

GUA CHA AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE ORANG ASLI

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Archaeological research in the Malay Peninsula may be divided into four main periods (Adi 1987). Period I marks the beginning of antiquarian work, initially by British colonial administrators (Earl 1860) and later by the officers of the Perak Museum (Wray 1905). Period II was geared towards human migrations through the Peninsula, as in the work of P.V. van Stein Callenfels (1936) and Callenfels and Noone (1940). In Period III, however, research shifted towards investigating internal cultural developments rather than migration, issues being advocated by Sauer (1952), and this approach was clearly demonstrated in the work of Dunn (1964) and Peacock (1971).

The fourth and current period began with the establishment of the Department of History at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. Here began an increasing interest in the archaeology of the Malays, particularly on their origins and cultural history, aspects of great importance to the newly independent country. With this new approach also there are attempts to relate archaeological evidence to the prehistory of the Orang Asli,¹ especially with regards to their origins (Rambo 1980; Benjamin 1976; Adi 1985).

Among the forerunners of this modern approach is Dunn, whose 1975 monograph *Rain-forest Collectors and Traders* pioneered much in-depth study on the Orang Asli and the archaeology of the Malay Peninsula. Recently, Gianno (1990) has studied Semelai resin technology, tracing use of resin in archaeological contexts and its application today.

There is now a rising need to think about the linkages not only between the Orang Asli and archaeological finds in the Peninsula, but also with respect to the Malays. It is in the light of this recent interest that this paper has been written. The first part discusses the results of the excavations at Gua Cha, a rockshelter situated in the interior of Kelantan. I will then try to relate the findings to the archaeology of the Orang Asli.

THE SITE OF GUA CHA

Gua Cha lies about sixteen kilometres from the Orang Asli village of Kuala Betis. It is situated on the left bank of the Sungai Nenggiri, which eventually joins the main Kelantan River through Sungai Galas (Fig. 1). In other words, Gua Cha lies on the major inland riverine route across the Malay Peninsula. It is interesting to note that on topographic

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maps, the Gua Cha rockshelter lies exactly opposite the now abandoned village of Gua Cha.

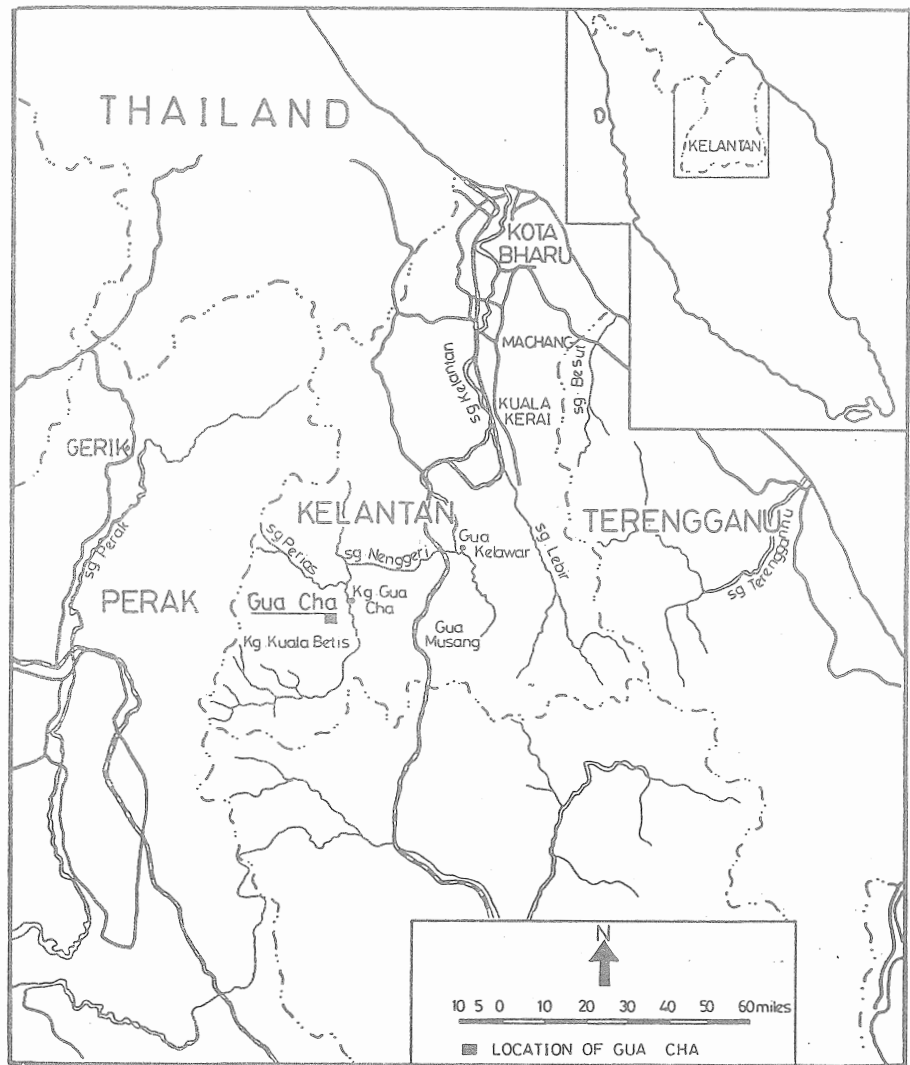


FIGURE 1: THE LOCATION OF GUA CHA

The Gua Cha rockshelter measures 18 metres long and its maximum width is 18 metres (Fig. 2). The height of the shelter at its dripline is about 13 metres. The main shelter is almost 9 metres away from Sungai Nenggiri, but a small tributary runs into the Nenggiri north of the shelter and just beyond the end of the limestone massif.

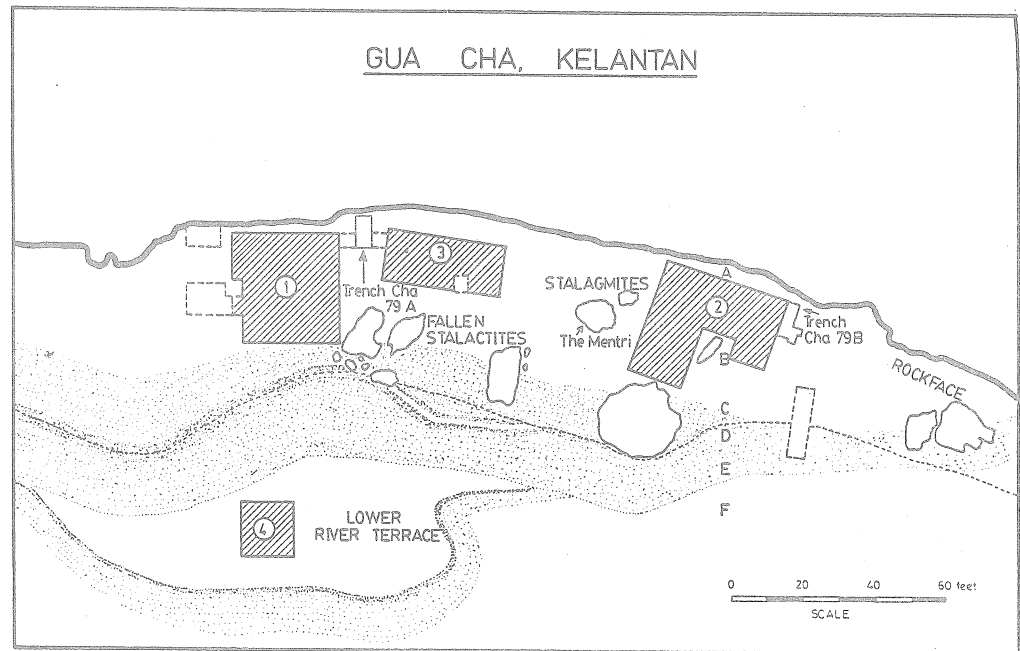


FIGURE 2: GUA CHA, KELANTAN: NOONE 1935 TRENCHES (DOTTED), SIEVEKING 1954 TRENCHES 1-4 AND 1979 TRENCHES 79A AND 79B

Previous Excavations at Gua Cha

The archaeology of Gua Cha was first explored by H.D. Noone (1939) and later by Williams-Hunt (1951). The major excavation at the site was carried out by G. de G. Sieveking (1954), with assistance from M.W.F. Tweedie of the then Raffles Museum, Singapore. Sieveking excavated three cuttings inside the shelter (Fig. 2) covering an area of about 240 square metres, and a fourth trench was excavated in the lower river terrace just outside.

Sieveking's excavation at Gua Cha is very important as through it he laid the foundation for systematic archaeological recording and research in Malaysia. He found two main layers of habitation in the site, the lower containing remains belonging to the Hoabinhian cultural complex, including stone tools, human and animal bones.

After the Hoabinhian occupation at Gua Cha, Sieveking claimed a break in stratigraphy reflecting a time lapse of about 2000 years before the Neolithic occupation of the site began. The Neolithic remains comprised extended burials accompanied by finely-made pottery, polished stone tools, shell bead necklaces, a shell spoon and stone bracelets.

The 1979 Excavation

In 1979 I re-excavated the site for my Masters Thesis at the Australian National University (published as Adi 1985). Two small trenches were excavated close to Sieveking's Cutting 2 and in between Cuttings 1 and 3 (Trenches 79A and 79B on Fig. 2). In general, the evidence found at Gua Cha in the 1979 excavation paralleled that of Sieveking, except that no clear break in stratigraphy between the Hoabinhian and the Neolithic was observed.

Four charcoal radiocarbon samples, one from the wall of Sieveking's Cutting 3 and the others from Trench 79B, have been dated. That from Cutting 3 gave a date of 810 ± 80 BP (ANU 2216) for carbonised rice found in the upper "black and stony" layer. A date of 3020 ± 230 BP (ANU 2217) from charcoal collected from the base of the Neolithic cultural level marks the termination of the Hoabinhian. Another date of 6300 ± 170 BP (ANU 2218) came from charcoal collected in the middle level of the Hoabinhian cultural deposit. However, a flotation sample giving a date of 3790 ± 250 BP (ANU 2219) from the bottom level of the trench proved to be contaminated.

The finds from the 1979 excavation may be summarised as follows:

Stone Artifacts

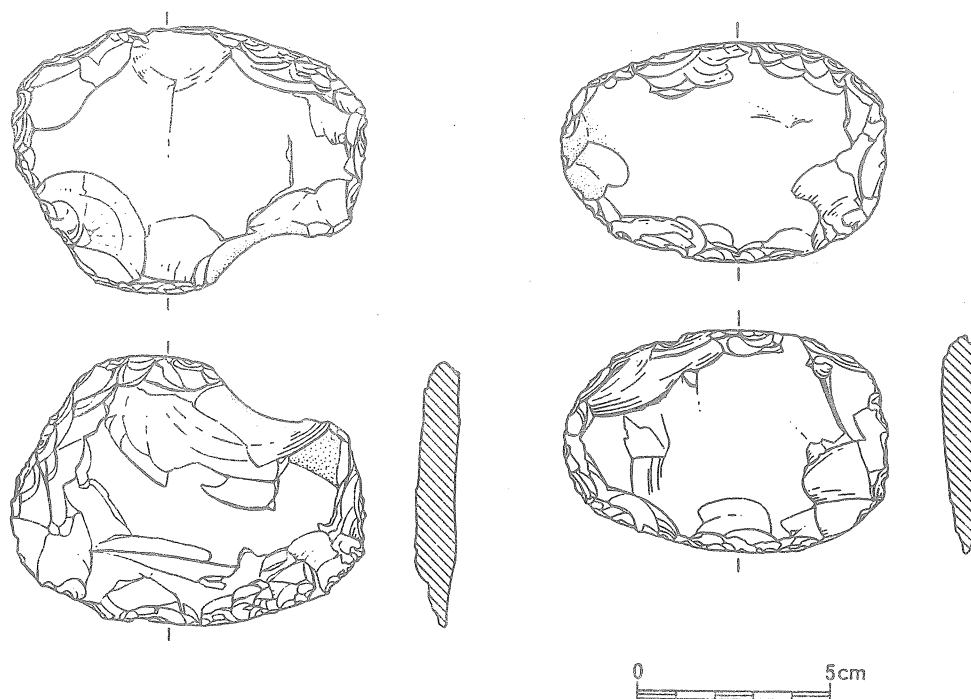


FIGURE 3: HOABINHIAN BIFACIAL PEBBLE TOOLS FROM GUA CHA

Stone artifacts form the major component of the materials excavated in 1979. Most of the stone tools are of Hoabinhian type, ranging from crudely worked implements to well finished ovates (Fig. 3) flaked all over both surfaces. No Neolithic implements or edge-ground tools were found. Retouched flakes and waste flakes were numerous throughout all layers in both trenches. River pebbles were quite numerous and the large amount of debitage would suggest that the tools were manufactured in the rockshelter. The raw materials were readily available as pebbles in the Sungai Nenggiri. A wide range of raw materials was employed for the production of these tools, including chert, greenstone, sandstone, basic schist, shale and dark limestone. The bifacially flaked pebble tools may be classified into four different shapes: ovate, sub-rectangular, subtriangular and slightly waisted.

Pottery

The 1979 excavation produced little pottery, although the richness of the site has been revealed through Noone's as well as Sieveking's excavations and has been illustrated elsewhere (Sieveking 1954; Peacock 1959; Tweedie 1970; Al-Rashid 1969).

The Gua Cha pottery shows a great diversity of form and ranges from simple round-bottomed bowls to more sophisticated footed and carinated forms. Many vessels have polished upper surfaces and definite slow-wheel striations, most are cord-marked and some are red-slipped. Some have perforations just below the rim in pairs or in groups on opposite sides. All of the complete and intact vessels were found as grave furniture. In general, the Gua Cha pottery presents the most complete Neolithic assemblage known in the Malay Peninsula.

The variety of pottery recovered from Gua Cha seems to show that the site belonged to a highly sophisticated society with a long and independent tradition of potting. There are similarities with pottery from sites in Thailand, but at the same time the Gua Cha pottery displays individualistic traits.

Burials

Gua Cha was used as a major burial ground during the Hoabinhian and the Neolithic periods. Sieveking excavated 37 burials in all, 23 having Neolithic associations and 14 being Hoabinhian. In addition, Noone (1939) found at least four burials, and four more were unearthed during the 1979 excavations.

The Neolithic burials were extended and normally accompanied by rich grave goods comprising pottery, stone bracelets, shell ornaments, bark-cloth beaters, beaked adzes and other items. However, no definite grave goods were reported from the Hoabinhian burials, which were identified according to stratigraphy, posture and conditions of preservation. One flexed Hoabinhian burial excavated in 1979 had a stone slab pillow and a body cover of tufa chunks dusted with haematite. Another unexcavated Hoabinhian burial was found beneath two limestone slabs (Adi 1985).

Food remains

Food remains found at Gua Cha fell into three major groups: animal bones, shellfish and plant remains. Animal bones consisted mainly of pig, including the banded pig (*Sus scrofa*), and clearly formed the main meat supply of the Gua Cha inhabitants from the earliest phase to the top of the deposit. The animal bones from Gua Cha belonged to about 21 species and young animals seem to have been favoured as prey. Animals hunted included Malayan bear, monkeys, gibbons, rats, squirrels, flying foxes, and large game such as cattle and rhinoceros. Other food remains included freshwater shells, especially of *Melanoides*.

Carbonised rice was detected in a large hearth in the top level of Sieveking's Cutting 3. It was plentiful and has been identified as probably belonging to the *indica* type. It is dated by ANU 2216 to 810 ± 80 BP; no traces of rice were observed in older contexts in the site.

CONCLUSION

Sieveking's excavation at Gua Cha in 1954 was the most important in the history of Malaysian prehistoric archaeology. Unfortunately, only a partial report was published and many questions were left unanswered. The 1979 excavations were brief, yet the evidence obtained was of considerable importance since it helped to elucidate some of the controversial issues raised by Sieveking's report.

The stratigraphy of Gua Cha was observed in 1979 to be similar to that recorded by Sieveking in 1954, except that the soil deposits are now identified (by Philip Hughes) as of alluvial rather than humus origin right from the bottom of the site.

Two main periods of habitation, the Hoabinhian and the Neolithic, occurred in the shelter. The Hoabinhians were most probably hunters and gatherers and no claims for a horticultural economy can be made. Because of the absence of marine shells in the deposits it is probable that they foraged only in the mountain valleys of the interior and had no direct contact with coastal counterparts. This is point of some interest, because during the Neolithic such contacts did exist, as evidenced by the marine shell spoon found in association with a Neolithic burial.

The question now arises of whether the ancestry of any of the present inhabitants of West Malaysia can be traced back to the prehistoric cultures represented in Gua Cha. It is quite clear that one can rule out the Malays and other Austronesian speakers of the Peninsula on the grounds of linguistic and historical geography. However, Gua Cha is situated on the boundary between two groups of Orang Asli: the Temiar Senoi to the west and the Semang Negritos to the north and east (Fig. 4). Both these groups speak Aslian languages within the Austroasiatic family, and these languages together with Mon and Khmer have an ancestry within southern Mainland Southeast Asia which is much older in this area than those of the the now-dominant Thai and Malay languages.

Internal divisions of the Aslian languages have been studied by Benjamin (1976), who divides them into Northern, Central and Southern subgroups. The Northern subgroup is associated mainly with the Semang Negrito foraging populations of the northern part of



FIGURE 4: ORANG ASLI GROUPS OF THE MALAY PENINSULA

the peninsula, whereas Central and Southern Aslian languages are spoken respectively by the Senoi of central Malaya and the Proto-Malays of the South, both of whom practice agriculture today. Benjamin (1976) believes that while it may be due to pure coincidence or sampling error, it is tempting to see the archaeological findings as evidence of some

kind of boundary between foragers (Hoabinhian) and horticulturalists (Neolithic) established already some 3000 to 4000 years ago.

There is little reason to doubt that the Semang and Senoi are the modern descendants of the population that produced the Gua Cha remains. That the present Orang Asli are the descendants of the Hoabinhians has been suggested by Rambo, who further suggests that the ancestors of both the Negritos and the Senoi lived near the coast during the Hoabinhian and only moved inland after the arrival of agriculture (Rambo 1988), whereafter their genetic developments were very much influenced by varying environmental factors.

Solheim (1980:70), on the other hand, suggests that the ancestors of the Semang Negritos and the Senoi were two contemporary Hoabinhian groups living in different niches, the Semang being the descendants of the coastal Hoabinhians who produced the Guar Kepah shell mounds, while the ancestral Senoi lived in the interior mountain valleys. Archaeologically, the Hoabinhian culture of the interior developed into the Neolithic, with additional elements being introduced by later newcomers who brought new southern Mongoloid genetic elements into the society.

Unfortunately, the available skeletal and genetic data for the ancestry of both the Semang and Senoi are scarce. Skeletal data from Hoabinhian sites in the Peninsula point to an Australo-Melanesian rather than a Mongoloid affinity (Bellwood 1985), though many scholars express uncertainty concerning the affinity of the Malaysian remains, for instance Trevor and Brothwell (1962) for Gua Gha and Snell (1949) and Jacob (1967) for other sites.

In his recent conference paper, Bellwood (n.d.) suggests that "the Semang may therefore be the most 'locally-evolved' descendants of the Hoabinhians in the Malay Peninsula, despite the apparent difficulties involved in recognising them in the available, but extremely small, skeletal sample." According to Bellwood, the Mongoloid gene flow into the Senoi population was not due to local differentiation but was influenced by agricultural societies elsewhere.

From the results of the 1979 excavation at Gua Cha it has been observed that there was no apparent break in the usage of the rockshelter between the Hoabinhian and the Neolithic cultures, as was originally argued by Sieveking. Trevor and Brothwell (1962) also concluded that the Hoabinhian and the Neolithic cultures were the products of the same people. Following Benjamin's argument that the Northern and Southern Aslian languages had differentiated some 6,000 years ago it is possible to assume that the ancestors of the Orang Asli had established themselves within the Peninsula by that time. They then evolved and split into distinct groups practising different life styles. Bellwood (1985:270) feels that the archaeological remains from Gua Cha are the product of ancestral Senoi people rather than Negritos, as indicated by the presence of Mongoloid traits in the Gua Cha human remains.

NOTE

1 The term "Orang Asli" was introduced into the local Malay language during the 1950s to refer to various peoples living in small groups in the Malay Peninsula, especially in the deep jungle or its peripheries. Generally speaking, they are the "Aborigines" of Peninsular Malaysia and South Thailand. Today they number some 70,000 souls identifying with 19 ethnic groups speaking about 12 different languages. Traditionally, Orang Asli have been divided into three distinct types, namely Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay, practising different modes of life and possessing physical differences.

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