Lake Chini

A Lost Settlement in Pahang

by

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In an article written in 1947 (1) Dr. W. Linehan referred to a visit he had made to Tasek Chini (correctly pronounced Cheni) in 1925. He wrote of the importance of Cheni in local legends and of the possibility that it was once the Capital of Pahang and went on to speak of a spot in the jungle south of the lake called Belukar Bata (Coppice of Bricks) where he had noticed a mound covered with giant grass which had appeared definitely artificial.

Along with other papers this one inspired Mr. Stuart Wavell and Mr. Tony Beamish to make a trip into Tasek Chini to search for this and another spot where Linehan had described the river-bed as full of potsherds. The trip unfortunately failed to find either but in a chapter of his book describing it Wavell mentioned a number of squares which he had seen on air photographs, apparently later, and as a surveyor this excited my interest.

Since then I have made a number of investigations, which are by no means complete, and it may be of interest to record some of them (significant or merely interesting). Firstly, of the legends of which Linehan spoke I have been able to obtain some accounts, unfortunately not verbatim, from Mr. Potter of the Pahang Prospecting Company. They were obtained from aborigines living on the shores of the lake, notably Musa bin Malim and Apek. The first concerns the formation of Tasek Chini, which is today an irregular lake of over a square mile, allegedly 18 feet deep in parts but over a great deal of it covered with rasau, a spiky and untidy looking plant, a type of water-grass, and, here and there, delightful deep-pink lotus flowers. It is surrounded by jungly hills and overlooked by Gunong Cheni (2101 feet). In the lake are two islands, Pulau Balai and Pulau Berhala (Islands of the Court and Idol).

The legend relates that centuries ago the lake was a cultivated area inhabited by Siamese aborigines who worshipped golden idols and that the name Cheni meant “gibbon”. The villages were built upon small hills, that closest to the mouth of Sungei Cheni being called Bukit Balai and being for the reception of incoming Siamese at the end of their journey. Close to this village was a small hill called Bukit Bangau and to the southwest another, larger in area named Bukit Berhala Besar, because it was the largest place of worship of their god whose name was “Henek”, a word now having no meaning. There is a hill, Bukit Ketaya, next to the lake and from here they obtained gold.

These people had a “haven”, “fresh water streams which flowed in all directions”, flowing eventually into Sungei Cheni, where they controlled the water by means of dams. After hundreds of years of prosperity the annual floods of the Pahang river swelled and finally smashed the dams, flowed in reverse up the Cheni into the ladang, washed villages away and
destroyed rice-fields, and killed a large number of people by starvation. Ultimately the Ruler re-established his Istana at Belukar Batol.*

This legend can be referred clearly to the lake as there is a Pulau Bangau north of Pulau Balai and a Pulau Berhala southwest of it, in fact the reference is almost too clear. An interesting comparison is with the legend of the formation of Tasek Bera (pronounced as in Brer Rabbit) quoted by Williams-Hunt (2) in which that lake is said to have been covered with rice-fields which flooded when an old man, a stranger, pulled his staff from where he had stuck it in the ground and water flowed from the hole which grew and grew until everyone had to swim for safety but all eventually died (whether by drowning or starvation is not made clear).

Another story of which I have at present only an account from memory by Mr. P. Ponnampalam of Topo Survey, is of a Siamese Raja who was building a canal at Kuala Gadioh, on the Sungei Jeram. This spot appears to be southwest of Kuala Gonoh, which is perhaps where Linehan saw his potsherds, and near the Sungei Gadenahu shown on Map 3 C/16, about 13 miles from Kampong Kuala Aur as the crow flies (crossing Sungei Bangkok on its way). He was apparently building a canal from there to Tasek Cheni, an unlikely feat, when he ran out of rice. His son was despatched to Siam but his ship was wrecked and he, with his wife and child, was drowned. The Raja abandoned his plans and departed, leaving behind him the unfinished canal, fish ponds, sharpening stones, and a pillow (bantal), tools, a box, and animals all turned to stone. One of Mr. Potter’s informants spoke of this place, calling it Jeram Penanjol.

It is interesting to connect these stories with an opinion given by
Tasek Chini: Pulau Balai is the north-easterly of the two islands.
Wilkinson (3) that the galleries of old mines at Selinsing in Pahang were constructed by men of no mean engineering skill (he guessed Khmers) and showed signs of having been abandoned in the midst of current work. He quotes the Malays as saying that these men were Siamese (he was writing in 1908). There are therefore four clues supporting a theory of an occupation by “Siamese” which ended abruptly, and probably in disaster.

Linehan (4) claimed to have discovered the foundations of a brick building at Kuala Cheni on the Pahang river and also at Pengkalan Durian in Ulu Bebar, 26 miles to the southwest in the coastal plain, where he also mentions a Padang Siam. He speaks of brick foundations at Langgar (Tambak Siam) and at Pekan (5), and says that the bricks were of the same type in these places. In a visit paid to Cheni some friends and I examined the bricks there; they are of sun-dried laterite and are about 7 inches square and 3 inches thick.

There is also a legend of a city, now disappeared, guarded by a monster which still lives in the lake. (Mr. J. N. McHugh tells me that he has questioned aborigines on this and is satisfied that they are convinced they have seen a creature different from any found elsewhere. It is alleged to have a single horn). This legend is hedged with prohibitions against telling it to outsiders. The Naga is supposed to have been seen in Laut Jemberau (the arms of the lake being called Laut) (2), in which the aborigines say there was once a large village, and Apek’s father and grandfather were able to control it. Sceptics may drop out at this point.

Clay for pottery is supposed to have been taken from the Sungei Perupok area. Potter says that whole pots have been found near the two islands, two of which he possesses, and also at Kampong Luat Lubok, and a three-legged pedestal carved from sandstone was found at Tanjong Makam, Kuala Cheni and later lost by the finder who did not think it of more than passing interest. An old man, Pa’ Alang Tahir also spoke of dams at Kampong Salong, further down the Pahang River.

The general impression gained is that in this area there were at one time many more people than at present, a belief applied by Linehan to a wide area of Pahang. Brick buildings in Ulu Bebar may indicate that it was once more important or easily reached than now or that the builders were at that time more accustomed to use brick than later.

Groeneveldt gives translations from the Chinese (8) of a reference to Pahang in the History of the Ming Dynasty in which the ruler of Pahang variously named Maharaja Tajau (1378) and Pa-la-mi-so-la-ta-lo-si-ni (1411) sent envoys to the Emperor of China five times between 1378 and 1416. Linehan transliterates the Chinese characters as Paramaswara Telok Chini, the words having
Sanskrit, Minangkabau, and Mon-Khmer origins. An alternative for the second word is perhaps Tale or Tonle, seen in the names of the two lakes, in Cambodia and in the now Thai part of the peninsula, Tale or Tonle Sap. This awaits investigations into the meaning of a number of place-names which may have Mon-Khmer origins. (A tempting one is Gunong Benom, “p’nom” meaning mountain in Cambodia, but “benom” meaning un trodden in Malay).

It was often the case that rulers in uncertain positions sent envoys to China in order to seek recognition, this having an effect on morale similar to membership of the United Nations nowadays and similarly bringing with it few effective restrictions. At the dates quoted the Thais had extended their control over the Mon people of Thailand well down the peninsula, having claimed the subjugation of Ligor in 1292, and it is possible that suzerainty over Pahang had lain with Ligor. It is evident that Pahang was an object of some interest. It was invaded by both the Thais and Malays in the 15th century. The Thais being eventually defeated by the Malaccans.

Linehan states that “Pahang” is Khmer for “tin” and “Chini” Siamese for tin. (A Thai friend did not recognise the word). The affinity in Language between certain aborigine dialects and the Mon-Khmer group need not necessarily have reference to subjugation by Khmers as it is my impression that this language group is widespread. Pahang, however, was renowned for its alluvial and lode gold, which was of great purity and thought even to be the gold of which the Queen of Sheba boasted. A European miner in this century has confirmed its purity, and the Khmers were noted consumers of the commodity. Is it possible that there was a small Khmer community in Pahang, mining and planting rice on plains drained and irrigated by canals similar to those in Cambodia, that with the growing defeat of their mother country the local governor tried to retain control by obtaining Chinese protection and that in the chaos of the time, perhaps by the silting of the Pahang river, perhaps by the breakdown of the administration of the drainage system, perhaps by a flood similar to those of 1926, the rice-fields flooded and the community collapsed with only legends remaining which ultimately attached themselves to the only two sheets of standing water remaining, Tasek Bera and Tasek Cheni?

Formulating such theories, even as an amateur, is fascinating but they are verifiable only on (or in) the ground. Air photographs gave a quick hope that the amount of ground to be covered might be narrowed. Five miles east of Tasek Cheni near the extremity of Sungei Tasek there is a square 500 yards across and aligned on an east-west axis, formed by a river and what is apparently a tributary to it. This square is seen as a 50 yard wide belt of small trees in the high jungle. A glance at a
plan of Angkor shows that this is a typical Khmer canal pattern (but the same may be the case in Ligor). South of this at the western end of Sungei Tasek the swamp in the river valley is crossed at right angles by a belt of high trees possibly signifying higher grounds rather as if a causeway or dam were there.

With four friends, Professor T. Silcock, Professor W. Weatherford, Mr. G. Brigden, and Mr. M. Golding, all amateurs, I visited this spot, very briefly, in the course of a widespread reconnaissance, and confirmed that the square existed, a small stream occupying the centre of the swampy band of small trees, but failed to demonstrate anything more. The stream was only crossed at two points and the centre of the square located only approximately. A fuller examination by walking along the stream and perhaps locating the exact centre would be more conclusive but at present no evidence of artificiality has been found. The name of this place is apparently Tempat Prah; the word Prah being the name of a tree which is not to be found there, and also a name closely associated with numerous temples in Thailand and Cambodia, e.g., P’ra Khan, P’ra Vihara, P’ra Patom, etc.

In the wider valley to the south we ploughed through peaty swamps, peering up through thirty-foot trees to find the belt of higher trees and failed to find them, partly due to the lack of foolproof landmarks. A young aborigine, Dua, assured us that there was no path across the valley, and the feature remains unfound and unexplained. Dua also took us to see a peculiar rectangular inlet a mile or so to the east, with a sandy shore called Padang Lumut, and here some pottery was found later identified as Sawank’alok ware, post-14th century. Once again there was nothing to explain the rectangularity of the inlet.

From here we went on to Tasek Cheni and on the next day we found on Pulau Balai a laterite brick of the same type as at Tanjong Makam. We went back to this island 3 months later to see if there were any further signs, as Yusoh bin Ngah, who had dug up the brick was not there earlier to point out the exact spot to us. His wife had, however, handed over to us some pieces of Ming pottery which he had dug up. Digging in the spot where he had found the brick we did not find brick foundations as we had hoped but uncovered about 20 fragments of unglazed pottery, several pieces of an iron bowl, some blue and some green glazed sherds. These have been provisionally identified as 2 shallow and horizontally rimmed neolithic bowls, pieces of a Ming and of either a Sung or Ming-imitated Sung bowl. The neolithic bowls were extremely fine, the base being only about 1/8 inch thick.

Walking in the mud surrounding the island we also found 4 fragments of other pots not yet identified and a piece of sandstone about 8 inches long shaped suggestively like the edge of a pediment and about 2 inches thick. The grooves along the “lower” rim were not even, however, and might suggest use for sharpening spear points. The stone would be useless for this now. Mr. McHugh, whom we met again on the lake, had also found a great deal of pottery in the mud on Pulau Balai including 2 whole pots. Abu Bakar, one of the men engaged for the trip, who had a very quick eye, also found a stone knife on the island. No further bricks were found.

The principal object of the second trip was to find Belukar Bata. Apek, the old Sakai, was unable to take us as the Penghulu had called him, so two of his sons acted as guides. The first disappointment was that everyone agreed that the word Bata was incorrect and should really be Batol;
the second was that once this is accepted the name need no longer apply to a small area associated with bricks, and in fact it is apparently the name of an area anywhere from a half up to several square miles. It lies on the eastern rentis of the Chini Forest Reserve, south of Bukit Patah Lutut, and north of Sungei Mentiga. It contains patches of very light jungle which apparently give it its name although we could not understand how these could last many years, surrounded by primary jungle. We did a rough survey of some dry channels associated with a level-topped mound west of the junction of two streams on the rentis about half a mile south of Bukit Patah Lutut but there was nothing to suggest they were artificial except their obvious long dryness.

It is probable that Apek or other of the older men know the place with which the legend is associated and could point it out. We called Apek but he had left his clearing for a week’s trip.

The dam in the legend was not anywhere visible and we did not visit Kampong Salong. The only lock found was a Government lock at Kampong Melayu where we went to see Bukit Berhala, mentioned by Wavell in his book. The circumstances of the lock however are interesting in that there appeared to be several channels north of it more or less parallel to the Pahang river and now dry. One of these passes between the hill and the river and is attributed to the Siamese. It is just possible that this is a very old padi area but it will be necessary to find out what existed before the D.I.D. took an interest here.

On the hill, at its southwest corner, there is a feature like a rampart about three quarters of the way up the hill, which is steep-sided. A horizontal platform about 20 feet wide has a 10-15 foot wall of earth on its outer edge with loose lumps of subsoil and stone here and there. At its northern end this feature stops abruptly and at its southern end it slopes down for some 50 yards or so before levelling out again at which point the platform widens. Once again it then stops abruptly overlooking the swamp at the bottom of the hill.

The riddle therefore remains and though we have been able to add a little to Linehan’s evidence of pre-Malaccan occupation we have not found out who the occupants were. The second party consisted of Mr. Brigden, Dr. F. Shipley, Mr. J. Elliott, and myself. Valuable help and advice were given by Mrs. Nixon of the Kuala Lumpur Book Club, Mr. Fu Chiao Shen, Mr. Leong Yew Kuan, and Mr. E. C. Foenander.

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