

# A Note on Stone Tool Use by the Orang Asli (Aborigines) of Peninsular Malaysia

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**W**HETHER OR NOT THE aboriginal peoples (Orang Asli) of Peninsular Malaysia ever made and used stone tools has been a question of perennial fascination for ethnologists and archaeologists since the time of Vaughn-Stevens and Skeat and Blagden. While numerous stone implements have been found in archaeological sites on the Peninsula (Tweedie 1953), few reliable reports exist of stone tool usage by contemporary Orang Asli. Skeat and Blagden (1906:248), although recognizing that they made certain limited uses of stone, concluded that the aborigines belonged to a "wood and bone age" rather than to the stone age, an assessment shared by Schebesta (1954-1957:134), who refers to the Semang and Senoi as "living in the Wood Age." This view has found favor with modern archaeologists, who often refer to the forest-dwelling hunting and gathering peoples of Southeast Asia as having had "lignic" rather than "lithic" technology (Solheim 1972). Hutterer (1976:225) suggests that the abundant bamboo in the region supplied an easily worked material for the making of knives and projectile points, so that stone was needed only for manufacture of the primary chopping tools that were used to shape the bamboo implements. A similar idea had been advanced much earlier by Skeat and Blagden (1906:247-248), who argued that stone tools were rare because fire-hardened bamboo knives, perhaps supplemented with sharp stone and bone fragments, were used to produce most other implements.

Ethnographic observation of contemporary aboriginal life suggests, however, that even though wood, bamboo, and other vegetable materials constitute the material basis for most artifacts, there is also a considerable use of stone implements. The principal uses of stone as observed by the author or reported in the ethnographic literature are as follows:

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Plate I Temuan woman crushing manioc with stone pounder (Sungai Dua Ulu, Pahang). Plate I-Plate IV, photographs by the author.



Plate II Temuan man sharpening bush knife with rock taken from river (Ulu Tamu, Selangor).



Plate III Hearthstones in fireplace in Temuan house (Ulu Tamu, Selangor).

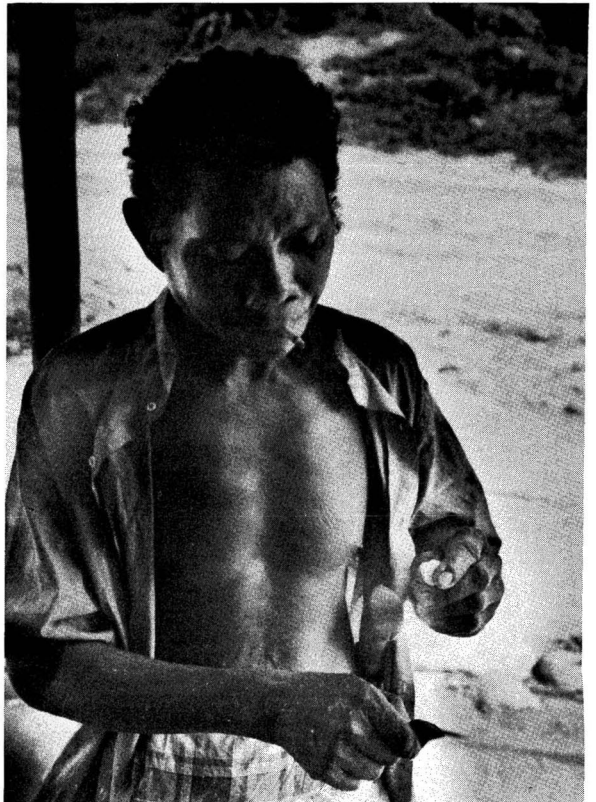


Plate IV Jahai Semang man using strike-a-light (Sungai Rual, Kelantan).

1. *Pounder for manioc roots*: A Temuan woman in Kampung Sungai Dua Ulu, Bentong District, Pahang was observed to smash manioc tubers into small fragments to feed to her chickens, ducks, and geese by laying the tuber on a small boulder and repeatedly striking it with a wedge-shaped stone held in her hand (Pl. I). Neither the anvil nor the striking stone had been deliberately shaped in any way. It is of interest to note that her husband did the same chore using a small steel sledgehammer purchased at a nearby market town.

2. *Anvil and hammerstones for working iron*: There are several reports in the literature, of which Schebesta's (1954-1957:105) is probably the most reliable, of the Semang using stone anvils and hammerstones for forging iron arrowheads.

3. *Whetstones for sharpening knives and arrowheads*: Schebesta (1954-1957:105) reports that he observed a Semang sharpen a newly forged iron arrowhead on a stone. The author has on several occasions observed Jahai Semang and Temuan sharpen bush knives on rocks taken from the beds of rivers (Pl. II shows a Temuan man from Kampung Ulu Tamu, Ulu Selangor, so engaged). Commercially produced whetstones are rapidly displacing such natural stone knife sharpeners among most Orang Asli groups, however.

4. *Files for smoothing teeth*: Pieces of sandstone and other rough-textured river pebbles are used by the Semang for grinding their front teeth to a flat edge, according to Skeat and Blagden (1906:248) and Evans (1937:88-89). A Temuan man living at Kampung Sungai Dua Ulu near Bentong informed the author that he had filed his teeth using a stone taken from the river.

5. *Hearthstones*: Because they lack cooking pots, the Semang seldom employ hearthstones in their fireplaces (Schebesta 1954-1957:137), but all other aboriginal groups usually embed three stones taken from a nearby river in the clay base of their fireplace to provide a support for kettles and other cooking pots (Pl. III shows hearthstones in a Temuan house in Kampung Ulu Tamu, Selangor).

6. *Stones for roasting grain*: Schebesta (1954-1957:138) reports that Senoi of an unidentified group place fire-heated stones together with kernels of grain in a basket in order to roast them. No reports exist of Orang Asli cooking by dropping heated stones into bark or wooden containers filled with water, as occurs frequently in other parts of the world. The high fire resistance of green bamboo, which allows bamboo vessels to be set directly in the flames until their contents are cooked, probably makes use of such a laborious technique unnecessary.

7. *Stones for "roasting" mothers after childbirth*: Stones are heated in a fire and then wrapped in *kemayong* leaves (*Homalomena* sp.) before being placed on the abdomens of Temuan women in the three days following childbirth in Kampung Paya Lebar, Ulu Langat District, Selangor. Similar practices are found among the Semai living around Tapah, Perak (Albert Gomes, personal communication) and in many other Orang Asli groups.

8. *Strike-a-light stone*: Fire making by striking sparks into tinder using a piece of quartzite and a piece of steel is widely known among the Orang Asli, although only the Semang still commonly employ this technique. Matches are now almost always used by other groups, although during the Japanese occupation the Temuan and the Semai say they used strike-a-lights. The quartzite pebble employed is not altered in any way from its natural state (Pl. IV shows a Jahai Semang from Sungai Rual, Kelantan, employing a strike-a-light).

9. *Projectile stones for catapults and slings*: Use of a true sling to cast a pebble to kill monkeys in the treetops is reported for the Temiar by Schebesta (1954-1957:128), although

he claims never to have seen such a weapon among the Semang. Rubber-band-powered catapults are commonly used by young boys in all the contemporary Orang Asli groups observed by the author. Pebbles are collected from river courses and used to shoot at birds. In the period just prior to the rice harvest, the Temuan of Kampung Paya Lebar, Ulu Langat District, Selangor use their catapults to create a virtual "flak" barrage over their paddy fields in an attempt to drive away the voracious flocks of grain-eating birds. Children from the same village have also been observed by Abdul Rahman Zainuddin (1977:44) to catch small fish by throwing pebbles at them when they swim in shallow stretches of the river.

10. *Stones used for curing and magical purposes:* The Semang shamans employ a quartz crystal (*cebux*) for purposes of divination and curing of various diseases. Water in which the *cebux* has been immersed is given to sick people to drink (Evans 1937:207, 221; Schebesta 1954-1957:134-135). Evans also reports (1937:221) that the Kintak Bong Negritos possessed certain black, flattened, circular talisman stones that have been found adhering to edible wild tubers and that these stones were believed to bring luck in searching for the tubers. The Kintak Bong also kept a dull, yellowish, egg-shaped nontranslucent quartz pebble which had been found beneath a *chenduai* plant. This plant is used in love potions, and the stone could also be immersed in oil and then the oil smeared on a woman to gain her affections.

Schebesta (1954-1957:165) gives a secondhand account of the use by the Lanoh Negritos of a flintstone to remedy snake bite. The Semai of Sungai Ruil in the Cameron Highlands are reported (Leow 1978:12) to treat jaundice by baking rocks from the river in a fire until they are very hot and then having the patient huddle over them, enveloped by a blanket to retain the heat.

Robarchek (1977:51) writes that the highland Semai prepare a special house for the soul of the rice before commencing to harvest their paddy fields: "A clump of standing stalks of rice is tied together so that the heads make a bundle, inside of which is placed a smooth stone from the river." After the harvest, the stone is taken along with the "house" to the settlement.

Among all of the Orang Asli, as well as among rural Malays, polished stone adze or axe heads, evidently from the neolithic period, are referred to as "thunder stones" and are believed to have supernatural qualities. Among the Semang, they can be used by the shaman in place of the *cebux* quartz crystal (Evans 1937:172, 207). There are no reports by reliable observers of contemporary aborigines ever making these implements or using them for other than ritual purposes.

#### CONCLUSIONS

As this brief review shows, stone is used by the contemporary Malaysian Orang Asli for a wide variety of cultural purposes. Thus, although it is true that most of their artifacts are made of vegetable materials so that it is perhaps correct to refer to the aborigines as having a lignic culture, they are hardly as alithic as has been commonly assumed. From the standpoint of the archaeologist, however, they might almost as well be, because none of their uses of stones involves deliberate and systematic modification of the original form of the natural materials. Therefore, it is highly improbable that any of the stone implements presently employed by the Orang Asli could in the future be identified by archaeologists as having been subject to human use. Even the hearthstones, which in other cul-

tural areas may be recognizable as such in archaeological sites because of their structured arrangement, are unlikely to maintain such alignment once the elevated floor of an abandoned Orang Asli house decays and its contents fall to the ground a meter or more below.

The use by Malaysian aboriginal peoples of stone in unmodified natural form and the poor preservation conditions in the tropical rain forest for artifacts made of organic materials combine to render unrealizable the brave dreams of the "new archaeologists" of total recovery of prehistoric sociocultural patterns. No technique of excavation, however rigorous and guided by scientific principles, offers much hope in dealing with cultures that literally leave behind no identifiable artifacts. The burden of understanding Malaysian Orang Asli prehistory must thus be carried largely by ethnologists rather than by archaeologists. Hence there is a pressing need for accelerated study of the traditional cultural patterns of the Orang Asli before these disappear completely. Time is rapidly running out, as the development programs of the Malaysian government's Department of Orang Asli Affairs are resulting in wholesale changes in aboriginal lifeways. Already many traditional practices have fallen out of use and, though still remembered by older people, will be forgotten completely within the next decade.

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