Conservation and Management Problems of Rock Art Sites in Peninsular Malaysia

by

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SINOPSIS

Selain daripada artifek, lukisan di Batu Guajuga adalah salah satu data arkeologi terpenting demi untuk memahami cara hidup masyarakat prasejarah dan penorakan alam sekitar. Di Malaysia usaha untuk mengkajinya baru dimulai akibat daripada penemuan-penemuan baru lukisan di Batu Guajuga, dan timbul kesedaran bahawa kemungkinan besar lukisan-lukisan itu akan musnah akibat daripada aktiviti manusia dan iklim. Di Semenanjung Malaysia terdapat empat tempat, daripada tempat itu iaitu di Gua Tambun, Gua Badak, Gua Batu Luas dan Gua Kelawar. Dalam memelihara tinggalan itu banyak masalah dihadapi dan Jabatan Muzium telah mengambil langkah-langkah dalam menghadapi masalah-masalah itu.

Apart from artifacts, rock paintings constitute a significant type of evidence in archaeological studies. Many aspects of past society can be understood by studying rock paintings. These artistic works not only reflect the economic activities of the people who lived then the environment in which they lived, but also their beliefs and the expressions of their aesthetic desires and inner self. More often, these paintings serve as the medium of communication.

Unfortunately, the study of rock art in this part of the world has not been given enough attention until quite recently. Thailand has, within the last decade embarked on a project for the proper recording of rock paintings in both the northern and southern regions of the country, (Sangwan 1987). It was during tour of the rock art sites in South Thailand, during the SPAFA Seminar on the Prehistory of Southeast Asia in 1987, that I realised the striking similarities between these paintings and those found in Malaysia. At this stage, time constraints have prevented me from undertaking a detailed comparative study of the rock art in both countries.

In Malaysia, the discovery of a few more rock art sites and the recent destruction of a rock painting site have created greater interest in this field of study. This paper reflects that interest and is aimed at describing the rock-painting sites in Peninsular Malaysia and at highlighting the problems of conservation and management pertaining to these sites. In so doing, the writer intends to present a preliminary note on this subject with the hope that this will lead to some advice for discussion how best the Museums Department of Malaysia can deal with the important problems connected with rock paintings.

To date, only four sites with prehistoric rock paintings have been reported in Peninsular Malaysia. The most important of these sites is the Gua Tambun site in Ipoh,
Perak, which was discovered in 1959 (Matthews 1959). Here, the drawings were made using red ochre or hematite. The other sites, Gua badak, Gua batu Luas dan Gua Kelewar bear paintings that were drawn using charcoal. These drawings also differ in style, technique, and subject from the drawings at the Tambun site. Expert for the Gua badak site (Evans 1927), the other sites were only recently discovered (Abdul Latib 1985; Zulkifli Jaafar n.d.). Based on the subjects of the drawings at the former site, which include motorcycles and bicycle, it can be concluded that they are of a much later date than the latter ones.
Gua Tambun, Ipoh, Perak

The Gua Tambun rock paintings site is situated in the outskirts of the City of Ipoh, the capital of the State of Perak, about 4 kilometres on the way to the township of Tanjung Rambutan. This site was first discovered by a British officer at a nearby military camp, and was reported by Matthews (1959).

The site is about 30 to 40 meters above the present Kinta Valley floor where an abrupt limestone overhang facing West, rises to about 50 meters above the floor of the shelter. It is on this surface that the rock paintings are found. The rockshelter is open and is about 300 meters long. Many of the paintings are about 15 meters above the present floor level of the shelter. It is believed that at one time the paintings extended for about 70 meters along the smooth limestone wall of the shelter. Since then, however, many of the paintings have become indistinct or have been destroyed due to weathering and exfoliation.

The rock art of Tambun is fascinating in many respects and is executed in haematite which were obtained locally. They are virtually all monochromatic, and depict humans and animals, dots, zigzags and other non-figurative motifs. There separate styles of rock art are found at Gua Tambun and include petroglyphs, simple figurative and geometric paintings and the complex x-ray pictographs.

Some of the crudely drawn figures are obviously human. Perhaps the most intriguing one is a bent-knee or squatting huma figure which, according to Faulstich (1984), appears to be associated with the ancestor cult, where mythological ancestors were believed to have been portrayed as squatting figures in human form. The position is said to symbolise fertility, birth and afterlife.

Some of the animals can be easily identified; others are indistinct and difficult to identify. The latter consists of wind boar, dugong, tapir, tiger and some deer. The deer are particularly interesting as their internal organs are also depicted. For example, one deer even has a small infant drawn inside its swollen belly, indicating pregnancy.

The Tambun art exhibits with their multiple layers of superimposed motifs indicate that the art evolved over a long period of time. The x-ray paintings represent the most recent phase of the art, and are often superimposed over earlier works. The x-ray paintings are by far, the best preserved of this art.

The dating of this site has been problematic. The Tambun art has been assigned to the Neolithic period on the assumption that most of the rock paintings were the product of a farming community. The shelter contains large midden deposits, although its current archeological potential is rather minimal due to the great amount of disturbance caused by the local inhabitants digging for natural fertilizers. In 1959, Matthews was able to collect grinding stones consisting of worn oval pebbles and slabs and several quartz pebble pounding stones. All were sustained with ruddles which Matthews inferred, prematurely, to be part of the typicl ‘Hoabinhian’ assemblage.

A number of artifactual remains were collected during our recent surface survey. These include food remains such as fresh water mollusc shells with broken and burnt bones, charcoal, sea shells, human bones, cord impressed pottery sherds, crude stone implements and ochre. Unfortunately, since these are surface finds, it is thus impossible to put these finds in archeological perspective. However, the large midden deposits suggest that the site was used intermittently over a long period of time.

Gua Kelawar, Sungai Siput, Perak

The Gua Kelawar site is situated close to the Gua Baik site excavated by Callenfels and Noone (1940), some 8 kilometers to the west of the township of Sungai Siput in the state of Perak and about 30 kilometers to the north of Gua Tambun (Zulkifli n.d., Adi and Zulkifili 1990). The cave consists of two leves: the lower has an area of approximately 270 square meters while the upper gallery is 160 square meters. The
paintings at Gua Kelawar are monochromatic and were using charcoal. These paintings are found in both the lower and upper galleries although they are concentrated mainly in the former area. They are drawn on cave walls and also on the roof. Some are located in areas that are difficult for the artist to reach. They can be dated to a recent period, probably the product of the Orang Asli ancestors who until today have lived within the area.

Plate 2. The drawing Gua Kelawar, added graffiti by visitors is clearly seen here.

Plate 3. A section of Gua Kelawar gallery depicting large games, human and geometric design.
Plate 4. A man wearing earings with an animals.

Plate 5. A unique dancing human figure of Gua Kelawar art.
The styles of art depicted in this cave are figurative, geometric and x-ray pictographs the motifs include human figures, animal figures, signs of universe and abstract designs. The first three motifs are confined only to the lower gallery. The most striking motif is a unique human figure with stretching arms, the left and right hands having four and three fingers respectively. He is seen riding on a kind of animal. Some animals can be identified as wild boar and elephants (with long trunk) and probably a tapir (shorter nose). The common abstract design is of a 'round mushroom'. In the remote corner of the cave, and in a deteriorated condition is a drawing of a boat with three men standing in it. At the front of the boat is a man holding a pole while at the back are two men, probably holding a radar.

The interior part of the cave floor has been quarried by local farmers for fertilizers. The surface of the disturbed area is strewn with vast amounts of marine and fresh water mollusc shells with broken apices (Adi and Zulkifli, 1990). Our surface survey has yielded numerous pebbles, 'Hoabinhian-like' artifacts, bone implements, hematite, cord-marked and incised decorated pottery sherds and iron spear heads. It is quite interesting to note here that even though hematite was found in the deposit, it was never used in the paintings at Gua Kelawar.

Gua Batu Luas, Hulu Tembeling, Pahang

Gua Batu Luas is situated in the upper reaches of the Kenyam River, a tributary of the Tembeling River, and is within the National Park reserve. The paintings here were surveyed in 1984 (Abdul Latib 1985) and, based on the ethnographic evidence, are said to have been drawn by the Orang Asli in the early part of this century.

The drawings are monochromatic, using charcoal. Their styles range from simple line drawings to x-rays pictographs. Motifs of the art include drawings which appear to give a panorama of the Kuala Tahan and Kuala Kenyam area. One picture depicts a mountain range, possibly the Gunung Tahan Range, with paths that reach the peaks while other pictures show the geography of the area with lakes and streams with directional arrows. There are also drawings consisting of squares, which may indicate the places where they stayed or the areas where they cultivated crops.
Some of the drawings are unique and the geometric motifs resemble the corpus of the Orang Asli arts, as evidenced in their use of combs, blowpipes and facial adornments and decorations which are examples of material culture. This area is within the foraging distance of the Negritos of the Tembeling Valley, and they still frequent the cave sites in Batu Luas.

Figure 1. Gua Batu Luas North Wall.

Figure 2. Gua Batu Luas North Wall.
Gua Badak, Lenggong, Perak

Gua Badak, or Rhinocerus Cave, is a small cave in a limestone massive about 6 kilometers from the township of Lenggong on the way to Grik. Evans (1972) reported these drawings, which comprise Negritos paintings, to be quite recent. These drawings can be grouped into 2 types: black ones, using charcoal, and white ones drawn by scratching the rock surfaces. It is with much regret that I have to point out that the cave is now gone as a result of the negligence of a certain authority. A permit was given for the limestone to be quarried for marble, and we only came to know of it when half of the hill was gone. Evans’ record is thus the most significant record of this once important treasure. I hope that accidents of this sort will never happen again in Malaysia or elsewhere.
The paintings, though quite modern, are quite important in the study of rock art. They reflect the artistic capability and aesthetic needs of the Negritos. These needs revolved around their every day life and experiences. One of the paintings is that of a man carrying a pole laden with coconuts. He is followed by a monkey which he has just sent up the coconut tree to pluck coconuts for him. Another drawing, of a bow and arrow, attests to the theory that the Negritos once used these instruments, before they turned to the blowpipe.
Yet another drawing of the sideview of a car with its wheels on top of each other depicts the modern experience. Other pictures, of men on horses or bicycles depict other modern features of life. At Gua Badak, apart from the figurative motifs, geometric designs were also common. X-ray pictographs, however, were lacking.

State of the Art

Most of the rock paintings mentioned above are in a poor state of preservation resulting from weathering in a variety of ways. Erosion, exfoliation, and spalling, and mineral secretion have adverse effects on the rock art. Even the sun, wind and rain can cause pictographs to fade and disappear rapidly. The worst factor is the human factor as people can further add to the destruction of these important of these important archaeological evidence, either recklessly scraping them or adding graffiti to them.

Preservation is the real problem facing the successful management of our rock art, especially the Gua Tambun gallery. This problem of preservation has resulted mainly from natural and environmental stresses. Lime water has seeped down the exposed face of the cliff, and has obliterated some of the motifs. Flaking and exfoliation have resulted in large painted areas falling loose from the baserock. Graffiti is another major problem, especially once the side has been opened to the public, as is the case with the Gua Kelawar paintings. This problem forced the Museums Department to eventually close the cave. Fortunately, Tambun Cave has not been much affected by this problem since most of the drawings are out of human reach.

In view of the need to preserve these rare but significant rock paintings, which constitute a remarkable heritage, the Museum Department hope to undertake several steps. These include: diverting the driplines, foliage control moisture barriers, stabilizing the rock and pigment, graffiti removal, graffiti proofing, and lichen removal. In the case of Gua Tambun, removal of unstable and weak stalactite has also been suggested. The Museums Department has also studied the best way of managing the site and monitoring the public. The latter is done either through limited accessibility and through educating the visitors to the sites.

References


