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AGENCY, AFFECT AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS: TRANSFORMING PLACE WITH ROCK ART IN AUWIM, UPPER KARAWARI-ARAFUNDI REGION, EAST SEPIK, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Roxanne Tsang, Liam M. Brady, Sebastien Katuk, Paul S. C. Taçon, François-Xavier Ricaut and Matthew G. Leavesley

**Abstract.** Contemporary narratives and interpretations surrounding rock art production in present-day settings provide important insights into rock art practices in the past and present. These traditions can still be seen today in places such as Africa, South America, Australia and Papua New Guinea (PNG). In PNG's East Sepik region, rock art stencils are still produced by the Auwim people of the Upper Karawari-Arafundi region. This paper presents a case study from Apuranga rock art site in Auwim village, East Sepik, where Auwim artists created stencils during a period of archaeological research in June 2018. Interviews with the Auwim artists revealed the stencils were made to transform a once-feared rockshelter into a place that the community could use again without fear or trepidation. This paper explores the implications of these events, the mechanisms for the rock art creation, the impact of researcher's presence, and their broader relevance to studies of rock art in contemporary settings. We argue that contemporary rock art creation in Auwim is embedded in a network of relationships that involve oral traditions, place-making strategies and emotional responses such as overcoming fear.

## Introduction

Rock art has been reported from across Papua New Guinea (PNG) for over a century. The first published account came from Seligmann (1910), who noted incised designs on Goodenough Island in Milne Bay Province at the south-eastern tip of the country. Seligmann's observation was followed by others such as Strong (1923, 1924), who noted paintings from the Central Province. Williams (1931) undertook the first analysis of PNG rock art, a comparative stylistic analysis between rock art from the Central and Milne Bay Provinces, and ultimately concluded motifs were created simply as 'art for art's sake'. From the 1940s onwards, references continue to appear from locales spread across mainland and island PNG, with the majority providing descriptions of site type (rockshelter, boulders), techniques used to create motifs (painting, engraving, charcoal drawing, and a rare instance of finger fluting [Ballard 1992a]), motif styles (e.g. scroll-like designs, animals such as lizards, anthropomorphs, material culture objects, mythical figures and various geometric shapes) and on occasion the contexts in which they occur such as at burial sites, and the geological substrate (e.g. Edwards and Sullivan 2008; Egloff 1970; Gabriel and Gorecki 2014; Gorecki and Dallas 1989; Gunn 1986; Leask 1943; Peterson and Billings 1965; Pretty 1966; Specht 1979; Wilson 2002; White 1972). Perhaps the most detailed study of PNG rock art comes from Byrne's research into the rich assemblage of engravings (cupules, rectilinear and curvilinear motifs, and three-dimensional or sculpted boulders) on Uneapa Island (New Britain). Her research focused on investigating the social and temporal contexts of engravings by exploring the distributional patterning, cultural associations, landscape locations, and their physical properties, and concluding that the island's rock art had complex social relations that governed its 'production and consumption through time' (Byrne 2013: 75). PNG's rock art has also featured in broader, pan-regional studies exploring patterning in Austronesian painting and engraving traditions from the western Pacific region (e.g. Specht 1979; Ballard 1992b; Ballard and Wilson 2018).

While there is unlikely one definitive reason for researchers not undertaking detailed surveys or analyses of PNG rock art (e.g. more interest in PNG's role in Pleistocene colonisation studies or logistical challenges with accessing rock art sites which are located mainly in remote, mountainous regions), this paper reveals there is considerable potential for PNG rock art research, especially in terms of exploring people's contemporary relationships with their rock art.

For decades, archaeologists and anthropologists (among others) have sought to capture the meaning and interpretations of rock art from Indigenous people. However, more recently, there has been an increasing interest in moving beyond simply recording what a motif is or represents, to instead exploring meaning, symbolism, and significance of rock art in contemporary settings by focusing on the myriad *social and cultural contexts* considered appropriate at the time of an individual's engagement with, or interpretation of, motifs and sites. Some of the key themes to emerge from these studies include the role rock art plays in reaffirming or reinforcing identity, the relational (e.g. kinship) and affective (emotional) contexts people use to show how images are made meaningful, motifs as inspiration for contemporary artworks, and how motif interpretations can be multivocal depending on multiple factors such as health and wellbeing, an individual's position in society, and historical circumstances (e.g. papers in Brady and Taçon 2016; see also, e.g. Brady et al. 2016, 2020; Colwell and Ferguson 2006; Goldhahn et al. 2020; Merlan 1989; Taçon et al. 2008; Young 1988). This paper builds on these studies by presenting details from a new rock art recording project in the East Sepik province of northern PNG. We begin by providing an overview of rock art from the Upper Karawari-Arafundi region, and second, presenting a case study about the production of rock art stencils at the Apuranga site in 2018 in Auwim traditional territory. Our primary interest is exploring the network of relations that these creative acts were embedded in, the agency of artists, affective responses of Auwim individuals, and in particular, the presence of an archaeological team. Drawing on frameworks of agency and affect in visual arts, we present a narrative to understand the context in which the Apuranga rockshelter, once devoid of rock art, was transformed into a rock art site with the creation of stencils. By doing so, we are exploring the reasons or motivations behind the rock art production as well as the potential implications of researcher presence in this process.

## Auwim, Upper Karawari-Arafundi region

Before European arrival, the Auwim were a semi-nomadic people residing in the rugged limestone mountains and gorges of the Upper Karawari-Arafundi region, south of the Sepik River (Fig. 1). The Auwim also practised a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, a rare occurrence for tropical forest people in eastern PNG (Roscoe and Telban 2004: 94). Around the 1950s, the Auwim moved from their high-altitude location to the lowland wetland altitudes to present-day Auwim village, ostensibly to seek basic government services. Auwim village (Fig. 2) is surrounded by tropical rainforest vegetation and sago swamps which grow

abundantly in the region (Edwards and Sullivan 2008; Roscoe and Telban 2004). In 2018, Auwim village consisted of 29 households. The population has grown from 41 in 1957 to around 300 in 2018 (Bartole 2018; Roscoe and Telban 2004: 114; Sullivan 2012; Tsang 2018). Auwim belong to one of two major original clans — Wandukumbay and Mungkumbay — and are then divided into 20 sub-clans. Today, the Auwim speak the local language, *Tapei* (or *Tape*), and the PNG lingua-franca, *Tok Pisin*, which has been widely spoken since the 1960s (for further details of Auwim social and cultural life see, e.g. Edwards and Sullivan 2008; Roscoe and Telban 2004).

**Figure 1.** Map showing the case study area location, Auwim, East Sepik, Papua New Guinea, including other sites mentioned in the text (produced by Andrea Jalandoni; base map by ESRI National Geographic).

**Figure 2.** Auwim village in 2018 (photo: William Pleiber, Papuan Past Project).

Contact with, and exposure to, Europeans (in the first instance, Germans) in the broader Upper Karawari-Arafundi (also referred to as Lower Arafundi) began in the early 1900s and is characterised by relatively fleeting interactions. Stories from the Imanmeri (a neighbouring language group) tell of a German expedition in 1912 traversing the region and taking some people captive (Roscoe and Telban 2004: 97). In 1928, gold prospectors travelled across the region, followed by various government patrols (Gorecki and Jones 1987a; Roscoe and Telban 2004: 98). During the Second World War, Australian and Japanese militaries travelled through the area (Roscoe and Telban 2004: 98). While missionaries began arriving in the East Sepik region in the 1930s, it was not until the late 1950s that they began interacting with the Auwim, where they issued 'edicts against the male spirit cult and burning sacra from their men's house' (Roscoe and Telban 2004: 98). From the 1960s, European contact with Auwim became more sustained and led to the appointments of village officials (or *luluais*), censoring of the population, and timber becoming a source of income (Roscoe and Telban 2004: 98).

### Historical, ethnographic and archaeological research in the East Sepik region

The earliest available sources concerning Auwim and cultural practices come from administrative government patrols, explorers along the Sepik River, and labour recruiters (Roscoe and Telban 2004: 93–94). Scholarly research in the Upper Karawari-Arafundi region began in the late 1950s and mainly focused on its artistic traditions, particularly its elaborately carved objects. In 1958, anthropologist Anthony Forge visited the Abelam (approximately 140 km north of Auwim) to 'purchase artefacts for a museum' and collected information on social organisation, aesthetics, religion, and ritual life (Forge 1959a, 1959b; cited in Gabriel and Gorecki 2014: 6). He was followed by Alfred Bühler, who produced a description of cult crocodile figures from Karawari (also spelt Korewori) (Bühler 1961). A few years later, Eike Haberland collected and recorded hooked figures including sago-bark paintings from the 'Auwim, Warlamas (or Kopokmeri), Imanmeri, Yamandim, and Imboin in 1961 and 1963' (Haberland 1964, 1966, 1968; cited in Gabriel and Gorecki 2014: 39; see also Roscoe and Telban 2004: 96). Haberland also worked alongside Siegfried Seyfarth in 1974, exploring the region's ethnology (Haberland and Seyfarth 1974). In the early 1970s, Christian Kaufmann (1974, 2003) researched sculptures and figurative art from the region. In 1991, anthropologist Borut Telban began the only long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the region with Karawari-speaking people focusing on cosmology, social organisation, ritual and death (Telban 1998; Roscoe and Telban 2004: 99) while his student, Tomi Bartole, explored the relationships between materialising power and self-transformation, a contemporary ritual practice among the Auwim (Bartole 2018). Telban's contribution to ethnographic studies in the region also included a summary of Auwim ethnography from unpublished patrol reports (Roscoe and Telban 2004). In 2005, anthropologist Nancy Sullivan began researching rock art and other decorative arts practices such as sago and paperbark paintings (see below).

Archaeologically, excavations undertaken in the East Sepik region have revealed Pleistocene occupation. In 1987, Gorecki excavated the Kowekau rockshelter, obtaining a date of 14 000 BP (Gorecki et al. 1987; Yen 1990). Gorecki and Jones surveyed the region's rock art in 1987 (see below) but did not excavate any sites. **A recent excavation at Paimbunkanja rockshelter (approximately 81 km south of Auwim village) by the 'Papuan Past: archaeology and genetics in Papua New Guinea' (see below) revealed a late Holocene period of occupation between 2000–3000 years BP as represented by knapped stone artefacts made from locally sourced pebble (Forestier et al. 2020).**

### Rock art of the Upper Karawari-Arafundi region

The earliest known report of rock art from the Upper Karawari-Arafundi region is by Gorecki and Jones (1987a, 1987b) during their survey of the region to identify rockshelters with the potential to excavate for evidence of early human occupation. While their report indicated the geology of rockshelters did not appear conducive for early human occupation, they noted many sites were decorated with rock art that they remarked was associated with religious and other customary activities (Gorecki and Jones 1987a: 2). Gorecki and Jones referred to 20 rock art sites in 1987; however, only 10 — Amboye (or Amboise), Kalapul, Kandamati, Limbut, Paigun, Pundimbung, Timblari, Wagum, Wangelia and Yanbimban — were visited and recorded during their fieldwork in the area (Gorecki and Jones 1987a: 10–11; 1987b: 10; Gabriel and Gorecki 2014: 12). The other ten sites (Imboin, Mambanekandja, Massendenai obelisks, Mendal, Nadim, Ombremas Standing Stones, Pukan, Yembinambasekim, Yuan and Yuminim) were only mentioned to them by local informants noting that they also contain rock art. Of these, only Pukan, Pundimbung and Yembinambasekim are located in Auwim territory, with new paintings recorded being produced at Pundimbung in 1987 (Gabriel and Gorecki 2014: 12) (Table 1). They noted that the assemblage consisted of stencils and paintings created using red, yellow and white pigments (Gorecki and Jones 1987b). Stencil motifs consisted of hands, hands + wrist + forearm, feet, finger 'messages', shell ornaments (e.g. *kina* [large, crescent-shaped usually made from gold-lip and hung around the neck], rings, nose-pegs, and belts or ropes), animal body parts (e.g. cassowary leg, megapode foot, dog paws and legs), and objects such as bone daggers, bone spoons, flying fox needles, turtle bones, *bilum* (bag made from natural fibre), leaves, metal bush knives, and other unknown objects (Gorecki and Jones 1987a: 10). Paintings were classified by subject matter and style and consisted of hands, *kina* shell, cassowary tracks, complex figures, geometric figures, radiating and parallel lines, crosses, circles, chevrons and 'stains' (likely indeterminate motifs) (Gorecki and Jones 1987a: 11, b: 10). They also commented that the style of motifs here was different to those encountered in the highlands region (dominated by curvilinear motifs), as well as highlighting the local significance of these sites with rock art, noting, 1) their association with their dead, 2) initiation of young men, and 3) a symbolic

expression of how they relate to place and landscape through origin narratives associated with specific rockshelters or sites (Gabriel and Gorecki 2014). Furthermore, they emphasised the continuity of the artwork given that local informants were able to identify creators of hand stencils in 1987 (Gorecki and Jones 1987a, 1987b). Although no attempts have been made to directly date the art, superimpositions, exfoliated surfaces and repainting on hollowed surfaces offers potential for future work.

Site Name	Recorder(s)
Pukan	Gorecki and Jones (1987) Tsang (2018)
Yembinambasekim	Gorecki and Jones (1987)
Pundimbung (Bundingbum)	Gorecki and Jones (1987) Edwards and Sullivan (2008) Tsang (2018)
Kundumbue (Kundumbu)	Edwards and Sullivan (2008) Tsang (2018)
Akuansam (Aekinyam)	Edwards and Sullivan (2008) Tsang (2018)
Apuranga	Tsang (2018)
<b>Potentially in Auwim Territory</b>	
Takinyaekanga	Edwards and Sullivan (2008)
Nombokopi	Edwards and Sullivan (2008)
Kansa	Edwards and Sullivan (2008)
Imango	Edwards and Sullivan (2008)
Kantin	Edwards and Sullivan (2008)

**Table 1.** List of rock art sites recorded in Auwim territory; those potentially in Auwim traditional territory have yet to be verified but are likely to be Auwim, given Sullivan's research base at Auwim village.

In their 2004 overview of the people and culture of the Upper Karawari-Arafundi region, Roscoe and Telban (2004: 94) make a brief remark about rock art that draws attention to the ritual significance of rock art sites. They note that people here were 'progenitors of an important rock art tradition that used caves as cult structures functionally equivalent to men's houses, pointing to an important analogical transformation of ritual culture'.

Following Gorecki and Jones' work, Nancy Sullivan led a research team in the Upper Karawari-Arafundi region between 2005–2008 and produced an unpublished report where it was stated they had visited 200 previously unknown rock art sites. However, only 70 appear to have been systematically recorded, and only eight are described in any detail in their report.<sup>1</sup> (Edwards and Sullivan 2008). Of the eight sites they described, three are in Auwim territory: Pundimbung (also spelt Bundingbum in their report), Aekinyam (this site is likely the same site recorded in 2018 by Tsang as Akuansam [Tsang 2018]), and Kundumbue (also Kundumbu), while the territorial affiliation of the remaining five has yet to be verified but given one of Sullivan's two research bases was at Auwim, it is likely they are also in Auwim territory (Table 1). Analysis of the eight sites they reported indicates that site dimensions range between 2–6 m in width and 16–75 m in length, and sites are typically located more than a one-hour walk from the present-day Auwim village. The sites are difficult to access because they are primarily located on cliffs or vertical rock faces where certain sites (e.g. Aekinyam, Takinyaekanga, Kundumbue) require additional climbing equipment to access the decorated rock surfaces (Fig. 3a, 3b).

**Figure 3.** (a) Trekking to Kundumbue rock art site. (b) An example of a cliff rockshelter at Pundimbung site in the Upper Karawari-Arafundi region, East Sepik, Papua New Guinea in 2018 (Photos: William Pleiber, Papuan Past Project).

Edwards and Sullivan (2008) also emphasised the rich ethnographic record associated with the region's rock art. For example, they described how some decorated rockshelters could be linked to warfare represented as trophies placed at some rockshelters (e.g. skulls painted with red ochre belonging to esteemed warriors). There also was an association with death through human bones stored in rockshelters. Origin theories are associated with various spirits, as is male initiation related to the creation of hand stencils and handprints. Moreover, they described that decorated rockshelters are used for seasonal occupational sites for both domestic and ritual activities (e.g. spaces for male initiation, cooking and sleeping) (see more details in Edwards and Sullivan 2008: 16–23). The available link between ethnographic data with the artwork itself suggested the potential for more focused research.

Other details in their report include descriptions of surface materials observed in 2008, including human skeletal remains, animal bones (e.g. pig skulls, flying fox bones, other marsupial skulls), material culture objects such as weathered bamboo flutes, clay pots, remains of *bilums*, other burial or grave goods, and fireplaces (Edwards and Sullivan 2008: 24–27). These materials suggest the rockshelters they visited were likely used for some time.

Most recently, Tsang et al. (2020) undertook the first detailed analysis of Auwim rock art, focusing on distinctive *kina* stencils. Auwim ethnographic knowledge about *kina* stencils made at Auwim rockshelters was used to demonstrate the ongoing cultural significance of *kina*, and at the same time, their role as symbolic reminders of the importance of 'prehistoric trade networks' linking the Torres Strait islands (north-eastern Australia) and PNG.

While in-depth rock art research into Auwim and the broader Upper Karawari-Arafundi region is still in its infancy, this previous research reveals considerable potential for further research in the area. In particular, the role of ethnography and contemporary narratives about people's relationships to Auwim rock art offers a useful avenue to explore the cultural significance of motifs, especially those created in the very recent past.

### 'Papuan Past' project and rock art context

<sup>1</sup> A publication on their research was proposed but did not happen owing to the untimely passing of Nancy Sullivan in 2015.



Since 2016, the ‘*Papuan Past*’ project has been exploring the modalities of human population settlement and adaptation, that is, biological, cultural and technical evolution, over the last 50 000 years in the broader New Guinea region with a particular emphasis on the lowland area of the Upper Karawari River, and the highlands regions (Chimbu, Jiwaka, and the Western Highlands provinces) (see, e.g. Forestier et al. 2020; Pedro et al. 2020). The broader archaeological investigation in the Upper Karawari-Arafundi region led to opportunities in May-June 2018 to visit rock art sites within Auwim traditional borders and resulted in the development of RT’s PhD research.

Upon arriving at Auwim village, the research team (RT, SK, F-XR, MGL) discussed with the Auwim community the project, aims, methods and recruitment of Auwim community members to assist with the excavation, genetic and rock art research program. After securing permission to undertake our research, we trekked to a base camp at Angarik (also spelt Ang-garik or Angalip) and spent four days visiting and recording four of the previously noted rock art sites in Auwim territory — Akuansam, Pukan, Pundimbung and Kundumbue. Afterwards, we visited a nearby village before spending five days carrying out an excavation at Paimbunkanja rockshelter and conducting interviews with Auwim community members about rock art, collecting saliva samples for genetic study, and recording genealogies of Auwim community members.

Upon returning to Auwim village at the conclusion of the excavation, we were told by Auwim community members that we ‘ought to visit another rock art site’ of which they knew. The following day we trekked to a site known locally as Apuranga, where we encountered motifs that were bright and fresh-looking in appearance (Figs 4 and 5). Upon arriving at the site, the Auwim villagers accompanying the team revealed the stencils were ‘created last week’, that is, when the research team were away from Auwim village, visiting Akuansam, Pundimbung, Pukan and Kundumbue, excavating Paimbunkanja, and carrying out interviews. They also stated that no rock art had been here before the production of this recent painting and stencilling event.

**Figure 4.** Examples of different stencil types at Apuranga site in 2018. Left down (a, c and e) before enhancement: a hand/palm, a thumb and unknown leaf stencils, respectively, with the appearance of being recently made. Right down (b, d and f) after picture enhancement using DStretch (yre, crgb, and yre colour filters, respectively) shows no older art (original photos: William Pleiber, *Papuan Past Project*).

**Figure 5.** Examples of different stencil types at Apuranga site in 2018. Left down (a, c, e and g) before enhancement: a hand/palm, a thumb and finger stencils; hand + arm and hand + forearm stencil; foot and toes stencils; and bone stencil respectively with the appearance of one-week-old. Right down (b, d, f and h) after picture enhancement using DStretch (lbl, labi, crgb and ywe colour filters, respectively) shows no older art (original photos: William Pleiber, *Papuan Past Project*).

### Apuranga rock art site

Apuranga is situated on a limestone cliff face overlooking Auwim village (Figs 6 and 7) in the territory of the Apem and Wakam sub-clans. The rockshelter is approximately 60 m long and 6 m deep. In addition to the rock art, only human skeletal remains (skulls, long bones) were found here and relate to the narrative provided below. The rock art was concentrated at the entrance, middle and end of the rock face of the shelter. The entire decorated rockshelter was systematically photographed at the individual motif and panel level, and a narrative from Auwim villagers about the production of stencils was recorded (see below).

In the first instance, motifs were digitally enhanced using DStretch (Version 8.3). No evidence of superimposition was identified. Some variations in appearance — brighter/fresher v. slightly faded — were observed, suggesting that rock art production could have occurred in multiple episodes (Figs 4 and 5).

**Figure 6.** View from Apuranga rock art site in 2018 (photo: William Pleiber, *Papuan Past Project*).

**Figure 7.** Apuranga rock art site in 2018 (photo: William Pleiber, *Papuan Past Project*).

Following Brady (2010), recorded motifs were classified into a 4-level hierarchical scheme to explore the stylistic variation in the assemblage<sup>2</sup> (see Table 2, Fig. 8). A total of 77 motifs were identified, indicating a large number of motifs were created during a short period of time. Of these, three are indeterminate, and 74 are determinate (Fig. 9). Of the 74 determinate motifs, figurative motifs account for 91% (n=67) of the assemblage, with non-figurative motifs accounting for only 9% (n=7) of the site’s rock art. Human appendages (hand + wrist + forearm, hand, fingers, feet, long/tibiotarsus bone) dominate the assemblage (n=65, 98%).

Level 1:	Indeterminate	Determinate
Level 2:	Non-figurative	Figurative
Level 3:	Non-figurative group motif forms: geometric shape	Figurative group motif forms: plants, human appendages and material culture.
Level 4:	Specific motif forms. These consist of a specific identification for individual motifs — for example, geometric shape (e.g. circle-shape).	Specific motif forms. These consist of a specific identification for individual motifs. For example, plants (e.g. leaf), human appendages (e.g. hand + wrist + forearm, hand, fingers, and foot), and material culture (e.g. crescent-shaped object [ <i>kina?</i> ]).
Level 4a:		More specific motif forms. These consist of a sub-specific classification for specific motif forms (e.g. under hand + wrist +

<sup>2</sup> A detailed analysis of the site’s rock art will be reported as part of Tsang’s PhD thesis.

		forearm is left hand + wrist + forearm, or right and left hands, 2-fingers, 3-fingers and right or left foot).
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**Table 2.** Classification of rock art imageries from Apuranga following Brady (2010).

Apuranga contains only stencilled motifs, with Auwim community members stating that ochre can be found along creek banks on the way to the site. Motifs were created by placing large amounts of ochre onto the palm, chewed (in a similar way to chewing betel nut from the *Areca palm*) but using only incisors, then mixed in the mouth with saliva and sprayed over the object or appendage, leaving the negative stencil on the rock wall. Auwim community members informed the research team that water or other binders were not used to form the pigment mixture (Tsang 2018). A freshly chewed betel nut shell was also recorded on the floor of the rockshelter directly underneath a panel of stencils.

The individual artists' names were not collected at the time of our visit; however, it was stated by Auwim community leader, SK and other Auwim who accompanied the team to the site that the rock art was created by their clan members one week before visiting. Owing to differences in the appearance of motifs — some already deteriorating and fading, others fresh with slightly wet paint present — we suggest that motifs were created over multiple visits during the week before our visit. Information about specific motifs or relationships to the site's narrative (see below) were not collected at the time of the interview, nor did SK and other Auwim accompanying the research team mention anything about specific motifs that were made.

**Figure 8.** Classification of rock art motifs at Apuranga (following Brady 2005, 2010).

### 'Dwarfs' or bush spirits and fear

During the site visit, RT conducted an interview with SK about stories related to the site and its new rock art in the Melanesian pidgin language, *Tok Pisin*, a language RT is fluent in (Fig. 9). The written version of the narrative was later read to SK and other Auwim members for accuracy and approved. The story reveals that Apuranga is associated with an ancestral narrative about 'dwarfs' (bush spirits or non-spiritual beings), ancestral spirits and massacres (as reported in Tsang 2018: 13–14):

**Figure 9.** (a) Community leader and co-author, Sebastien Katuk, at another rockshelter in 2018. (b) Research team interviewing a local clan member at Apuranga rock art site (photos: William Pleiber, *Papuan Past Project*).

Apart from the newly made hand stencils, previously, there were human skeletons in Apuranga rockshelter. No one visits this shelter because prehistorically, there were dwarfs that live there but in an underground house beneath the rockshelter. These dwarfs murdered villagers when they went out to extract sago or hunting. They leave the skulls in the rockshelter, perhaps as trophies. Other villagers kept wondering why some of them were missing and after some time, had a search party out. When they arrived at Apuranga, they saw numerous skulls laid out. They knew something exists beyond this cave. One day they saw the cave-hole, tried digging it out but never succeeded. All gathered for a meeting and agreed to spiritually wake one of their spirit ancestors to assist them. The creek nearby swelled and magically flowed into the rockshelter and the hole underground. This allowed the ancestral magician into the dwarf's shelter and killed all of them, including their chief. After that, no more villagers were missing but the cave was still left unused.

SK ended the story by explaining that with the presence of researchers in the village who expressed an interest in rock art, some clan members had gone and painted their 'hand marks' on the rockshelter walls making it available to be used again for the community. These motifs were made before the community invited the research team to visit the site.

### Discussion

Several strands of this narrative can be woven together to generate insight into the Auwim's contemporary relationship to the site, its motifs, and its affective and relational dimensions. First, the narrative describes how Auwim feared 'dwarfs', and by extension, the place where they resided. The fact that the rockshelter did not contain any cultural materials apart from skeletal remains (that themselves were related to the 'dwarfs') appears to confirm SK's explanation for the lack of engagement, indeed the complete avoidance, with the rockshelter. The role and reputation of the site's 'dwarfs' as violent beings influenced people's perception of the place.

The Auwim community's use of the specific term, 'dwarfs' (*duof or masalai*), is likely a Tok Pisin term referring to 'bush spirits', a common term across many parts of PNG that refers to different forms of spiritual entities inhabiting the landscape (see Edwards and Sullivan 2008: 17 for Auwim ancestral spirit and other *masalai* spirit names). For example, among the Lelet of New Ireland, the 'bush spirits', or *lagas*, are 'derivations of a basic anthropomorphic body, varying in appearance, size, and their effects on humans' (Eves 2020: 9, 1998: 155–157, 160–163). Some forms of *lagas* include one that has 'wings and can fly, while others are terrestrial beings, including one with tail and one which is a dwarf' (Eves 2020: 9). Eves notes that *lagas* are 'powerful beings' and that they have been described as 'cannibals, sorcerers, and tricksters renowned and reviled for their attacks upon humans. These fears are still prevalent, particularly for those who venture into the forest' (Eves 1998: 169).

Thus, the feelings and emotions generated by the Auwim community about Apuranga before the team arrived at Auwim can be embedded in a shared understanding of the violent actions of the 'dwarfs' and the potential for death. This notion of fear associated with place speaks to a growing literature in anthropological and archaeological studies that seek to explore and understand how and why people respond the way they do to encounters with objects, images and places. Over the last two decades, the notions of emotion and affect have been used to add another layer to the study of human behaviour in the past and present. For example, Seigworth and Gregg (2010: 2, original emphasis) note that affect is, 'in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*', while Stewart and Lewis (2015: 239) suggest that emotion can be 'a lens for approaching social worlds and lived experiences as ongoing processes, highlighting partiality, flux, and contingency'. Stewart's book, *Ordinary affects*, also show how encounters, experiences and knowledge can 'provoke attention to the forces that come into view as habit or shock, resonance or impact' (2007: 1). In doing so, this highlights that 'something' has, or is, occurring that can impact on people's behaviour. In a rock art context, recent research (e.g. Brady and Bradley 2016) has explored this theme by examining responses of senior Aboriginal men concerning a well-known and feared rock art site in northern Australia's Gulf of Carpentaria region in the early 1980s. In this instance, the encounter with paintings created by a sorcerer designed to ensorcell and kill victims was the mechanism used to elicit fear. This fear continues to linger into the present day by those who had family members killed by

sorcery paintings, and their responses to the site continue to reveal fear, especially for younger generations who may inadvertently visit the site without knowing about its power. In the case of Apuranga, it is the story of the violent ‘dwarfs’ that can be conceptualised as the ‘trigger’ for fear among the Auwim, as well as the skeletal remains that act as a tangible reminder of what the ‘dwarfs’ are capable of doing, that is, killing villagers who go hunting and gathering.

What is intriguing here is that the narrative reveals how an ancestral spirit magician was summoned to assist the Auwim to deal with the ‘dwarfs’ and the role of memory. While the ancestral spirit magician was able to kill the dwarfs, thus making Apuranga suitable again for visitation, the legacy of the story and the violent actions of the ‘dwarfs’ clearly remained in the memory of the Auwim until only before the research team’s visit, likely contributing to its continuing abandonment/avoidance. Instead, the timing of Auwim re-engagement with the site — coincident with archaeologists interested in rock art — suggests that the presence of researchers may have played some role in this process. Indeed, the testimony of Auwim community members that the stencils were created only *after* the research team arrived and stated their interests in learning about rock art and other aspects of Auwim cultural history did a transformation of the site occur. Key to this transformation was the inscription of the site with personal markers — hands, feet, everyday objects etc. — as a way of demonstrating the establishment of a new relationship with Apuranga.

This reappraisal of the site’s history and the performance of inscribing it with Auwim symbolic markers could, on the one hand, be interpreted as a community’s response to the curiosity of the researchers. However, we conceptualise this event as something more complex and embedded in a network of relationships linking the past (violent ‘dwarfs’ terrorising the Auwim, an ancestral magician killing the ‘dwarfs’), present (arrival of archaeologists interested in rock art, prompting a reappraisal of Auwim relationships to a once-feared site) and future (visiting or using the site in the future). What is interesting to consider here is the role of archaeologists in this network. While archaeologists are typically interested in the past and notions of objectivity in their research, their presence and actions can have implications for people’s contemporary engagements with places, objects and images. The implications of ‘researcher presence’ are overlooked in archaeological practice analyses and typically require a reflexive gaze to appreciate their role in people’s engagements with their pasts in the present (e.g. Brady 2020). For example, in Torres Strait (north-eastern Queensland) in 2001 and 2002, Ian McNiven, Bruno David and LMB observed rock art being created by Torres Strait Islanders during an archaeological research project on the sacred islet of Pulu. Over two years, the Goemulgal created a total of 37 motifs using locally available red ochre — the first documented occurrence in over 100 years — while participating in an excavation program (McNiven et al. 2002; see also Brady 2005, 2015; McNiven et al. 2009). The archaeologists did not ask for the motifs to be created, but rather Goemulgal undertook the rock art creation process likely as a performative act in front of archaeologists as a way of reaffirming their powerful relationship to the islet and their cultural practices. What is critical here is that archaeologists can 1) be implicated or embedded in the contemporary process of making rock art; and 2) become integrated into the Auwim’s sphere of relationships that shape their engagement with their landscape, memory and cultural practices (see also Taçon 1992 for an example from Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory, Australia).

The production of new motifs at Apuranga is also significant in that they can be conceptualised as active agents used to mediate social relationships. In his work on art and agency, Gell (1992, 1998) implored researchers to re-consider art objects beyond their aesthetic values and instead seek to understand how the images or objects exerted their own agency, that is, what can/could they do? He noted that ‘[t]he idea of agency is a culturally prescribed framework for thinking about causation’ (Gell 1998: 16), thus suggesting that interrogating the agency of art objects and images should be carried out according to their social and cultural contexts. Using an example involving the highly decorated Trobriand Islander canoe prows used in the highly competitive *kula* exchange network, he proposed that they were used to perform ‘psychological warfare’ on exchange partners, forcing them to give up their most valuable possessions. In the Apuranga context, the new motifs are used to signal changing social relationships: a new relationship based on place-marking to what was a once feared place and that has now been integrated into the Auwim social and cultural landscape, and secondly, a relationship with researchers who are interested in learning more about the nature of Auwim graphic systems and relationships to place.

## Conclusion

Our case study involving members of the Auwim community creating rock art stencils at a once feared site has demonstrated that people’s contemporary relationships to rock art and place are highly complex. The presence of an archaeological team with interests in rock art has shown that researchers can be embedded in people’s cultural traditions and practices, and embedded in their network of relationships involving oral traditions, place-making strategies, and (overcoming) fear. It was this network that resulted in the rock art production of Apuranga. Approaching Apuranga’s rock art through the lens of agency, affect and emotion has also been useful in understanding how meaning can be made not only of the motifs themselves but also of the places (e.g. rockshelters) where they are found. The fact that new rock art was created in 2018 is an important and unique case study for PNG and highlights the potential for ethnography to contribute to understanding the nature of rock art in contemporary settings.

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**Figure 1.** Map showing the case study area location, Auwim, East Sepik, Papua New Guinea, including other sites mentioned in the text (produced by Andrea Jalandoni; base map by ESRI National Geographic).



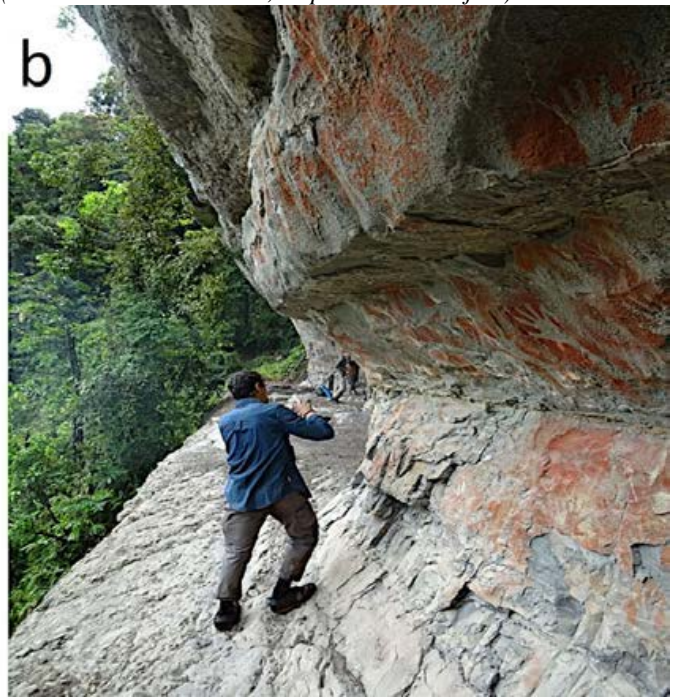


**Figure 2.** Auwim village in 2018 (photo: William Pleiber, Papuan Past Project).

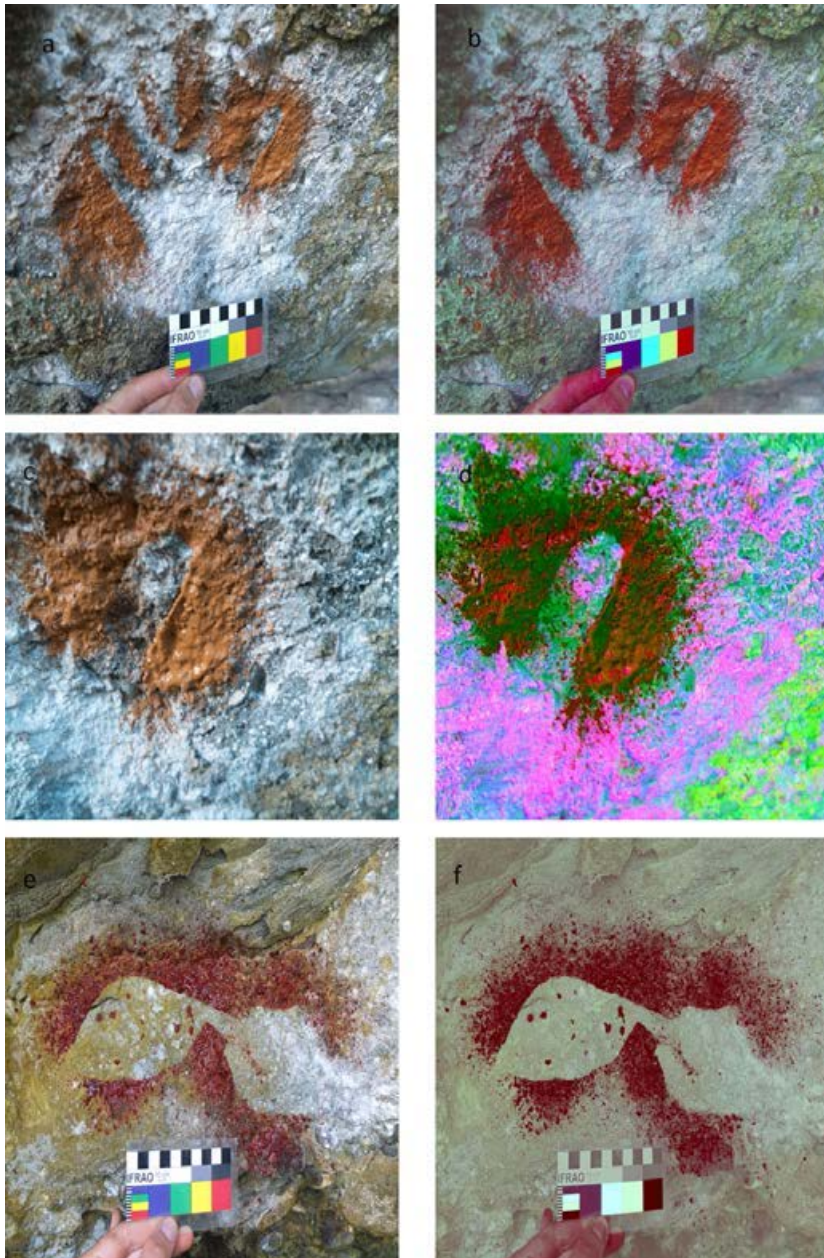




**Figure 3.** (a) Trekking to Kundumbue rock art site. (b) An example of a cliff rockshelter at Pundimbung site in the Upper Karawari-Arafundi region, East Sepik, Papua New Guinea in 2018 (Photos: William Pleiber, Papuan Past Project).

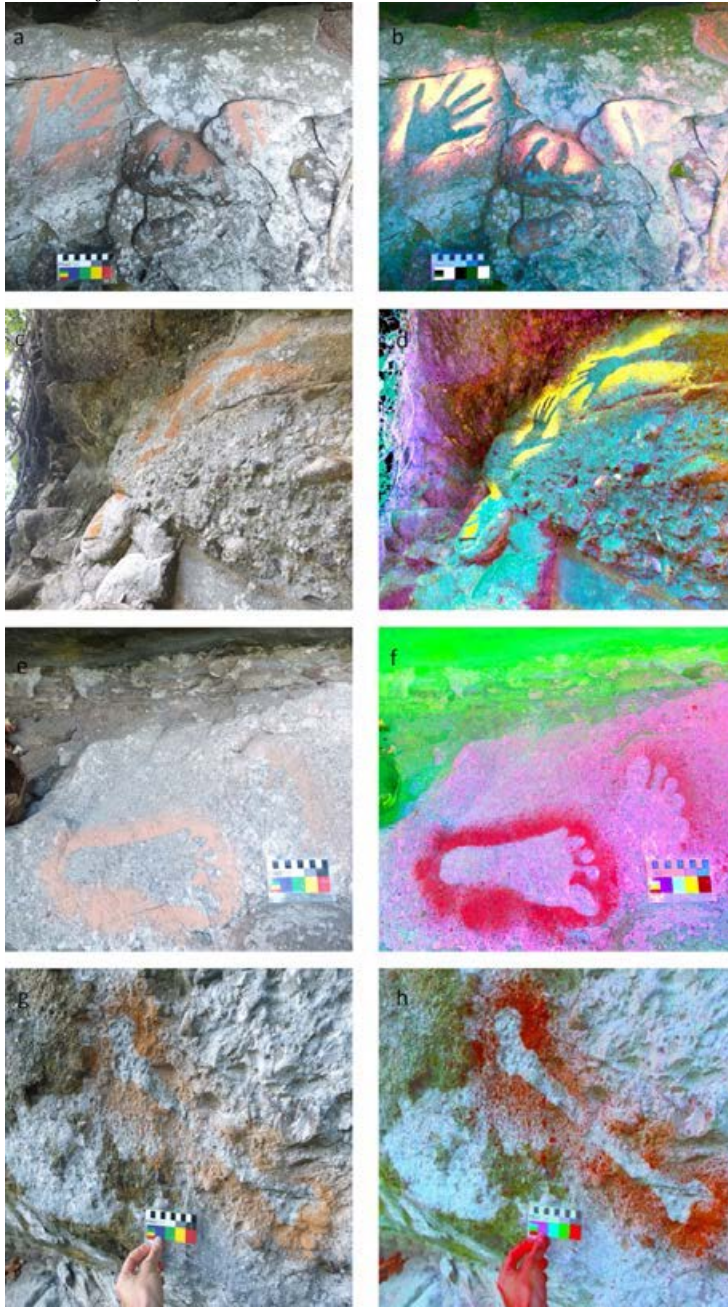


**Figure 4.** Examples of different stencil types at Apuranga site in 2018. Left down (a, c and e) before enhancement: a hand/palm, a thumb and unknown leaf stencils, respectively, with the appearance of being recently made. Right down (b, d and f) after picture enhancement using DStretch (yre, crgb, and yre colour filters, respectively) shows no older art (original





**Figure 5.** Examples of different stencil types at Apuranga site in 2018. Left down (a, c, e and g) before enhancement: a hand/palm, a thumb and finger stencils; hand + arm and hand + forearm stencil; foot and toes stencils; and bone stencil respectively with the appearance of one-week-old. Right down (b, d, f and h) after picture enhancement using DStretch (lbl, labi, crgb and ywe colour filters, respectively) shows no older art (original photos: William Pleiber, Papuan Past Project).



**Figure 6.** View from Apuranga rock art site in 2018 (photo: William Pleiber, Papuan Past Project).

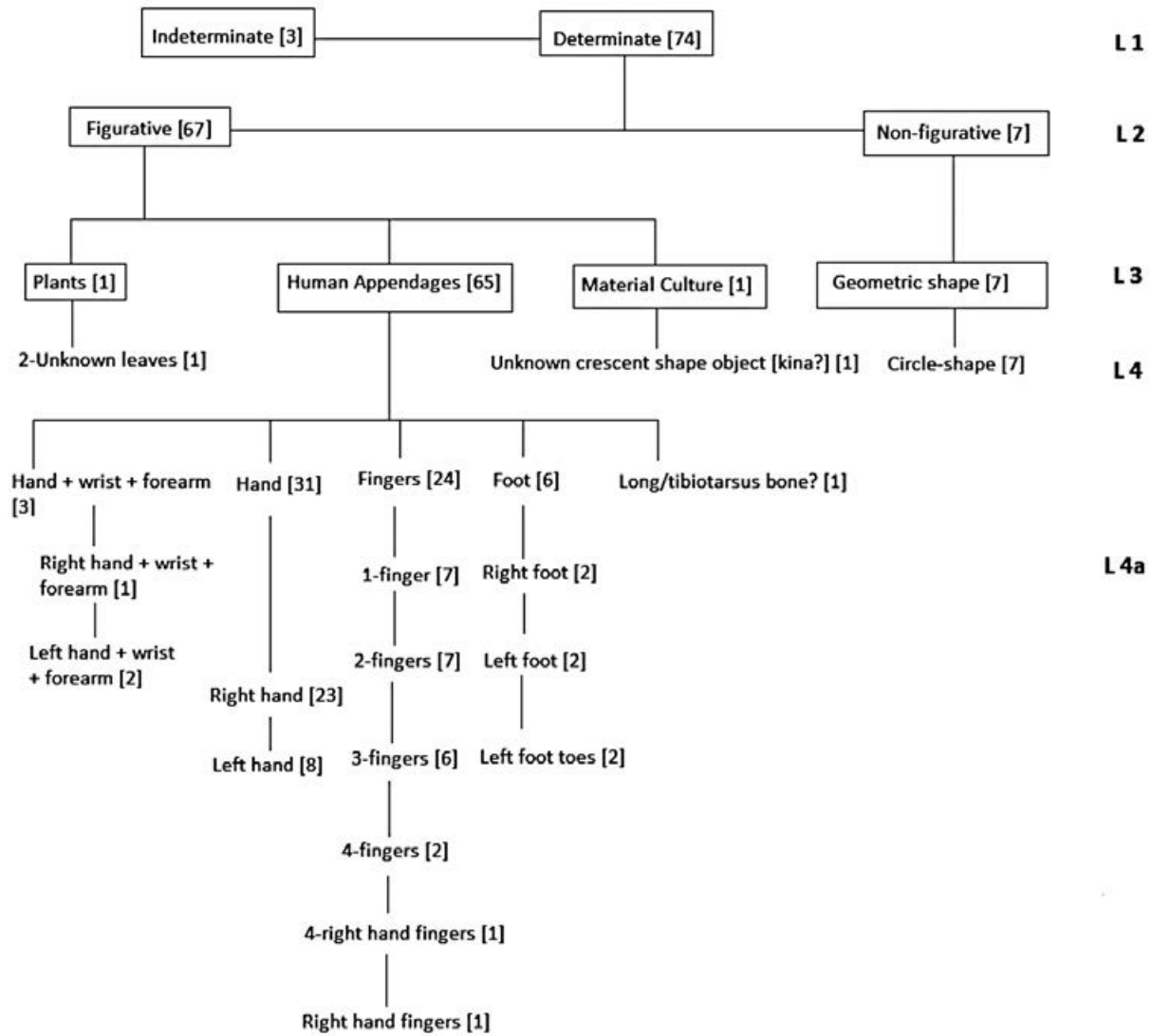




*Figure 7. Apuranga rock art site in 2018 (photo: William Pleiber, Papuan Past Project).*



Figure 8. Classification of rock art motifs at Apuranga (following Brady 2005, 2010).





**Figure 9.** (a) Community leader and co-author, Sebastien Katuk, at another rockshelter in 2018. (b) Research team interviewing a local clan member at Apuranga rock art site (photos: William Pleiber, Papuan Past Project).

