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Chris Hunt, Barrie Hartwell, Alastair Ruffell and Earl of Cranbrook

INTRODUCTION

This note documents a stone artefact found by Anuar bin Haji Jaya of Kampung Niah, Niah National Park, Miri Division, Sarawak, Malaysia in 2009. The artefact was lent to Lord Cranbrook for analysis and then returned to its finder, who regarded it as extremely significant and an important heirloom. It seems, from conversation with the finder, that broadly similar stone artefacts have turned up around Niah before, and that local people regard them as 'thunderbolts', of some magical significance.

The artefact was a surface find, exposed on a bulldozed surface on the summit of a low knoll in the young oil palm plantation near Kuala Manong, behind Batu Niah (Plate V). The soil was the lateritic orange clay usual for the area. At the time of the find, the find-spot was unvegetated, and a gravelly subsoil exposed on the surface (Plate VI), suggesting that the stone artefact may originally have been buried. Anuar took Lord Cranbrook to a nearby sandstone exposure, the nearest 'hard' rock that he knew, and a comparative sample was taken.

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The artefact

The artefact is an adze or chisel, 91 mm long, with straight, rounded sides, a blade width of 40 mm and a butt width of *ca.* 33 mm (Plates VII, VIII & IX). The convex dorsal surface is smoothly ground from butt to blade with no sign of wear. However, there is considerable damage to the butt itself with two flake scars and shatter damage on the corners (Plates VII & VIII). Enough of the central part of the butt survives to show that it was ground and flattened, approx. 10 mm thick (Plate IX) and probably squared at the corners. The sides are rounded at the ventral face but angular at the dorsal surface indicating that the grinding of the dorsal surface was probably the final stage of fabrication.

Superficially this appears to be a modified flake with a convex dorsal face and a flatter ventral face orientated close to the natural foliation (visible on the sides and butt). A dimple in the dorsal surface at the butt appears to be a partially ground out flake scar. The ventral side has been faceted at the distal end along the natural cleavage line to enhance the blade which, apart from post-depositional damage, has a sharp and unbroken edge. The ventral face forms a squared panel at the distal end which is at odds with the blade facet itself which is shorter on one side (9.5 mm) than the other (13.0 mm) giving a lopsided appearance (overall sides 86.0 mm and 90.0 mm) to what is otherwise a regularly shaped object. There is some evidence of a band of polish along 75% of the broader area of the blade facet, parallel to the distal end of the ventral panel but not to the blade edge. The maximum thickness of the artefact is 14.8 mm measured towards the longer side; thickness measured along the shorter side is 8-12% less.

The overall impression is that this is a finely made tool, but also one that has been well used. The unblemished nature of the blade edge contrasts with the badly damaged butt. It is difficult to conceive of it being applied to a material soft enough not to damage the blade but which required the damaging impact force of a hammer erratically striking the butt. When this occurred the implement was clearly not hafted. This is the type of butt damage seen on stone wedges used to split timbers. However, such usage does not equate with the uneven polish seen on the blade, which shows that the artefact was clearly being used dorsal side up with the blade facet on the ventral side being in contact with the work surface at an angle of 40° – more appropriate to a chisel or a plane.

Based on this evidence at least two scenarios suggest themselves:

1. The artefact was fabricated directly as a flat-butted chisel, held ventral side down and gripped by the hand from the side, leaving the butt exposed and struck with a hard hammer or mallet. Against this, the hand would have to be relatively narrow (less than *ca.* 60 mm) to avoid covering the butt and the blade. Nor does this explain the uneven pattern of polish on the blade facet.
2. A more complex but more likely scenario is that the artefact was originally flaked and finely ground as a square-butted, straight-sided adze or chisel with rounded sides and a faceted blade, that may have been hafted to facilitate use. During this period of use the semblance of a polish built up across the blade facet. It may