

**THE HOABINHIAN SITE AT TAAT HILL CAVE,  
UPPER TERENGGANU, MALAYSIA**

**MOHD. KAMARUZAMAN A. RAHMAN**

**INTRODUCTION**

Looking at the development of Hoabinhian culture in Terengganu and Malaysia (generally), we are facing with an issue and problem. Few scholars have given their opinion about its time frame, characteristics and artifacts. They are Heine Geldern, W.G. Solheim, W.M.F. Tweedie, F.L. Dunn, G. de G. Sieveking and some other local scholars (Malaysian and South East Asian). Among these scholars, Dunn's opinion is quite interesting because he divided the prehistory era into three categories that is directly related to Hoabinhian. The division are:

1. The beginning of terminal Pleistocene adaptive threshold around 20,000 BP.
2. The conservative tradition area, around 10,000 year BP (early Holocene) which is related to Hoabinhian culture.
3. The beginning of the innovative tradition area, around 4,000-5,000 years BP (Dunn 1975).

Using Dunn categories to relate to the Hoabinhian period, Sunda shelf was submerged around 10,000 years BP. Sumatera, Borneo, Palawan and Taiwan were isolated. Indirectly, the island's genetic and cultural flows were also isolated. This is because there is no effective sea-faring between people from the mainland and the islands. Gene flow and cultural flow were reduced between mainland and island which became isolated (Dunn 1970: 1041-1042).

Seafaring became more effective around 5,000 years BP. The rising of sea level reduced the area of the lowland. In the interior, Hoabinhian society stayed in rock-shelters at least till the end of the Pleistocene period. The Hoabinhian people were hunters and gatherers but at this stage, there might have been intensive incipient agriculture. Trading activities still concentrate at the interior area. The trading within the remote areas are still dominant but the trading activities between coastal and interior area is frequently on the increase (Dunn 1975: 134-135).



The division or category which is done by Dunn is an effort to apply a few concepts of population genetics to understand the changes and cultural adaptation in the mainland and island Southeast Asia. Culture is related to the genetic concept especially with regards to gene flow, culture pool and culture isolation. It was assumed to have developed with the changes of environment which was related to the rising of sea level at the end of the Pleistocene period and also because of the innovation of effective sea-faring (Peacock 1971: 114-115).

### HOABINHIAN ERA

Hoabinhian terminology have been in use since 1932 (71 years ago) with the acceptance of the resolution of Hoabinhian term (Matthews 1969: 86) by the committee of the conference in Hanoi. The term was based on research by Madeleine Colani in Vietnam. In January 1960 and January 1961, Dr. P.I. Boriskovsky undertook research at Hoa Binh district and agreed with Colani's opinion regarding the Hoabinhian (Solheim 1970: 50).

Even though there has been disagreement to Colani's idea, excavation in Indo China has shown that the new culture was based on the hunter-gatherer and flake tool made from pebble. It was a Mesolithic culture without a proof of agriculture (Matthews 1969: 94). This assumption was not in line with the findings by C. Gorman.

In his 1965 excavation at Spirit Cave (Thailand), Gorman found ceramics at the upper layer. Based on a flora analysis, he believes it was possible that peas were cultivated there. From the C14, Solheim (1972: 148) indicates that this agricultural development dated as far back as 10,000 BC. According to the findings, Gorman introduces the term "technocomplex" for Hoabinhian culture (Gorman 1970). To sum up, it is very difficult to make a definite conclusion namely whether ceramics and domestication were new technologies of this Hoabinhian period.

### TAAT HILL EXCAVATION

Taat Hill Cave is situated at GR 256355 Sheet 48 Series L7010 1973 in Lake Kenyir, 76 km. from Kuala Terengganu. This cave is near the Biwah Cave which was investigated by R.O.D. Noone in 1944 and Adi Haji Taha in 1976 (Adi 1983). Taat Cave was briefly mentioned by Sieveking in his report in 1956 (Sieveking 1956, 207).

Our<sup>1</sup> excavation was done in two seasons of time. In May 1989,



one test trench 3 x 1 meter was excavated while in August 1989, the excavation was done in two trench 2 meter x 2 meter. Measurements of this cave are 36.5 meter in length, 11 meter wide and 11 meter high. Previously, this cave was around 300 meters from Terengganu river but now it is only 5 meters from the surface of Kenyir Lake Dam. It is also situated at around 1,500 meters above sea level.

### MAY EXCAVATION

Excavation was done in the test trench which was situated near the cave wall. This cave was not disturbed by guano diggings, therefore the artifact was in their original position. Excavation was done at the depth of 65 cm. after reaching the bed rock.

From the observation of soil colour, it indicated that ceramic was not found below the depth of 25 cm. The interesting artifact that was found was a Sumatralith. By this finding, we<sup>2</sup> confirmed that this cave had only one culture i.e. Hoabinhian because the ceramic was only found at the upper layer.

Our opinion is not contradictory with Dunn's findings in Gua Kechil, Pahang (Dunn 1964). At this site, Dunn found that Hoabinhian artifacts comprising decorated and undecorated ceramics at the upper occupation of 40 cm. thickness (Bellwood 1985: 168-171). Probably this was a post-Hoabinhian or pre-Neolithic culture. The appearance of ceramics did not indicate the emergence of Neolithic culture at this Taat Hill Cave. Further more, we did not find any polished stone axe belonging to Neolithic culture.

Besides the above artifacts, food debris including shells (various species) and animal bone were also found. The shells were found from the upper layer to the lowest layer (before the sterile layer). The shell samples from upper layer (5 cm.) were sent for C14 dating and gave a date of  $2630 \pm 80$  BP (Beta-33738) while the shell samples from the lower layer dated  $8920 \pm 120$  BP (Beta-35075).

### AUGUST EXCAVATION

In this excavation, two trenches measuring 2 meter x 2 meter were opened which was given a label Trench A1 and Trench E1. Both of the trench were located at the middle of the cave. A1 was placed parallel to the previous Test Trench while E1 was located at the lowest place and near the mouth of the cave.

## TRENCH A1

Excavation was done at the depth of 75 cm. Among the artifacts found were shells, ceramics, charcoal, seed, animal bone, tusk of bamboo rat, flakes and 'Sumatraliths'. Shells were found almost in all spits. Ceramics was not found after the depth of 45 cm. 'Sumatralith' was found at 57 cm. depth.

## TRENCH E1

The artifacts found were almost the same as in Trench A1, the only difference was that it also contained a river stone (probably because it was situated near the mouth of the cave) and a scrapper. At the lowest spit (70 cm.), a bone was found but it was too fragile to be identified (most probably it was a human bone).

## CONCLUSION

The findings of two 'Sumatralith' pebble tools indicated that it was produced by pre-Neolithic people. Indirectly, this Taat society had a close relation with Hoabinhian people that lived in Cha Cave in Kelantan and Kota Gelanggi, Jerantut, Pahang (Adi 1983: 57-58, Adi 1988: 4 and Mohd. Kamaruzaman A. Rahman 1993).

This can be proven from the activities of nowadays Aboriginal People (Semaq-beri) who live in Kuala Berang, nearby this cave who always travel to Kelantan and Pahang. Based on this, Noone's (Sieveking 1959: 207) and Benjamin's (Benjamin 1987: 134-142) opinion can be accepted. Noone gave two Neolithic people's routes (which had probably also been used by Taat peoples) from Terengganu to Tembeling River:

1. Trengan R. Sat R. Tembeling R.
2. Trengan R. Pring R. Kenering R. Spia R. Tembeling R.

While Benjamin (1987: 136), in 1960's, used to walk in the remote area using the route that have been used by Orang Asli (the Aborigines) since prehistoric period from:

1. Kelantan to Pahang via Upper Berok and Upper Tenom.
2. Kelantan to Perak via Upper Ber and Upper Pelus.
3. Kelantan to Perak via Upper Perias and Upper Lanweng.

In fact, there is still in existencceg a route that link Patani, Thailand and Muar, Johor, Malaysia through Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang which is known as Penarikan Route.



This route had been used by prehistoric people. Through this route transfer of new ideas or innovations had occurred as evident by the artifacts excavated in Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang.

From the typology of artifacts of the Taat Hill Cave, it showed that this site was occupied by prehistoric people until the post-Hoabinhian era. Even though it had only a 40 cm. preceramic levels as pointed out by Bellwood (Bellwood 1993: 40), he accepted that this site was definitely a pre-agricultural Hoabinhian occupation (Ibid, 54). The findings of 'Sumatralith' stone tools and scrapers fulfilled the definition of Hoabinhan characteristic proposed by C.F. Gorman (Gorman 1970) and J.M. Matthews (Matthews 1969).

From these two excavations, it can be concluded that this site had been used continuously. There are a few other caves surrounding this area, probably they were also occupied by the same group of people. Biwah Cave which is mentioned previously has been excavated in May 1996. It can give more information about the people that lived around this area.

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