

iconography that the rock-art, material culture or ritual ceremony may possess.

Sedan Chair

During the Frog Festival, as mentioned above, a procession of villagers beat bronze drums that hang from a length of bamboo and parade the sedan chair through the village. Similar procession scenes are depicted in the rock-art along the Zuojiang River Valley (Figure 11). However, they are associated with a circular motif – widely interpreted as drums (Qin et al, 1987: 167). Moreover the circular motifs are not held by the figures in the procession line, rather the motif is integrated into the scene. At Tham Ta Duang (Figure 2, Area 1) there are 18 anthropomorphic figures shown in profile in procession carrying two objects: one rectangular object with a smaller rectangle painted inside it and, the other, a circle. If we were to compare this pictograph to the exact ceremonial process of the Toad Festival, then it is possible to interpret the motif to the left of the procession as a sedan chair based on its metaphoric shape. However, there is no archaeological evidence to suggest that sedan chairs were used by prehistoric producers of the rock-art along the Zuojiang River Valley or at Tham Ta Duang.

Presently, sedan chairs are made entirely of colourful paper built on a bamboo frame. If such a ceremonial object played a part in the ritual ceremonies of the prehistoric Luo Yeo, as it does today amongst their ancestral Zhuang, and assuming similar such compostable materials were used in its construction, no evidence of prehistoric sedan chairs would likely have survived. Consequently, there is no trace of the material artefact in the archaeological record of southwest China or western Thailand.

Wooden Log Coffin

The same rectangular motif at Tham Ta Duang has also been interpreted as representing a wooden boat-shaped log coffin (Sangvichien et al, 1989: 116) and the ceremony depicted in the rock-art possibly a funerary ritual (Schoocondej, 2002: 192;

Supakijwilekakarn, 1990: 50). These interpretations have been made based on the archaeological evidence from a single site, Tham Ongbah in Kanchanaburi, located approximately 52 kilometers northwest of Tham Ta Duang, the only log coffin site to have been extensively excavated in western Thailand. A further five cave sites – Tham Kao Takaeng, Tham Ruea, Tham Pu Ai Di, Tham Li Si and Tham Sing – have been reported with evidence of a similar burial practice, all of which have been heavily disturbed by looters and guano collectors. Skeletal remains were often cremated in fear of any spirits that they may contain. Thus, remnants of antiquity vary quantitatively and qualitatively between each site.

Log coffin burials have so far been documented in the west (Sørensen, 1988; Fine Arts Department of Thailand, n.d.) and northwest (Gorman, 1970; Grave et al, 1994; Wannasri et al, 2007) of Thailand, with one site reported in the northeast, however, its contents were cremated by the locals who discovered it (Bullen, 1992: 358). This prehistoric burial practice is prevalent across Southeast Asia, with log coffin sites found in such areas as Semporna and Sarawak, Malaysia (Bellwood, 1985); Sichuan (Needham, 1970) and Fujian (Needham, 1971), China; Cebu, Rombron and Bohol, Philippines (Tenazas, 1973); and Viet Khe, Dong Xa and Yen Bac, Vietnam (Bellwood et al, 2007). These regional log coffins differ in shape and design, presumably representing local styles.

Per Sørensen (1988) excavated Tham Ongbah in 1965, at which time there too were signs of severe disturbance by treasure hunters, mainly looking for the abundant glass beads, semi-precious stones, bronze jewellery, iron weapons and tools, pottery and complete bronze vessels that furnished such burials. Amongst Sørensen's finds were over 90 log coffins, each cut lengthways from a single tree trunk (*Dalbetgia sp*), with its interior burial chamber dug out, wherein the buried would lie inhumed supine, with a planked lid – no coffin was found completely intact. At either end of the coffin are carved stylised animal heads with horns, which may have served as handles (Sørensen, 1988: 97). The overall aesthetic of the coffin reflects that of a boat. C₁₄ dating from one of the coffins yielded a date of 2180±100 b.p. (K-1300). However, this date comes with some potential complications,

particularly in regards to the time between when the tree was cut down to when it was finally carved into a coffin. Closely associated with the log coffins were fragments from six bronze Dong Son drums of Heger Type I (Sørensen, 1988: 95), whose iconographic depictions have a stylistic affinity to the rock-art and will be discussed further below.

Sangvichien et al (1989: 117) commented on the perspective in which the log coffin is depicted at Tham Ta Duang, questioning why the coffin was not painted lengthways. If indeed the motif is depicting a log coffin, the typology found in Kanchanaburi presents coffins with burial chambers measuring up to three metres long with handles at either end, thus giving a rectangular side view with smaller extensions protruding from either side (Figure 12). The motif depicted at Tham Ta Duang resembles that of a square, presenting us with a new perspective of the coffin possibly being depicted either from a front or back view (Figure 12 and Figure 2).

Certainly, parallels between the metaphoric shape of a log coffin, with its ability to be held by the stylised carved handles at both ends and possibly being transported to the area where the coffin would lay to rest, is somewhat analogous to the square motif being held in the rock-art at Tham Ta Duang. Furthermore, the six burial caves found in Kanchanaburi provide evidence of a log coffin burial culture within the region that is in close proximity to Tham Ta Duang, which goes some way to suggest a funerary connection with the rock-art. A similar motif is not featured at Pha Daeng and Khao Plara.

What comes into question is whether the rock-art is a representation of a funerary ritual or practice. If the act of painting was part of the ritual process, and should this have been a process with each burial, we would expect to see repetition of the motifs in similar numbers to the burials found. Depiction of the funerary practice could have been reserved for those of higher status; two types of burials were found at Tham Ongbah – coffins that were richly furnished and simple burials in the ground with less fine grave offerings – which suggests a hierarchy in funerary practice that could have transferred to the creation of rock-art. Alternatively, the rock-art may have served as a teaching tool for the group's cultural funerary ritual. Clearly these questions will never be answered, but the discussion, comparison and

analysis of data between sites within and outside the text region is important.

Dong Son Drums

A frequent motif found in the rock-art along the Zuojiang River Valley is a circle, which many have interpreted as representing Dong Son drums (Guangxi Zhuang Ethnic Group Autonomous Region Ethnic Research Institute (henceforth *GZEGARERI*), 1987; Qin et al, 1987; Shengmin et al, 1994; Zao Fu, 1992). These interpretations arose from the high concentration of Dong Son drums found in Guangxi, from local folklore and their current use today in ritual ceremonies. Figure 13 shows the various stylised depictions of the drum, with varying designs radiating from its centre. Drums associated with individual anthropomorphic figures dominate the Zuojiang rock-art, however, on occasions they are associated near a procession line. In contrast, a single circular motif is depicted at Tham Ta Duang, which is being carried by two anthropomorphic figures, one on either side of the motif as part of a procession line. In this case, the motif has also been interpreted by the majority as a Dong Son drum, connecting it to the drums found at nearby burial cave, Ongbah (Shengmin et al, 1994, 1994: 10; Shoocongdej, 2002: 194; Sukkham, 2007: 14).

Another square motif is depicted to the left of the circular motif as part of the procession line at Tham Ta Duang. Although the two objects differ in size and shape, they are held in the same way at either end by anthropomorphic figures. Because of this similarity, Suphawan, et al. (1989: 62-63. In: Sukkham, 2007: 7) believe that both motifs could represent drums or depict the style of two different drums. It should be noted that some of the supposed Zuojiang Dong Son drums (Figure 13, drum numbers 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 14, 17 and 21; Figure 17, drum numbers 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16; Figure 18, drum numbers 17 and 19; and lastly Figure 19, drum numbers 1, 3, 15 and 17), all have extensions connecting to the drum. Therefore, although the rock-art does not depict a procession line carrying the drum, there are signs that some drums had the potential to be carried, and by extension, could have been carried as part of a procession. What is missing from the circular motif at Tham Ta Duang, however, is the signature central

star (or sun burst, eye, moon) on the tympanon of the drum that is so identifiable of Dong Son drums. The square motif, however, could potentially depict an abstracted form of the drum. The possibility that the procession line at Tham Ta Duang is carrying two different objects as opposed to two drums should be considered. Thus the possible combinations may be: drum – drum; sedan chair – drum; log coffin – drum.

A total of six Dong Son drums of varying condition were excavated from Tham Ongbah. Four were found by Sørensen (Ongbah 86, 87, 88, 89) (1988: 100-108) and two well-preserved drums were excavated earlier in 1957. Among the six cave burials with log coffins so far reported in western Thailand, Tham Ongbah is the only cave where Dong Son drums are present. Such burial associations are not the norm amongst western Thai burials; similarly, there has so far been no drum-burial association between the largest concentration of log coffin burials in northwest Thailand. Therefore, the presence of the drums at Tham Ongbah is an irregularity to what is evidenced elsewhere and thus possibly marks the site as particularly significant (Calò, 2014: 84). It should be noted that the five log coffin sites, previously mentioned in Kanchanaburi, were heavily looted and have not been excavated by archaeologists. Thus, the apparent absence of drums does not preclude their presence before they were looted, or that they exist at the sites, yet to be excavated.

On closer inspection of the Dong Son drums excavated from Tham Ongbah, the relationship between the log coffins and drums is strengthened by the iconographic depictions adorning the drums. Fragments of the mantle belonging to Ongbah 89 depict the stem of a boat; bird motifs depicted on either end of the rooftop on the house motifs of Ongbah 86 recall those carved on either end of log coffins. Feathered figures, also described as feathered “warriors” (Higham, 1996: 290), are also depicted on the boat and on the tympanon of Ongbah 89 and 86. The bronzed plumed figures can be compared to the painted feathered headdress/loincloth anthropomorphs depicted in the rock-art of Tham Ta Duang (Figure 2, Area 1 and Figure 3, Area 2), Pha Deang (Figure 4, Area 1; Figure 5, Area 2; Figure 6, Area 3 and 4) and Khao Plara (Figure 7, Areas 1 and 2; Figure 8, Areas 5, 6, 7,

8, 9 and 12). Analogous motifs to these are also depicted in the rock-art along the Zuojiang River Valley and on bronze drums found across southwest China. Furthermore, they also feature on Dong Son drums in Yunnan, which are thought to have spread into Guangxi where wooden coffins have been excavated in caves near rock-art, for example on the Miao Jiang Cliff, Longzhou County, Guangxi.

These drums were distributed from their centres of production in the Dong Son cultural sphere of North Vietnam and neighbouring southwest China during the Late Metal Age (300 BC-500 AD). Using migratory routes along rivers, maritime routes and across mountain passes, these drums provide evidence of an exchange network and possible alliance between early cultural spheres across Mainland and Island Southeast Asia.

Calò (2009: 92) proposes a trade route based on the similarity of the Dong Son drums found, starting in Binh Tri Thien, North Central Vietnam, travelling down the Mekong River to south Laos, and then into northeast Thailand reaching the Mun and Chi River systems. At the confluence of the Mun and Mekong River, a drum was recovered from the site of Ban Na Pho Tai (Damrikul & Worasaard 1980). North of Ban Na Pho Tai, the largest Dong Son drum found in Thailand was excavated at Don Tan. This elaborate drum shows four three-dimensional toads on the tympanum, sequences of feather patterns on the panels of the mid mantle, and a boat with feathered anthropomorphs on the upper mantle. Again, we see a link with frogs as the tympanum of Ongbah 89 has four bases on which four sculptured frogs should be fixed; unfortunately, these sculptures have not been recovered. Another Dong Son drum was excavated at Pak Thong Cha, Nakhon Ratchasima province on the main route linking the Khorat Plateau with central Thailand (Higham, 1996: 231). Calò (2009: 93) believes that Dong Son drums entered Kanchanaburi via this route, finally ending up in Tham Ongbah.

At principle maritime trade routes, Dong Son drums may have been traded between Late Metal Age elites who controlled exchange networks and may have not only introduced exotic commodities, but also external ideas into the region (Nitta, 2005: 127). It could be suggested that with the trade of the Dong Son drum, the artistic

and technological advancement, ritual significance or iconographic aesthetic could have influenced and been integrated into existing early cultural spheres, and the possible beliefs and practices associated with them also imported.

Atthasit Sukkham (2007) compares the ritual ceremony of the Bahnar tribe in the Central Highlands of Vietnam with the ceremonial dress and performance depicted in the rock-art of Kanchanaburi and Uthai Thani. The Bahnar worship the spirits of nature at New Year in order for a good harvest by beating gongs in procession. Their ceremonial dress includes a headdress of bird's feathers and loincloths. Once the performance ends, a buffalo is sacrificed to the spirits. The two stages of the ceremony have been compared to scenes depicted in the rock-art of Kanchanaburi and Uthai Thani (Sukkham, 2007: 15). The rock-art at both Tham Ta Duang (Figure 2, Area 1) and Pha Deang (Figure 5, Area 2) feature a linear line of anthropomorphic figures with headdresses/loincloths, the former associated with a circular motif and the latter possibly dancing. At Khao Plara there is a depiction of headdress/loincloth wearing anthropomorphs pulling at bovine (Figure 8, Areas 6 and 9), which could depict the sacrificing of a buffalo as performed during the New Year ritual ceremonies of the Bahnar. The process of this ritual is also carried out during funeral ceremonies. This offers a further alternative interpretation of the two motifs in the procession as gongs as opposed to Dong Son drums. This interpretation offers an additional meaning to a motif that is problematic to interpret. However, this interpretation is merely comparing similarities in the shape of the possible objects used in rituals from different present-day cultures to motifs in prehistoric rock-art with very little archaeological evidence and tenuous ethnographic analogies. Therefore, it is difficult to say with any certainty that these motifs represent gongs. Burial evidence, dating and site proximity from Tham Ongbah so far provides convincing evidence for the interpretation of the motif as a Dong Son drum rather than a gong. However, the function of Dong Son drums still remains debatable. They have so far been interpreted to have a number of ritualistic functions in funerary, agriculture, or in warfare; however, it may not have had a single use or meaning and perhaps functioned across a multiple number of ritual occasions.

Zoomorphs

A number of zoomorphic motifs are depicted at Pha Deang and Khao Plara, however, none are not found in the rock-art at Tham Ta Duang. There are a total of three zoomorphs found at Pha Deang – one bovine, a domesticated dog and as interpreted by Schoocongdej (2002: 194) the single head of a bovine. Khao Plara has a total of eleven zoomorphic motifs that include four dogs, four bovine, one cockerel, one deer, one frog and a turtle. Most animals are associated with anthropomorphs; however, some are depicted individually and in a herd.

The dog motif is always associated with an anthropomorph, suggesting they may have been domesticated. At Pha Deang, we see a dog beneath the feet of an anthropomorphic figure (Figure 6, Area 3) and at Khao Plara, three anthropomorphs are featured, one with two dogs on either side of its feet (Figure 8, Area 5), another with one behind it (Figure 8, Area 11), and the other with a dog above it (Figure 8, Area 7). The latter pictograph is also associated with another anthropomorph with a cockerel on its arm. Another two anthropomorphs are associated with a deer or a dog; however, Shoocongdej (2002: 195) has interpreted it as possibly a deer/dog wearing a headdress (Figure 8, Area 9).

Anthropomorphs along the Zuojiang River Valley are also accompanied by dogs (Figure 4.35). Here, dogs are found uniformly beneath or above anthropomorphic figures, with a possible weapon or staff hanging from their waists in large numbers. They stand out from the less elaborate anthropomorphic figures and are generally larger in size, with some suggesting they could be depictions of rulers, warriors or shaman (Zao Fu, 1992: 382; Liao 2002: 363). Zao Fu (1992: 382) claims the strongest interpretation for the dog motifs is that they are remnants of another totemic religion worshipped by the people of Guangxi (Zao Fu, 1992: 382). Today this totem of a dog is worshipped among the people of Guangxi, such as the Yao, an ethnic minority who have an ancestral myth explaining their descent from a dog called Pan Hou. Killing, consuming and painting the image of a dog is strictly prohibited, except for the latter when used for ceremonial purposes (Zao Fu, 1992: 382).

It is interesting to consider that should the people of the Zuojiang River Valley or their beliefs have migrated or influenced the western region of Thailand, the association of the dog to anthropomorphs seems, through the rock-art of Pha Daeng and Khao Plara, to still be significant, as dogs are always associated with anthropomorphs and thus the anthropomorph could possibly represent a ruler, warrior or shaman. It is worth noting that all anthropomorphs associated with dogs are depicted with headdresses and loincloths, suggesting ceremonial wear is being worn for a ritual ceremony, possibly permitting the image of a dog to be depicted in the rock-art. Based on the frequency of dog and anthropomorphs depicted in the rock-art of western Thailand, they certainly feature less frequently than in the rock-art along the Zuojiang River Valley, which on a basic reading would suggest that a significant connection between the two, and the body of rock-art as a whole, is not so strong. However, the frequency of a motif does not necessarily determine its importance – a singular motif could hold a similar weight of significance as when it is repeated manifold. Again, it is difficult to determine if a connection existed between the two regions based on animal and anthropomorph composition; however, as presented above, there are correlations between the two regions that go beyond similarities in the style of rock-art to include parallels in the rock-arts composition and respective material culture.

There also seems to be a strong association between bovine and anthropomorphic figures at the sites in western Thailand. An anthropomorph throwing a spear at bovine is depicted at Pha Daeng (Figure 5, Area 2) and three anthropomorphic figures are associated with a bovine at Khao Plara. Two anthropomorphic figures wearing headdresses and loincloths, with one wearing bracelets – fragments of bronze bracelets have been excavated at Tham Ongbah as burial gifts and at contemporary burial sites, not featuring log coffins but linear interments, within the lowland area of the region at Ban Kao and Ban Don Tha Phet (Sørensen, 1988: 100) – and pulling or holding a leash tied to an elaborately dressed bovine (Figure 8, Area 6). Figure 8, Area 11 depicts a group of anthropomorphs, a dog and a herd of buffalo/cattle in x-ray – this is the only area to depict a herd of animals. The anthropomorphs and dog are grouped to the right as though charging

head on towards the herd of buffalo/cattle who to their left have two running towards them and possibly three running away from them. Perhaps, this group of paintings depicts a hunting scene.

Here we see a direct contrast between the style in which buffalo/cattle motifs have been depicted, either with elaborate body patterning or as simple x-ray figures. It could be suggested that the “simpler” bovine motifs represent wild animals being captured by the anthropomorphs to domesticate, as bovine are depicted “tamed” or “restrained” on leashes held by anthropomorphs, and then possibly playing a role in some sort of ritual as their bodies are adorned with elaborate patterns. Interestingly, the image of a bovine head is found carved at either end of log coffins found in burial caves located in close proximity to the rock-art sites, iconographically linking the rock-art in some degree with having a possible funerary significance or that the bovine held some significance as its image is represented in the rock-art and on coffins.

Shoocongdej (2002: 202) highlights the importance bovine and dogs have in the regions ritual and symbolic animism. The Lua of northwest Thailand sacrifice buffalo for major earth spirits, for funerals of important persons, for a guardian spirit of the village, during agricultural ceremonies and for curing serious illnesses. In addition, the Lua eat dogs on ceremonial occasions and chickens are sacrificed along with other larger animals during major agricultural and communal ceremonies (Kunstadter et al, 1978: 101-102).

At Pha Daeng, an anthropomorph is depicted throwing an arrow towards a charging or leaping bovine in x-ray, suggesting the scene is one of hunting. On the other hand, the bovine is depicted face on with the anthropomorph, drawing away from the suggestion of a “hunt” – perhaps a purposeful battle. A further four anthropomorphs at Tham Ta Duang are depicted in a stance with their backs bent and arms pulled back with what appears metaphorically to be bows as if ready to release an arrow from their bow – although an arrow is not depicted. The scene is difficult to interpret as no prey is depicted. Although the prey’s presence is not necessary to ascribe the scene as one of hunting, it does raise the question as to whether it could possibly be a combat scene, but again an opponent(s) is not depicted.

Srisuchat (1990: 84) suggests that the paintings at Khao Plara represent the performance of a fertility ritual. At Khao Plara, an anthropomorph in profile, seen to be sitting down with an enlarged stomach, is associated with a turtle beneath and a frog beside it, and has been interpreted as a pregnant woman (Srisuchat, 1990: 84; Shoocongdej, 2002: 195) (Figure 8. Area 7). According to Srisuchat (1990: 84), this scene represents a fertility ritual that occurred in an agricultural context, based on depictions of bovine.

Zoomorphic motifs depicted across the three sites in western Thailand could suggest that they had some ritual significance. With dog and bovine motifs depicted in possible ceremonial wear, most of the zoomorphic motifs associated with anthropomorphs, in what could be interpreted as being in a dance or worship like posture, are also wearing headdresses and loincloths that could be a ceremonial costume, suggesting a possible ritual affiliation. From the composition and association of zoomorphic motifs to anthropomorphic figures, it could be suggested that there is a ritual connection; however, it is difficult to define what those connections are or what roles they may have played, be it as part of a fertility, hunting or funerary ritual. Moreover, there is difficulty in establishing whether the rock-art is a representation of a ritual ceremony or whether the act of painting was part of the ritual process, or part of a different but related ritual practice.

Although theories of ritual explain possible social functions for rock-art, they do not address the meaning of the symbols depicted (Hays-Gilpin, 2004, 59). Particular motifs are associated with everyday activities, such as hunting, which could suggest that these motifs are ascribed to a ritual context when painted on cave walls, thereby redirecting their meaning towards ritual activity and expression. However, there is a dichotomy between the everyday and ritual, with possible hunting scenes sitting side by side with scenes of processions and adorned anthropomorphs and animals – arguably not the everyday, but perhaps the hunting scenes are not everyday too. Perhaps when any scene is painted on cave walls they are associated with ritual activities; therefore it could be argued that the practice of rock painting was ritual; however, they could also be records of ritual

activities, a device for teaching others ritual performances, or possibly records of a shamanic experience.

Shamanism

David Lewis-Williams (1989) posits that “shamanism” is a cross-cultural category of religious practice, widespread, if not universal, among hunter-gatherers. The rock-art in Kanchanaburi and Uthai Thani goes some way in identifying the presence of possible hunter-gatherers since anthropomorphs are depicted fighting with or throwing an arrow at a bovine (Figure 5, Area 2; Figure 8, Area 11), and in Tham Ta Duang, four figures are depicted shooting arrows (Figure 3, Area 2). Moreover, surface finds at each site revealed stone tools used possibly for preparing hunted prey. Therefore, according to Lewis-Williams, the rock-art could relate shamanism. Therianthropic figures with animal heads or animal feet are documented in the rock-art of Khao Plara (Figure 8, Area 10) and Tham Ta Duang (Figure 2, Area 1; Figure 3, Area 3). Shoocongdej (2002: 192) suggests that these figures may symbolise a form of shaman who merged with the animals. Lewis-Williams’ neuropsychological model interprets the geometric content of rock-art (dots, lines, zig zags, grids nested curves) as visions seen in altered states of consciousness or as metaphors of the trance experience. Such geometric depictions are not, however, found in the rock-art at the three sites in western Thailand. Thus, questioning if the audience experiencing the rock-art needs to be in a state of trance accessed or permitted during ritual ceremonies to understand any motif, be it geometric or a defined analogic motif?

Although the more “apparent” motifs have been interpreted as shamanistic, the less elaborate, simple, or one may consider badly preserved rock-art, has received less attention. Some view the rock surface as a membrane dividing this world and the spirit world (Hays-Gilpin, 2004: 147). Figures found partially or in x-ray (Figures 2, 6, 7, 8) may be interpreted as the figure emerging out or into the spirit world.

Performances or acts need to be repeated in the same form, at numerous times, to be considered a formalised act adhering to

a prescribed form. Rappaport (1999: 228) calls this “punctilious performance”. If rock-art were associated with ritual, repetition of a particular suite of motifs would be expected within a similar context in a particular location or in the same form within similar locations. A number of dancing figures and feathered headdress/loincloth dancing figures have been found in this manner in the two caves at Kanchanaburi. However, this repetition is also found at a different location on the cliff face at Uthai Thani.

Repetition has been identified as an aid to stimulate the senses and heighten awareness in all education, particularly rituals. The use of repetition has long been used as a didactic tool to aid learning when facts needed to be remembered precisely (Merrill, 1983: 323). Educational theorists, such as David Merrill (1983: 323), contend that an essential element of memorisation is repetition and can be aided by mnemonic devices, such as, intonations, actions or visual stimuli. Perhaps rock-art motifs were produced as mnemonic devices in association with the teaching of aspects of ritual or ceremony so that these motifs when viewed at a later date would assist the observer to recall the information correctly. If motifs were produced as mnemonic devices, it is thought that each time a teaching session was repeated the motifs would have been re-emphasised by re-marking or rubbing (Ross & Davidson, 1999: 319). Shoocongdej (2002: 193-194) points out that at Pha Deang there are some motifs of human anthropomorphic figures that are in a bad state (Figure 4, Area 1), and a cluster of motifs so poorly preserved it is difficult to identify them (Figure 6, Area 4). She also brings to attention the many superimposed motifs of dancing figures, feathered headdress/loincloth dancing figures, and animals found at Khao Plara in Figure 8, Areas 10, 11 and 12, and proposes that these sites were visited on many occasions over time (Shoocongdej, 2002: 197). Perhaps the abraded or superimposed motifs were used as didactic tools where the teacher may have rubbed or drawn over the motifs to teach aspects of ritual.

Repeated production of any motif at a particular place suggests that there may have been some benefit to the artist producing the motifs there, and thus might account for its recurring production. Given that initial explanations for the meaning behind rock-art

motifs to participants have to be verbal, repetition of the production of motifs would not be necessary once the meaning had been voiced. However, if production of the motif itself was a vital ritual action and the audience a supernatural one, repetition may be seen as a means of ensuring the message was received (Layton, 1991: 145). Moreover, the production of rock-art leaves a permanent, or near permanent, mark of communication. It provides tangible evidence to both the community members and the supernatural audience that the ritual has been enacted or the act of painting itself a part of ritual performance.

Overview of my Findings and Interpretations

Whilst it is impossible to cover all possible interpretations of ritual, this article has examined existing interpretations of ritual in the rock-art at Tham Ta Duang, Pha Daeng and Khao Plara in western Thailand, with a particular examination of comparisons made to the rock-art found along the Zuojiang River Valley, Guangxi. This comparison has been the focus of much of this article, in particular with regards to “praying figures” and discussion around the interpretation of the procession scene depicted at Tham Ta Duang. Through explorations of the ethnographic and archaeological records of Thailand and southwest China, an interpretation that seems most compelling is some sort of ritual that iconographically connects the rock-art, Dong Son drums and log coffins.

By exploring the rock-art’s content, what we can say is that it is likely ritual rock-art exists in Kanchanaburi and Uthai Thani. There are certainly signs in the rock-art’s content that suggest ritual, however, what type of ritual it symbolises and/or what role it played in ritual is unknown. What we do not know, or cannot say for certain, is what the ritual was, be that funerary, New Year celebrations, fertility and so forth. In addition, it cannot be said whether the rock-art was produced during rituals or used to communicate the act of ritual. Whilst it is likely ritual is represented in the rock-art, there are still further questions that cannot be answered. It is still unknown as to who produced the rock-art, whether it was shaman, men, women, adults or children.

This article does not entertain any pretensions; rather it has been left intentionally open-ended to encourage other archaeologists to debate and reassess the interpretation of ritual in Thai rock-art. In rock-art research no one interpretation is “right” or “true”; in fact several explanations can coexist, while sometimes none are adequate. The ambiguous nature of rock-art means that any interpretation of its meaning is questionable; however, that is not to say offering multiple possible speculations instead of definite interpretations is any less important, as it encourages debate. One only needs to keep in mind that the study of rock-art and ritual can, as Hays-Gilpin (2004: 209) writes in her study of rock-art and gender, be described as “...a puzzle that can never be completed.”

Although this article has explored only the topic of the rock-arts ritual content, it can undoubtedly encompass much more, from gender, kinship, religion, class and ethnicity. Moreover, there are a number of investigative avenues to explore ritual further, such as through the sites landscape context as meaningful humanised places, which are actively integrated into cosmological, social and ritual systems of a society (see Scott, n.d.). The rock-art of Kanchanaburi and Uthai Thani Provinces has great potential for studies beyond identifying ritual motifs, especially as further excavations are conducted in the region and outside its borders. However, this is a study that has only just begun in Thailand and must come with the caveat that all future studies look differently at what has always been there – the rock-art and the studies already undertaken.

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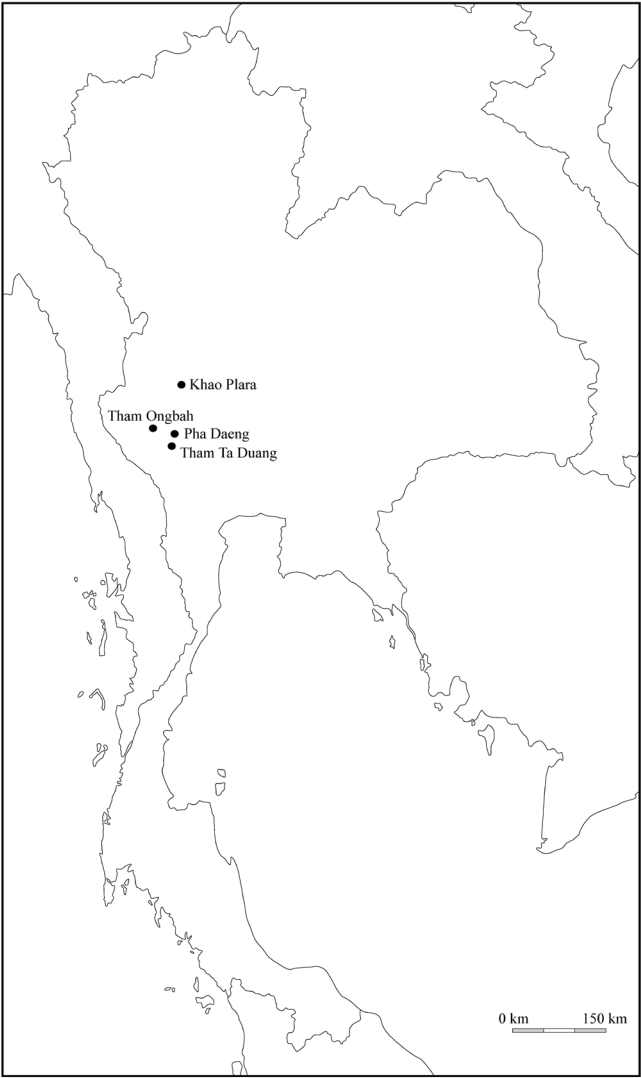


Figure 1: Map of the main sites in western Thailand mentioned in text.

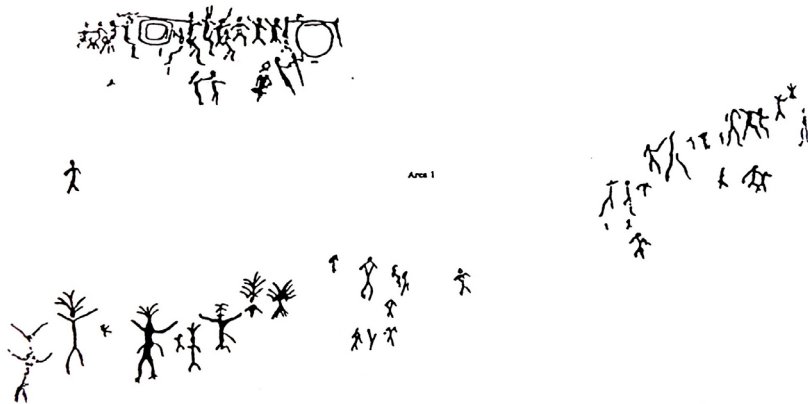


Figure 2: Pictographs at Tham Ta Duang, Area 1, Kanchanaburi Province (Shoocongdej, 2002: 191).

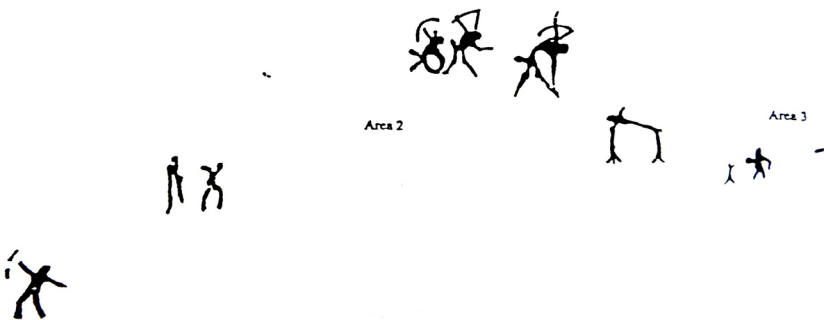


Figure 3: Pictograph at Tham Ta Duang, Area 2, Kanchanaburi Province (Shoocongdej, 2002: 192).

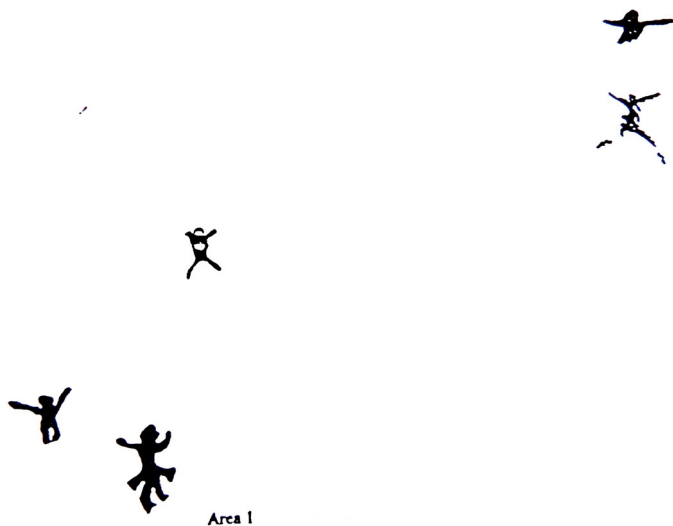


Figure 4: Pictographs at Pha Deang , Area 1, Kanchanaburi Province (Shoocongdej, 2002: 193).

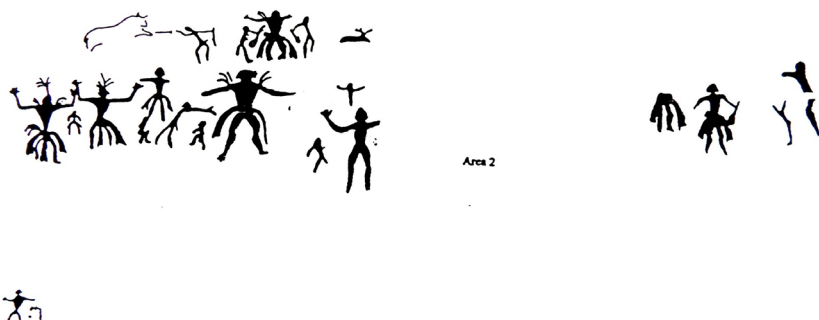


Figure 5: Pictographs at Pha Deang, Area 2, Kanchanaburi Province (Shoocongdej, 2002: 193).



Figure 6: Pictographs at Pha Deang, Area 3 and 4, Kanchanaburi Province (Shoocongdej, 2002: 193).

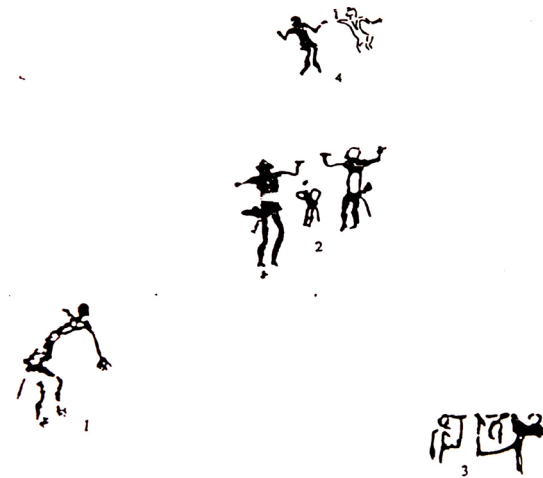


Figure 7: Pictographs at Khao Plara, Area 1, 2, 3 and 4, Uthai Thani Province (Shoocongdej, 2002: 196).



Figure 8: Pictographs at Khao Plara , Area 6, ,7, 8 , 9, 10, 11 and 12, Uthai Thani Province (Shoocongdej, 2002: 196).



Figure 9: Children parading the sacrificed toads in a sedan chair during the Toad Festival. (Wongthes, 1994: 119).



Figure 10: Zhuang villagers in procession holding and beating brass drums. (Wongthes, 1994: 125).



Figure 11: Pictographs at Zuojiang River Valley, Guangxi, showing a procession line associated with a drum (Zao Fu, 1992:23).

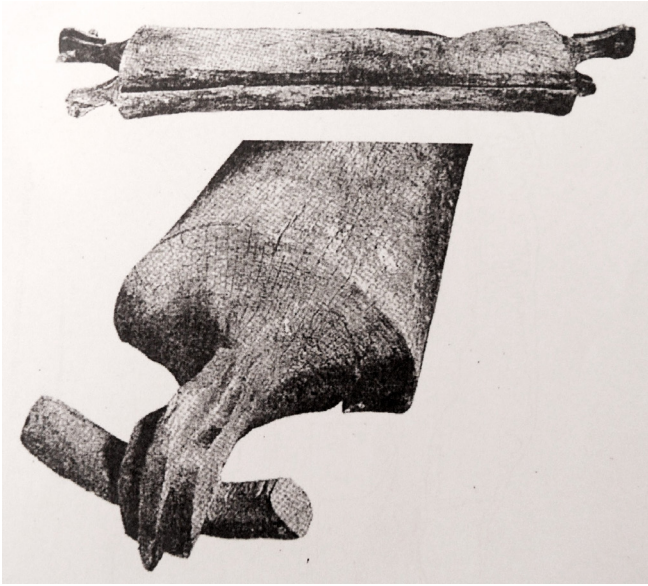


Figure 12: Wooden coffin with stylised animal heads, Ongbah Cave (Sørensen, 1973: 136).

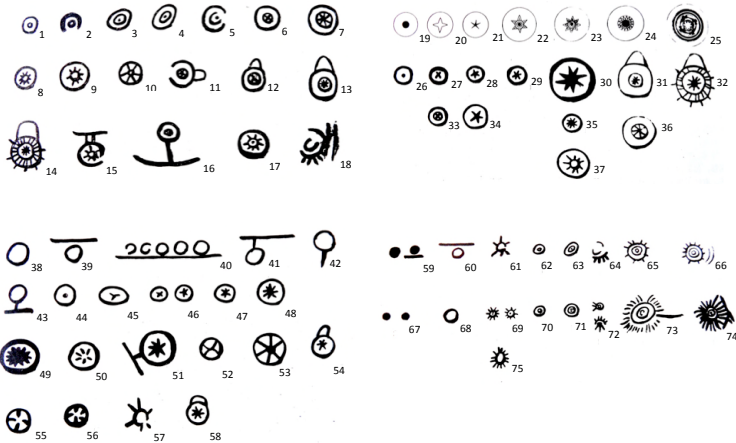


Figure 13: Various stylised depictions of Dong Son drums in the rock art of the Zuojiang River Valley, Guangxi (GZEGARERI, 1987: 166, 168, 169, 195).